

Dr. John Romeri  
Director of Music  
Cathedral/Basilica of Sts. Peter and Paul  
Philadelphia, PA.

Dr. Romeri,

The binder that you are finally receiving here holds the mini-history of two of your predecessors who served as organist-choirmasters at the Cathedral. The information and materials were requested of me some months ago by Loretta Hartnett for your interest. I apologize for the delay.

The 'script' and enclosed original and copied items lie in a basic chronological order for both musicians.

I also enclosed a few of Gerard Stief's original compositions that were written for and used at the Cathedral: organ variations on various hymns and a setting of "I Believe That My Redeemer Lives" that the singers used at the Cathedral in the immediate post-Vatican years.

Best regards,

Carl J. Gedeik

~~gedaik1@verizon.net / 215-247-6827~~

~~gedaik@stmcparish.com~~

ORGANIST – CHOIRMASTERS

Of the CATHEDRAL of SS. PETER and PAUL,

Logan Circle, Philadelphia, PA.

1925-61

1- Dr. Reginald Mills Silby (1925-35)

2- Mr. Gerard Joseph Stief (1935-61; subsequently parish organist 1961-85)

## INTRODUCTORY NOTES

In the fall of 2010, a Philadelphia organist, Mrs. Loretta Hartnett, contacted me in the name of the new director of music for the archdiocese of Philadelphia and the Cathedral-Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul in Philadelphia, Dr. John Romeri, in search of information that Dr. Romeri wanted to pursue concerning his predecessors at the Cathedral.

Since I, Carl J. Gedeik, an organist-choirmaster-music director in the diocese of Philadelphia all of my adult working life, am related to one of the predecessors (Mr. Gerard Stief), I agreed to provide what information I could. My mother, Helen Marie Stief Gedeik, and Gerard Stief were brother and sister; thus Gerard Stief was my uncle. As an important footnote for this project, Gerard was my closest relative and a crucial intellectual, spiritual, moral, and life force for me. I (as executor of his estate and closest relative, his "surrogate son") can provide some copies of pertinent documents that relate to him and his Cathedral position, and some personal memories relating to him and his work. Also, my wife Rosemary and I have been on friendly terms with a survivor of Gerard Stief's predecessor at the Cathedral (Dr. Reginald Mills Silby), in the person of Silby's daughter Gwyneth Silby (married name 'Mrs. Lever Stewart,' although her husband has been dead for a number of years). Gwyneth Silby resides at the Waverly retirement community in suburban Gladwyne; she is indeed in very fine physical and mental health!

Dr. Romeri and the archdiocesan and cathedral music archives have full possession of both my notes and some pertinent original or copied documents contained herein. Where copies are included here, Dr. Romeri and any diocesan researchers are welcome to examine the originals in my possession.

## DR. REGINALD MILLS SILBY

NOTE: The information provided here has been obtained over the years through: 1) personal recollections of my uncle Gerard Stief (his successor); 2) excerpts from hand written diaries of Gerard Stief; 3) conversations with Dr. Silby's surviving daughter, Gwyneth Silby; 4) archival information from the eastern province of the Vincentian (C.M.) priests in Germantown, Philadelphia

Reginald Mills Silby was born in London, England on 08 March 1884 and died in New York City on 13 January 1954. His parents were Anglicans, his mother high and his father low. Silby attended both primary and secondary years of school at the Brompton Oratory in London; he converted to Roman Catholicism at the age of 18 based on the influence of years at the Oratory. See an article that he wrote in the 'Baltimore Catholic Review' for 19 January 1918 titled "My Conversion."

Gwyneth Silby relates that her father was encouraged in music by his mother, a singer of some ability, but that Silby's father tried unsuccessfully to steer him to the study of law. His extensive young music abilities and conversion earned him a job at the just opened Westminster Cathedral in London where he served as Sir Richard Runciman Terry's assistant organist and choirmaster from 1903 until 1909 when Silby left for the United States to promote Terry's work while venturing forth on his own in a new land. Thus Silby's formative young years were spent under the tutelage of Sir Richard Terry at the beginning of one of the most noted musical enterprises in modern Catholic music history with Terry's musicological research and the vast repertoire of Gregorian chant and Renaissance polyphony sung daily at the Cathedral in the beginning years of both Cathedral's and the now famous men and boys choir's histories!

