

NEWS RELEASE

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USM Students Call Italy Study Abroad 'A Once In a Life-Time Event'

(Leavenworth, Kan.)—For 10-days, eight University of Saint Mary students witnessed what many can only dream. The eight students, part of the USM concert chorale, took advantage of a study-abroad music tour of majestic Italy from December 30 through January 8, performing religious and spiritual music along the way. The “pilgrimage of music and prayer” included a once-in-a-lifetime performance for Pope Benedict XVI.

Jesan Barnes, Hollie Becker, Taylor Gillespie, Katherine Gooden, Ryan Harris, Matthew Lockwood and Adejola Tucker made the excursion, accompanied by USM fine arts—music department chair Dr. William Krusemark. The group combined with a select group from Benedictine College to perform religious music including “Ave Maria,” “Exulte Deo,” and “O Admirabile Commercium” during the trip. The trip included stops in Milan, Rome, Venice, Vatican City, Florence and Assisi—all in nine days.

On January 6, the group performed for the Pontiff inside a building adjacent to Saint Peter’s Basilica in Vatican City. According to descriptions, there were tens of thousands of people in attendance.

“You don’t know what to expect, but once you’re there, you can feel the power of the cities,” USM junior Jesan Barnes said. “You know how much history is there, I mean these are places that were written in the Bible. It was a surreal experience all the way around.”

Barnes said the once-in-a-lifetime performance for the Pontiff was capped off when Pope Benedict acknowledged and blessed the group prior to their performance. Despite the large audience and the pressure of performing for the leader of the Catholic church, Barnes recalls her confidence in the group.

“I didn’t really feel nervous because our group was so good. We never really got off. I was confident that we could do well,” Barnes said. “It was so moving to see how the Catholic church was built upon on this place. The Vatican was just beautiful. You just get sub-merged in the religion, but it’s much more than that. It was a spiritual journey all the way around. We went into all these churches, with all the history, it was just wonderful to see the other side of it.”

USM sophomore Katherine Gooden was a little more apprehensive. She said the crowds, especially in Vatican City, made her just a little nervous. In fact, getting inside the Vatican may have been the most grueling part of the entire trip. Gooden remembers waiting in line for hours outside a security check in Saint Peter’s Square before finally clearing a metal detector and security post. People were pushing and shoving trying to move the line forward.

“There were tons of people inside the Vatican,” Gooden said. “Performing in front of such a large audience made me a little nervous, but it was a great experience.”

Gooden said she previously took a learning community, USM’s unique blend of two different disciplines into one class, such as business and mathematics or art and theology, with Sister Kathleen Wood and Dr. Krusemark that emphasized artwork and music, particularly religious artwork and music. Much of the architecture Gooden studied was on display first-hand throughout the tour.

“The art and the music we sang, everything tied into what I learned in that class,” she said. “Touring the country, taking in the sights, it was amazing. I think applying what I learned and actually knowing something about the deep history made the trip a lot more full-filling.”

While performing in front of the Pontiff was likely the highlight of the tour, Barnes and Gooden both agree that the group hit its peak during a performance at the Basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi. They each have their own favorite memories as well.

“It was really moving inside Assisi,” Barnes said. “We seemed to come together there.”

For Barnes, her favorite site was undoubtedly Rome. The Roman Coliseum was unbelievable, she recalls.

“I loved being in the ruins of Rome and seeing how old it was. It makes you really think how young America is compared to this city,” Barnes said.

Gooden loved Rome as well, but Florence was her favorite part.

“Florence was probably the most amazing part of the trip,” Gooden said. “I just loved the city. We saw so many amazing architectural designs—churches, buildings. It really touched your heart.”

So would they do it again? Barnes said without a doubt.

“I don’t think you can ever put into words what a trip like this means for your life,” she said. “The surreal experience, the grandeur of the area—I would go again, without a doubt.”

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