

'Requiem'

Young Denton priests' chants become best-selling album

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Associated Press

DENTON — At the sound of a tap, dozens of young men clad in black cassocks and white surplices rise from kneeling positions to watch two of their brother priests begin a chant.

With a gentle wave of the Rev. Zachary Akers' arm, the other priests pick up the song. Their voices float as one to the arched chapel ceiling, filling the small church with resonant, almost haunting echoes.

The ancient Latin wouldn't have felt out of place in a European monastery hundreds of years ago. But this seminary is less than 20 years old and sits on a hill southwest of Lincoln, surrounded by fields newly planted with corn and soybeans.

The priests are members of the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter, a Catholic order formed in 1988 that focuses on traditional, pre-Vatican II liturgy and sung prayers. They come from around the country and the world, many drawn to Our Lady of Guadalupe seminary in the tiny village of Denton by the holy power they feel in Gregorian chant.

And since May 12, they've had the best-selling classical album on Amazon and one of the top classical albums on iTunes.

The seminary never expected to have a hit album, said the Rev. Gerard Saguto, the order's North American superior.

"We just wanted to put something out there to get people to think more about eternity, God and our life in reference to those things, and it seems we've been blessed with this popularity, which none of us expected or were even trying to achieve," he said.

"Requiem," by The Fraternity, features many of the 80 seminarians and recently ordained priests singing a traditional Latin funeral Mass. It's the result of four years of requests from De Montfort Music, a label that focuses on sacred music.

Monica Fitzgibbons started the label with her husband after realizing sacred chants were an uncovered territory.

Fitzgibbons said she had a pretty good idea the album would take off in the niche market of sacred mu-



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The Rev. Benoit Guichard originally from Besancon, France, works on a portable altar at the wood shop at Our Lady of Guadalupe Seminary in Denton. Guichard is a member of the Priestly Fraternity of Saint Peter, who focus on traditional liturgy and Gregorian chants, which they use to pray four times a day.

sic because of the priests' young voices, unique in a genre dominated by older monks. Sony licensed the album, and it's sold more than 5,000 copies in less than two weeks — a sizable figure for a classical artist that doesn't tour and enough to top Billboard's classical chart.

"It's hard to explain the timelessness and the universality of this music," said Akers, who was ordained three years ago and returned to the seminary to direct music for the album. "To think that this music, more or less, is the same sound, the same melodies that someone would have heard even a thousand years ago at the death of a loved one. It's very humbling to be part of something so much bigger than oneself."

Music has always been a part of Akers' life, from singing in his church choir as a child to starting a band with his brother and friends to playing bluegrass music in college. When he felt a calling to the priesthood, he

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chose the Fraternity of St. Peter because of its emphasis on sacred music.

"There's something transcendent I find about the music," Akers said. "It's very peaceful, very calming, and very conducive it seems to prayer."

The chant is integral to the seminary's daily routine, Saguto said. The young priests rise by 6 a.m. each day and gather in the chapel to sing lauds, a morning prayer to praise God as the sun rises. They'll return three more times throughout the day to chant psalms.

Seminarians take at least 20 credits of music throughout their seven years, and several of the classrooms where they also study Latin, theology and church history contain keyboards or music stands.

"From the first time you step into the seminary, we are constantly being formed in Gregorian chant, which is part and parcel with the mode of worship that we use here in the seminary," Saguto said.

Along with chanting four times a day and attending classes, they eat



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Members of the Priestly Fraternity of Saint Peter, a Catholic order formed in 1988, perform a Gregorian chant at Our Lady of Guadalupe seminary in Denton. The seminarians released an album, "Requiem," singing a traditional Latin funeral Mass.



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The Rev. Joseph Lee, academic dean and basketball coach, leaves the gym at Our Lady of Guadalupe Seminary in Denton as seminarians play basketball. Seminary life is extraordinarily regimented. Along with chanting four times a day and attending classes, they eat meals together and exercise together.

meals together and exercise together: an hour after their afternoon chant in the chapel, a decidedly

more modern sound of squeaking tennis shoes on a hardwood floor fills a new gym as 10 seminarians in T-shirts and gym shorts race up and down a basketball court bordered by white netting for indoor soccer practice. Our Lady of Guadalupe's basketball team recently placed third in a 16-team tournament of American seminaries.

Away from the gym, seminarians spend time growing produce for their kitchen, keeping bees on a hillside and working in a woodshop, where men in sawdust-covered cassocks craft bookshelves, chalice boxes and traveling altars that fold out from a box to offer Mass on the go.

The priests come from different backgrounds — one class contains a British man with a Ph.D. in classics from Oxford and a Mexican seminarian with a technical degree in heating and cooling — but all are brought together by a shared sense of faith and the Gregorian chant, said the Rev. Joseph Lee, the seminary's academic dean.

"The church is really a family at the end of the day," Lee said. "We face the same direction as we pray to God, and one of the things that really unites us is that music."