

## 3CG songs at the Papal Vigil in Hyde Park on 18<sup>th</sup> September 2010



Jaw-dropping news – we stared at each other in complete dis-belief when Nina announced at our weekly Saturday evening practice that ‘...a priest from the Vatican had phoned and asked if the choir could sing a couple of songs at the Papal Vigil in Hyde Park on 18<sup>th</sup> September....’ what did we think?

Well first of all, we thought it might be a joke or that they had phoned the wrong choir, perhaps there had been a misunderstanding? Then as more details came through over the next week or so, we began to realise that we were really being asked to sing two songs, very likely in the presence of the Holy Father and in front of an audience of thousands – not to mention billions of people worldwide watching the telly!

We selected a new song in a Cameroon dialect, Bagnante, and another in English. Over the next couple of months we continued with our programme, practicing new songs for an African mass at St Elizabeth’s in Foleshill on 7<sup>th</sup> August. It was not until after this that we could work on the new songs. We decided on a uniform reflecting African culture, since so many members of the choir are at the moment of African origin. Jennifer and Benedette travelled to London to the market and bought enough cloth to have our uniforms made. Dorcas, who runs a shop called Abobo in Foleshill Road, came and measured us all and made beautiful uniforms for us.

Our very grateful thanks are due to Fr Timothy Menzies, who had suggested our choir be involved in the first place, and who then went on to raise money for us from a variety of sources, including a mystery benefactor to whom we are very grateful, enabling us to book a coach and accommodation (at the Premier Inn, Harrow). Further generous donations from Sacred Heart Parish enabled us to buy an evening meal on Friday and breakfast on Saturday. As the Pope’s visit grew nearer, we were invited to talk about the choir on BBC Radio Coventry and Warwickshire. We sang a few lines from our songs and they asked if they could come and ‘see us off’.

Finally the day arrived, Friday 17<sup>th</sup> September, and we assembled outside Sacred Heart Church, our base, at 8.30am. BBC Radio CWR arrived and we sang for them. We boarded the coach and set off for London. On board were 20 of us, as two members would meet us in London, Edwin’s set of drums beautifully painted for the occasion by Sandra.

We arrived at Hyde Park for the dress rehearsal and passed through security. As we were shown to our dressing room we passed behind the enormous stage, surrounded by TV cabins, enormous boxes, ramps, steps, cables and attended by an army of crew. We were sharing our dressing room with the London Gospel Choir. In other rooms were Carol Vorderman, Liam off Britain's got Talent, The Priests, a Polish Dance group, a Romany Group who looked beautiful in their traditional costumes and were really friendly. We relaxed, practiced a bit, chatted and waited to be called. When it was our turn we stood at the side of the stage on the ramp waiting. We were so nervous! Even though there was no audience today. To get onto the stage we had to climb the stairs and emerged into the vast splendour of the stage. It was unbelievable! We looked down onto the altar where the Pope would be tomorrow. To our left was an orchestra and above them a mass choir.

Technicians and camera men were talking on headphones and a director looked serious, glancing quickly between his clipboard and the orchestra, the choir...us! We arranged ourselves (very professionally because we'd practiced) in two rows. The director gave us the nod and we sang our songs. Everything was ok. We wondered what it would be like tomorrow with thousands of people watching, and we were very glad we'd been able to do this rehearsal because we would probably have been stunned into silence if we'd met the sight of the stage for the first time on the day.

We went back to Harrow to our accommodation and the restaurant did us a special deal and put the tables together so we could enjoy a meal together. Next morning we set off at 9.30am. We went for breakfast in Oxford Street before going into the park. Once back in the dressing room, Sky News called wanting to interview us. They asked us a few questions about how we felt (loud cheers!) what it meant to us (more cheering!) and then we sang Nkolo Limbi...live! Some of the group had managed to let friends know that's what we were doing so we got almost immediate feedback from around the world. People in Nigeria commented that it was good but our 'dancing' was untidy – they hoped we would practice this before the vigil!!

We returned to the dressing room and began to get a bit nervous. Finally security cars (from the Vatican entourage) began to turn up and then it was our go. We walked onto the stage and saw that the park was completely packed – there were 80,000 people there. We could see flags from all over the world and banners saying 'we love you Benedict' and 'Viva Papa'. In front of the stage were loads of youth groups, and we knew that our own youth group was there – somewhere. Each group was dressed on one colour of the rainbow. The effect was wonderful. The youth groups chanted and sang and were parading flags across the stage at this point, with the mass choir singing a song every so often. Everything was projected onto big plasma screens. The Pope was now on his way from Westminster to Hyde Park. It was our turn to sing – we sang with every fibre of our bodies. We sang for everything we wished for everyone – our families, our friends, our parishes, absent friends.

During the vigil we were seated on the stage behind the altar. We felt absolutely blessed and privileged to be there. The orchestra was absolutely fantastic, it really took our breath away. When the pope entered we felt a tremendous sense of peace and humility being so near to such a holy man, after all the preparations and apprehension about the day. The youth groups and crowd cheered and waved and the vigil got underway. It was very beautiful and prayerful and during the silent parts of the service, the whole park was completely hushed; you could hear a pin drop.

After returning to Coventry we felt absolutely elated! We felt so honoured to have been involved and happy to have sung our songs without mistakes. None of us will ever forget the experience and we will always feel blessed by it. We will always be very grateful to Fr Tony and the parishioners of Sacred Heart for supporting us down the years, and to Fr Timothy for putting us forward and helping raise the money.