

## **St Mary's Basilica Choir: 70th Anniversary, 1954–2024**

Domenico De Rosso formed a choir that sang at an open-air Midnight Christmas Mass in 1953 on land purchased by Father Kelly in Separation Street, Bell Park. The choir consisted of Italian, Dutch and German migrants. Rev. Joseph Kelly was instrumental in arranging for Domenico and his newly formed choir to regularly sing at St Mary's. Domenico was subsequently appointed organist and choirmaster by Dean Francis Greenan, and many of the members who sang at Bell Park formed the present-day St Mary's Basilica Choir.

Domenico De Rosso was conductor and organist for over 36 years (1954-1990). Domenico was born on April 7th, 1928, in the northern Italian town of Vicenza. He studied Organ, Gregorian Chant and Polyphony at the Duomo in Schio, migrating to Australia in 1952 and settling in Geelong in 1953. He married Evelina in St Mary's Church in 1954 and she remained a constant supporter of Domenico's musical endeavours.

Domenico was very fortunate in having Rev. Denis White, a priest at St Mary's, as a tireless recruiter of choir members. He had a great love of liturgical music and he set about recruiting members from all over the Geelong region. His 'taxi' service for members to and from weekly rehearsals and the 9.30 am Sunday Masses is legendary. The choir numbered between 40 and 50 singers at the 9.30 am Sunday Mass and continued to grow when the St Thomas Church choir discontinued in 1963 and many of its members joined the St Mary's Choir.

Domenico brought to his role unparalleled liturgical musical expertise and he introduced his singers to a wide range of liturgical music. He particularly excelled in Gregorian chant and the Latin church music of the Polyphonic Schools and gradually the choir's repertoire included motets and Mass settings of Palestrina, Victoria, Viadana, Allegri, Annerio, Arcadelt, Casciolini, Lotti, Pitoni and Byrd, to name a few.

Sacred music has always been a feature of the liturgical life of St Mary's Basilica. Most notably, Mr Percy Jones (father of the Rev. Dr Percy Jones of St Patrick's Cathedral Choir fame) and before him, Mr Gildo Candella, had successfully championed sacred music at St Mary's for many years before Domenico's appointment. From the choir archives of the 19th century, the choir proudly displays, among other music, copies of the

Coronation Mass of W.A. Mozart and the Messe Solennelle (St Cecilia) of Gounod hand-dated as being sung by St Mary's Choir in 1897. The choir archives also have copies of Mass settings by Weber and Haydn that were used regularly in the late 19th century.

In 1966 the Parish of Ss Peter and Paul (Ashby) West Geelong celebrated its centenary, and the young parish organist Roger Heagney commenced a most fruitful collaboration with Domenico. Their respective choirs combined to perform Faure's Requiem and The Seven Last Words of Christ of Dubois in 1966 and 1967. Over many years this collaboration extended to performing, amongst other music, Vivaldi's Gloria, Pergolesi's Magnificat, Mozart's Coronation Mass and Dvorak's Stabat Mater. In 1972, the two choirs sang the Coronation Mass by Mozart to mark the centenary of the Dedication of the First Stage of the Church. The choir participated in the music program of St Francis' Church Melbourne during the Eucharistic Congress in 1973, and it also participated in the final Eucharist of the Congress celebrated at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. The choir also participated in a number of Carol Services conducted in St Patrick's Cathedral Melbourne in 1968, 1969 and 1973. The 9.30 am Sung Sunday Mass was regularly broadcast over the Geelong radio station 3GL for many years.

In December 2003 the Parish Priest, Rev. Kevin Dillon, commissioned Roger Heagney OAM, KCSG to write a Mass setting to help celebrate the 150th anniversary of the laying of the foundation stone of the church and the completion of the restoration undertaken from 1996 to 2004 by Fr Dillon and his predecessor, Monsignor James Murray. Roger Heagney selected musical themes taken from the well-known Gregorian Missa De Angelis for his setting and he dedicated it to Domenico. From the dedication:

As 2004 also marks the 50th year since Domenico De Rosso first conducted St Mary's Choir and subsequently took it to such fine achievements, I would like to dedicate this Mass to him to acknowledge his great contribution to Church music, his inspiration to me and our long friendship.

In 2014 the Choir of St Mary's commissioned another Mass from Roger Heagney, Missa Salve Regine to mark its 60th Anniversary.

The present-day St Mary's Basilica Choir continues the tradition that Domenico inherited and developed, by promoting liturgical music drawn from the musical heritage of the Church and engaging in contemporary music appropriate for the liturgy of the 21st century. In 2004 the pipe organ was reinstated to its original position in the gallery. The chamber organ that is situated in the south transept was donated by St Margaret's Church East Geelong as a replacement during the reinstatement of the main organ to the gallery. The choir makes use of both organs for the 9.30 am Mass and various other liturgies throughout the liturgical year.

### **Significant Dates**

1954–1990    Domenico De Rosso, director

1980–1990    Frank De Rosso, organist

1991            Fr Ian Falconer, director            Frank De Rosso, organist

1992–2001    Frank De Rosso, director            Jenny Krasny, organist

2002–2020    Christopher Kelly, director            Frank De Rosso, organist

2021–            Frank De Rosso, director and organist

**Cantors in recent times:** Lauris De Vercelli, Nick Merrett, Allister Cox, Jane Bashiruddin