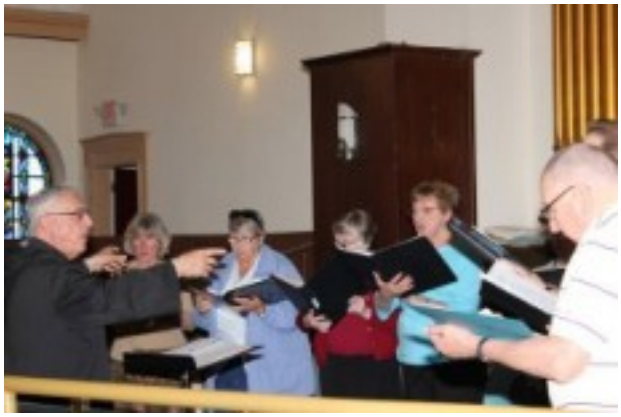

By Tanya Connor

It's like God speaking.
It brings back memories, and is for the Church today.
It helps people minister – and sleep.
That's what the director and members of Assumption Schola Gregoriana say of the Gregorian chant they sing around the diocese and beyond.
The Schola celebrates its 15th anniversary Aug. 15, currently boasting 22 members, some originals.
Some spoke with The Catholic Free Press recently, before breaking for the summer.
"We accept all people as long as they accept the spirit of this ministry," said co-founder John McManamon. "We wanted this to be a ministry that would do God's work" in liturgical settings, not a hobby or an adult education class.

"It wasn't an anti-Vatican II sentiment," he said of starting the Latin Gregorian chant choir. "We wanted to keep chant alive in the spirit of Vatican II. That's why we wanted ordinary people to join. We're all volunteers. We don't charge for what we do. We're glad to go into any parish and sing for a Mass, an evening of reflection, a Lenten mission." It's not a performance; it's prayer. He said they've sung at about 30 parishes in the diocese, and a few other places. Some places schedule them for the same occasion each year.

Father Donat Lamothe, an Augustinian of the Assumption and professor of music at Assumption College, directs the Schola, which Mr. McManamon asked him about starting. Mr. McManamon handles scheduling and advertising.

"There was a little ad in The Catholic Free Press," Janet Hammonds said of how she learned

about the Schola last fall. “I love Gregorian chant … but I never sang it. I would listen to it at St. Benedict’s Abbey in Still River. I saw the ad, thought about it and prayed about it the first week.”

She decided she couldn’t add it to her schedule, she said. The second week she saw the ad again. She was intrigued by the focus on ministry and joined.

“When my husband passed (in 1996), everything had changed for me,” said Margaret Royka. “I was having problems sleeping and I’m an asthmatic. Having seen the ad in The Catholic Free Press, I called Father. I had been in chant in high school – Ascension High School in Worcester. Father invited me to come. I’ve slept beautifully ever since I joined and I breathe beautifully. It’s been a beautiful journey and I hope it continues for a long time.”

Candace Jaegle also saw the ad, she said. “I had been going to the abbey in Spencer to listen” and had CDs. “Chant is so calming. I have a very intense job. I come home at night and listen to chant and everything’s OK.”

She said she remembered Father Lamothe from when she worked at Assumption College.

“He said, ‘Welcome home,’” she recalled.

“It’s prayerful; it’s calming; you sleep like a baby,” she says now.

And Father has the patience of Job,” someone interjected.

“I think when you’re dealing with the musical arts you have to be patient with yourself,” Father Lamothe said. Getting upset defeats the purpose. Perfection is not of this world.

“We’re echoing the sounds of the other side of the divide,” he said. “The chant itself is like a bridge between this world and the next,” offering a glimpse of the beauty of the next world, using mostly Scripture, including parts of the Mass in Latin. “It’s as if the Divine speaks to us. Apparently Stanley Kaplan is planning ahead. He said when he gets to the pearly gates, he’ll ask St. Peter: “How do I join Gregorian chant?”

“It might get me in,” he said.

“We sang that in grammar school and high school.” He joined 15 years ago, and said he’s found it rewarding to go to many places, some of which he wouldn’t have visited otherwise.

“It’s been a fantastic 15 years,” said Suzanne Casey. “It’s just been a real nice companionship. There’s a spiritual aspect, and the joy of singing.”

That singing was how Anthony Penny discovered a way to pursue his interest in music – and the spiritual aspect.

“I discovered the Schola when I went to a Mass at Blessed Sacrament for 40 Days for Life,” he said of a Worcester parish supporting that pro-life effort. “I heard them sing.There was a program that was passed around and there’s an advertisement on the back that says, ‘You’re welcome to join us.’

“I’ve always enjoyed music. I played the guitar. I played in a rock band. It was fun, but it was always empty on some level. I decided to sell all of my equipment. There’s a part of me that

wanted to use my talents – if I had any – in a way that was fulfilling."
Upon seeing the Schola ad, Mr. Penny said, he realized he could use his talents for God.

"When I came, Father was extremely welcoming," he said of his arrival a couple months ago. "Everybody was welcoming. I was a part of it right away. I can't claim to have ever joined anything in my life where I felt that welcome."
"I'm always happy to see new members," Father Lamothe said. "There's something very natural about Gregorian chant;" it's easy to pick up.
"I can't read a note of music, but this is simple," added Ms. Hammonds. It also helps her pronounce Latin.

"I miss the Latin Mass," said Ursula Faber, who attended St. Joseph Elementary School in Webster. "That was the most prayerful Mass I've participated in. So it brings back a lot of memories. Every Tuesday at the end of our practice we do compline. I feel God listens. He's almost in front of me. And I never thought I would learn how to read square notes."
A musical instrument connected Kimono Abramoff and Father Lamothe "I was a student at Assumption College, so I knew Father Donat," she said. She also worked in an office near his and they practiced together on a koto, an instrument from her native Japan. After her husband died in 2003 she joined the Schola.
Loretta Chabot, a member for about 12 years, said she met Father Lamothe after a Mass for deceased Assumptionists, including her uncle, Father Gilbert Chabot.
"I had just moved back here from Ohio and I was looking for a place to sing," she said. "This was a double winner. It's a wonderful ministry."
Father Lamothe said he learned Gregorian chant from Father Cabot, and added, "What goes around, comes around."
"We'll never really know how many lives we've touched," Mr. McManamon said. "That's up to the Holy Spirit." But he said they hope to continue doing God's work – "and advertising in The Catholic Free Press."

The Schola resumes practice in September from 7:30 to about 8:30 p.m. Tuesdays in Emmanuel House, next to Assumption College's chapel. They welcome inquiries year-round from those interested in singing or having them sing.

– Those seeking more information or a $10 CD of the music can visit the website www.assumptionschola.org or contact John McManamon at 508-478-5745 or info@assumptionschola.org.