



c o v e r s t o r y

MR. RYBICKI'S

OPUS

By Mary Meehan | Photos by Kathy Denton





Dennis Rybicki's weekdays are long. So, too, is his list of responsibilities.

A typical day for Rybicki begins at 7:05 a.m., when, as choir director, he leads the 105-member Grand Rapids Catholic Central High School choir through rehearsal. From there, he goes on to lead the school in morning prayers; teach classes on liturgy and liturgical song; and rehearse with the school's women's choir, freshman choir and an *a cappella* auditioned choir. All of this takes place before lunch.

In addition, Rybicki serves as the director of liturgical music for the Diocese of Grand Rapids; director of the diocesan choirs and director of the Diocesan Choral Academy, a large children's choir program focusing on

faith and musical education.

"I'm really lucky in that I have the opportunity to work with eight choirs with more than 300 people on a weekly basis. I work with two children's choirs, four great high school choirs, a select



▶ Clare helps dad on the harp, one of the many instruments that Rybicki loves to play.

adult choir made up of primarily college music majors and other very experienced singers and a wonderfully large adult diocesan choir,” he says. “I’m so proud of every person in these choirs. It is a privilege to work with them and share the mysteries of our faith with them in such a deep and meaningful way.”

In allegro

Most afternoons, Rybicki can be found at his office in either the school or Cathedral Square Center for student and other meetings. Careful planning and organization are required for his complex duties.

By 4:30 p.m. Rybicki is beginning rehearsal with the Choral Academy, followed by a rehearsal with the Diocesan Choir at 7 p.m. On a recent Thursday in November, one of his “short” days, Rybicki finished an evening performance with Catholic Central’s *A Cappella* Choir at a banquet celebrating Advent. Afterward, he greeted parishioners, co-workers and students; helped a parent track down his wandering child; and took a moment to chat with a priest. It is hard to miss how much energy Rybicki has, despite his long workday.

“Yes, it’s stressful, but I wake up every day and can’t believe it,” he says chuckling a little, “It’s been an awesome journey.”

His enthusiasm is organic. It only takes a few seconds of conversation with Rybicki to know just how much he loves what he does. Choral and sacred music are his passion, and he’s found a way to share it with others and inspire young people in their lives and their faith. The choir did the same for him.

“Sometimes being a kid can feel so lonely,” he said. “The choir is a way for them to connect deeper with themselves, each other and with God.”

Prelude

Rybicki got his own start in a high school choir in Lakewood, Mich., near Lake Odessa. As a life-long Catholic, he considers himself lucky because not only did his school have a choir program, but they also studied sacred music.

“If I would have grown up where they didn’t have a choir at the time, I would have never been where I am today. It changed my life,” he said.

As an undergrad, he attended Aquinas College in Grand Rapids, thinking at first of earning a teaching certificate in music education, then about being ordained a priest. He saw himself perhaps as a band director, but it was choir that he loved the most. He knew that he wanted to teach music, and



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that if he were ordained that would not be a guarantee.

“It just felt right,” he says, “like it was meant to be.”

It was about this time in his life that Rybicki began teaching liturgical music at St. Isidore Church in Grand Rapids. There, he met his wife Annette, a math teacher at the school. Her classroom was just across the hall from his.

“I just looked at her and thought ‘I think I’ll marry her.’” He remembers this moment fondly and with the same excitement and joy in his voice that he expresses when he talks music. When asked if it’s OK to share that story in print, he laughs, “No! Yes, yes it is!”



Composition

Fourteen years ago, Rybicki came to work at Catholic Central High School to help build the choral program. He's been the director there ever since, and has developed the school's program into four choirs, including the *a capella* auditioned choir, with whom he plans on touring Ireland next summer. This group has also performed at Saint Peter's Basilica before both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI.

"Dennis is truly a blessing to the Catholic

“ There are different ways to feed people. **Through beauty, art, and music, the choir helps feed souls, and that makes life make sense.** ”

Central community,” said Steve Passinault, principal at Catholic Central High School. “His talents are perfect fit for the many programs he leads here at Catholic Central. The kids also see him as a great example of faithful person. The kids want to be a part of his class and choirs. And to have someone like him is pretty special.”

