

## Ambrose Karels

Archbishop Jean Jadot, the apostolic delegate to the United States, had just finished the prayer after communion at the installation mass of Bishop John J. Sullivan here in the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception on Wednesday, August 17, 1977. Local television news crews for the first time occupied much of the free space in the choir loft and side aisles of the cathedral, camera locations marked on the floor by masking tape that would remain stuck there over two decades more. Announcements were underway.

Father Ambrose Karels did not concelebrate; he was up there conducting the Pontifical Choir, and I was on the organ bench, still in the seminary, two years away from my ordination. Ambrose called the choir, brass, and timpanist to attention because they were about to launch into a new setting of the *Te Deum* in a translation recently approved by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy and composed by Jean Langlais in Paris, a work commissioned by the Composers' Forum for Catholic Worship, officing out of Sugar Creek, Missouri, and directed by Robert I. Blanchard, Ambrose's predecessor as conductor of the Pontifical Choir.

Somehow, while Ambrose was getting the attention of the other musicians, he lost track of what Archbishop Jadot was doing. A pause had blossomed downstairs in the sanctuary, so Ambrose, a conductor, who understood the importance of accurate timing, sprang into action. Raising his baton, he threw down his mighty arm in the direction of the timpanist, who lifted two substantial mallets and sounded a thunderous drumroll. Unfortunately, it wasn't yet time for the *Te Deum*. In those same seconds of silence, Archbishop Jadot had raised his own arm to give the final blessing. As great waves of drumbeats washed from the choir loft toward the sanctuary below, I could see with panic the archbishop glancing at the palms of his own hands as if to ask, "What did I just do?" Ambrose realized the difficulty immediately and instructed the timpanist accordingly - not to stop the drumroll, but to play it *pianissimo*. Above this low carpet of sound, the archbishop obligingly imparted his solemn blessing. Then Ambrose cranked up the volume in the loft and filled this cathedral with the praise of God, *Te Deum*.

Ambrose Karels conducted the Pontifical Choir in this cathedral for 35 years. He was ordained a priest here 59 years ago last month, and he returns here today so that his friends may pray a final time in thanksgiving for his life and for the repose of his soul. Ambrose served as an associate pastor in several parishes, all within Kansas City proper. He worked as chaplain for three Catholic high schools, he directed a Latin Mass community, and became a chaplain at two local Veterans' Hospitals. He also played and sang with a group called the Musicians of Bremen, who performed early music for Kansas City's Young Audiences program, while wearing renaissance costumes.

I don't want to shock anyone, but Ambrose didn't get along with a lot of people. His best friends fell into two categories: musicians and animals. His most recent four-legged friend was Luke, but who can ever forget Pickwick the scottie, or the image of them both pacing the Concourse in Historic Northeast Kansas City, before rejoining Sasha the Siamese cat, virtual landlady of the rectory? A

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study in contrasts, Ambrose ministered to teens and to elderly veterans. He kept many people at arm's length, but he cultivated close, meaningful and life-giving friendships with an inner circle. He led music for very public diocesan liturgies, but he preferred to live in relative obscurity and hoped to retire in obscurity. So if you ever felt distant from Ambrose, you helped him meet his goals.

Yet in spite of himself, Ambrose believed in harmony. He inherited a choir of boys and men; he expanded it to include women. He recruited relentlessly to create a balanced sound, he practiced discipline in the rehearsal room, and he developed a devoted band of followers who embraced his musical preferences, tolerated his outbursts, and - at a time when Catholic musical tastes were not catholic-with-a-lower-case-c - produced some of the most beautiful music in the history of our diocese, from Bach cantatas to the Fauré *Requiem*. He cultivated and harvested the human voice.

Apart from the choir loft of this building, the other elevated space that will forever be associated with Father Ambrose Karels is the attic of Assumption Rectory, now known as St. Anthony's. There he gathered colorful people of diverse personalities to exchange ideas, play music, eat delicious food, and sip the fruit of the vine. Gatherings were intimate but lively, as you would expect from a man who enjoyed chamber music more than symphonic. The attic became a foretaste of heaven, the place to which believers hope to ascend, unbothered by heat and chills, to spend endless time with lifelong friends, where every tongue, sated with true food and true drink, shall give praise to God. Ambrose spread the table before his friends and poured many cups overflowing. May he now rest from his labors. May his works accompany him. May he who enjoyed his privacy discover the blessed harmony that awaits all those drawn in the Spirit's tether to sing eternally *Te Deum*, alleluia.