Vatican



The choir of New York's Church of St. Paul the Apostle performs "Love More" below the main altar of St. Peter's Square, Sept. 24, 2025, at the Vatican. (Caitlin Long)



by Camillo Barone

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They thought they'd be buried in the crowd. For more than an hour on the morning of Wednesday, Sept. 24, the choir from the Church of St. Paul the Apostle in New York City queued at the gates of St. Peter's Square, uncertain if the pope would even hear them sing.

But as Vatican guards suddenly waved the group forward — past pilgrims, past dignitaries, to a set of five empty rows at the very foot of the papal platform — the singers realized they had been placed in Pope Leo XIV's sight line.

"As soon as the choir realized they were going to be sitting in this special section right in front of the pope, many of them were in tears," said their pastor, Paulist Fr. Eric Andrews, now sitting in his New York office Sept. 26, his own voice repeatedly breaking.



Pope Leo XIV smiles as he rides the popemobile around St. Peter's Square at the Vatican before his weekly general audience Sept. 24, 2025. (CNS/Pablo Esparza)

"It was overwhelming. It was like — you have made it here," said the priest, who is the former president of the Paulist Fathers.

Minutes later that day as Leo's popemobile rolled through the square, the choir stood up to offer him a gift crafted just for the moment: "Love More," an original hymn written by the parish's composer in residence, J. Oconer Navarro. Its words, drawn from the pope's May 18 inaugural homily, floated back to him as the crowd roared its welcome.

Post on X by Gio Benitez (X/@GioBenitez)

The performance was the crowning moment of a Jubilee pilgrimage that had carried the ensemble through Florence, Assisi and Rome. It was written for the choir's pilgrimage and dedicated to the children of the Annunciation Catholic School in Minneapolis where a shooter killed two students at a school Mass Aug. 27.

The American congregation of the Paulist Fathers have long invested in liturgical music. In the early 20th century, the Paulist Choristers were nationally recognized. At St. Paul the Apostle in New York today, that tradition continues in a different form. The parish choir is led by Broadway music director Joey Chancey, with new compositions by Navarro, a well-known New York University Tisch School of the Arts professor who comes from the Broadway musical theater world.



Joey Chancey, director of the choir of New York's Church of St. Paul the Apostle, in St. Peter's Basilica (Caitlin Long)

Talking to NCR after their trip to Italy, they said their work is rooted in Scripture but shaped by the discipline of theater.

When Navarro was asked to compose a new piece for the choir's pilgrimage to Italy, he turned to Leo's first words as pontiff. "I went back and researched. I was like, let me see what he first said when he came out onto the balcony. And then I just

started pulling words," Navarro recalled. He found a consistent emphasis on love, unity and continuity with the late Pope Francis' vision.

From there, he looked at the new pope's inaugural homily. "He said, "We could feel the working of the Holy Spirit who was able to bring us into harmony like musical instruments, so that our heartstrings could vibrate in a single melody,' " Navarro said.

That image of harmony became central to the song "Love More," which the choir performed for the pope in St. Peter's Square.

Navarro, who has been part of St. Paul's music ministry for nearly 20 years, views writing music as his form of prayer. "I never liked being pointed out to say grace at Thanksgiving, because I never felt like I had the words to do that. But I do think I had the music to do that." He came to see composition as "a collaboration with God," translating what he hears into sound.



The choir of New York's Church of St. Paul the Apostle before a concert in the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls in Rome, Sept. 21, 2025. (Courtesy of Paulist

Fr. Eric Andrews)

His music has reached beyond the parish. Parishioners and visitors have told him they returned to church because of the choir's settings of Scripture, particularly the Palm Sunday Passion Masses. Some have even traveled from out of state to hear it again.

He said he acknowledges conservative Catholic critics who resist blending theatrical and sacred traditions but he sees his work simply as highlighting Scripture in ways people can hear anew. "The fact that we just now did it for literally the entire Catholic world, I think that means something."

"We're walking towards something, and there's more to be written."

Chancey, the choir's director, described Navarro's approach as text-driven. The music is written to highlight cadence and meaning so that the words carry impact even when spoken rather than sung. Parishioners and worldwide visitors often respond by noting they have never heard familiar passages set in that way.

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"I think one of the things that makes his compositions in his musical settings of Scripture stand out is the fact that he does come from the theatrical world, and it's not by any means in a performative way," Chancey said.

"He understands text — whether it's Shakespeare or Scripture. He understands what are the important words in a sentence, how should it flow, how should the melody carry this text so it resonates with you," he said.

Many of St. Paul's choir members are actors or professional musical singers, which Chancey said contributes to the clarity of delivery.

Yet the choir's placement at the papal audience carried a deeper significance.



Paulist Fr. Eric Andrews, pastor of New York's St. Paul the Apostle, and president emeritus of the congregation of Paulist Fathers (Courtesy of Paulist Fathers)

In the choir's correspondence with the Vatican, Andrews said, the group had been "very clear" about who they were: "We share the multiple across the age spectrum, married, single; we even put down we have members who are LGBTQ+."

"We didn't pull any punches. And I think members of the group thought, because of that, they would never put us up front," he said.

For membership director Alison McCartan, that authenticity defines St. Paul's. "Where I think St. Paul's is different is that it has really evolved and continues to speak to all," she said. "When we say 'All are welcome,' we are actively living and breathing it. Our mission is not rooted in judgment — it's mercy."

"The fact that we were all there up front and being honest about who we are, we were bringing our parish community along," Andrews said. For him, it was consistent

with the Paulist Fathers' long, historical commitment to welcoming all.

"My favorite St. Paul quote is, 'I become all things to all people, so I can save a few.' So this was a representation of who we are as a parish," he said.

The next morning, on the bus to the airport, Andrews spoke with a choir tenor member, Esteban Castillo-Myers, who said he had been in tears all morning. "You know, this is an image of the kingdom of God," the priest recounted telling him.

"We're so diverse, so many different people from so many different backgrounds and races," Andrews said, choking up remembering what he told the choir member. "This is what heaven is like; this is just a little slice of heaven that we're seeing right here."