Rybicki earned a master's degree in music education from Calvin College and continued his post-graduate studies in liturgy at the University of Notre Dame; theology at Aquinas College and choral education at Westminster Choir College in Princeton, N.J. He has recently been accepted into the doctoral program of sacred music at the Graduate Theological Foundation at Notre Dame, where he will be able to specialize in sacred choral music. He is also a certified spiritual director, which allows him to connect with more than just students and focus on the spiritual journeys of others. He calls it “just journeying,” being able to share his faith with children and adults alike.

Bishop Walter Hurley first saw Rybicki's work at the diocese's Cathedral of Saint Andrew, where, because of its proximity to the high school, Catholic Central's choirs often have the opportunity to perform at diocesan services.

“Mr. Rybicki really has a passion for music and his passion has helped inspire my passion as well,” said Bailey Byerly, a senior at Catholic Central High School, who sings in the school's varsity concert choir and a capella choir. “I feel very accomplished, because he chooses songs with deep roots and a story behind them. He challenges

Interesting in joining or booking a choir?

► Grand Rapids Diocesan Choir

A large choir in service to the liturgical life of the diocese that sings large masterworks and principle diocesan liturgies. Rehearsal information: 7 - 8:30 p.m. the 1st, 3rd, and 4th Monday of each month at the Cathedral of Saint Andrew

► Saint Andrew School Singers

A small, auditioned choir in service to the liturgical life of the diocese specializing in chant, renaissance polyphony and chamberworks. The choir rehearses weekly and sings at diocesan liturgies and concerts.

► Catholic Choral Academy

A tuition-based, diocesan children's choir program specializing in sacred music and music theory. The choirs (grades 2-8) meet weekly.

► The Catholic Central Choral Department

The choirs of Catholic Central High School consist of a freshman choir, women's chorale, a concert choir and an *a capella* choir. The choirs represent the high school and are involved in liturgies, tours, competitions and concert engagements.

For more information about any of these choirs, please contact Dennis Rybicki, drybicki@dioceseofgrandrapids.org or dennisrybicki@grcss.org.



us and I always feel blessed to perform the music he has prepared for us.”

In 2006, Bishop Hurley asked him to serve as director of liturgical music for the Diocese of Grand Rapids. After much prayer and deliberation with his wife, Rybicki accepted. He has never looked back.

He considers being able to work with so many different choirs a blessing.

“Through the music we make, the events that we’ve been involved with, and the places that we’ve visited together, the choirs of the diocese and Catholic Central have made a substantial difference in the music life of Grand Rapids,” Rybicki says.

In addition to the people in his choirs, he is also noticeably passionate about classical choral and sacred music. He speaks fondly of early times in the church, when voices were the only sound worthy of praising God, and he finds being able to sing and lead among the noblest professions. He is currently planning another trip to the Vatican to sing with the Sistine Chapel Choir. Of the music, he says there is “nothing more humbling.”

Music is his hobby, as well as his profession. Rybicki sings and plays several instruments, including the harp and flute. He enjoys traditional Irish tunes and describes his tastes as eclectic, but it is sacred chant and polyphonic hymns that speak to him most. Renaissance-era composers

like Palestrina and Victoria, as well as ancient Gregorian chants, are his areas of expertise. While he isn’t exactly fond of “the more contemporary stuff,” he has been known to pull out his iPhone and play music by Estonian composer Arvo Part, whom he has been particularly excited about.

“The unique thing about my life as a church musician is that although I sing and play a number of instruments. I am not an organist or really a keyboardist. My main instrument is the choir. That’s how I think of my vocation – I am a choral director who specializes in sacred music,” he said.

Overture

There doesn’t seem to be any slowing down for Rybicki. While his vocation keeps his days very full, he expresses no regrets. He is just where he wants and needs to be, he said.

Now that he and his wife have a 2-year-old daughter, Clare, Rybicki laughs about how becoming a parent after being a teacher for so long changes his view on teaching and on children. He has gained a great compassion for parents and understands how truly special each child is. But it hasn’t changed his passion for his church and the music. One can only imagine that those passions will rub off on Clare, as well.

When talking with Rybicki, one gets the sense that his music ministry is more than just teaching, playing and directing; it is a deep connection and understanding between not only him and God or him and the music, but the choir members themselves, and the things they can learn from each other.

“There are different ways to feed people,” he explains, “through beauty, art, and music, the choir helps feed souls, and that makes life make sense.” ☕