Dr. Silby came to Washington, D.C. in 1909 as organist and choirmaster at St. Patrick's Church. He met and married his wife Alice (also of British descent who was a very young widow previously living in Argentina) whom he met at St. Patrick's Church. During World War I, Silby served with Canadian armed forces since he was a British citizen. After the war, he and his wife decided to remain in the United States. He assumed the organist-choirmaster position of St. Cecilia's Cathedral in Omaha, Nebraska in 1919 and stayed until 1925. Gwyneth relates that her parents spoke of their happiness both in Silby's work and life in general there. Silby left Omaha due to a confluence of factors: a new and unsupportive rector at the cathedral there, a dying Archbishop Harty who had been so supportive of Silby and had hired him, a nasty dispute with Irish girls of the high school (their graduation Mass music!). In six short years, Silby had already enacted some of Sir Terry's repertoire (Tallis, Byrd, et al) and had insisted on strict adherence to Pius X's 'Motu Proprio.'

In 1925, Dr. Silby accepted the position at the Cathedral of Ss. Peter and Paul in Philadelphia. While there, he also held part-time positions: Villanova College, the Vincentian Minor Seminary in Plainsboro, NJ, the Vincentian novitiate and motherhouse in Germantown in Philadelphia (where the Silbys also lived on PhilEllena Street), and a downtown conservatory with Nicola Montani (the editor of "St. Gregory Hymnal"). The last venture did not work out as the two principal musicians had different temperaments and musical priorities and tastes.

Incidentally, Gwyneth Silby was born on Easter day, 1925, and thus arrived in Philadelphia as a baby. Cyril Silby, now deceased, was born in Philadelphia in 1930.

On the next page, find an article from the student seminary newsletter that cites Silby's work in Plainsboro, NJ at the Vincentian minor seminary there.

On the following page, find an article from the student seminary newsletter that verifies some of what is related about Dr. Silby above as the article relates a later guest lecture appearance of Silby's at the Vincentian major seminary then in Northhampton, PA.

1934

Vol. 7, No. 2, p. 3

3

St. Joseph's  
Seminary-

Vincentian  
Minor  
Seminary

(high school)

Plainsboro, N.J.

(adj. to Princeton, NJ)

## St. Joseph's News

All the afternoon of Tuesday, the 11th of September, we arrived singly and in groups, ready for another year of study. When we assembled for the first time, we numbered just one short of 100, and 32 of the group were new boys.

The day after our return, Father Kennedy and Father O'Connor, who are leaving for China in a short time, visited us. After their informal but inspiring talks in the evening, we gave them a hearty applause as our farewell, coupling with this the promise to remember them in our prayers.

New Boys' Night! Under the capable direction of the Seniors, with Louis Storms as master of ceremonies, 30 new actors strode out on the stage and displayed their talents for the amusement of the rest of us. Their efforts we applauded generously. Then, to complete the show, two of the old boys staged a very informal "Gaudeamus," in three acts.

Doctor Reginald Mills Silby, the organist and choir director at the Cathedral in Philadelphia, has been teaching us singing two days a week since the beginning of school.

1934 - chapel was recently completed

(F. J. H. W. C.)

provided by

Rev. John CARVEN, C.M., Archivist of  
Vincentians

Jan., 2011

# HER IOHODIE

MAY, 1952

Mary Immaculate Seminary, Northampton, Pa.

Vol. 24—No. 8

Vincentian MAJOR Seminary (theology years there)

## Dr. Silby Lectures At M. I. S.

Dr. Reginald Mills Silby, former director of music at St. Joseph's College, Princeton, and at St. Vincent's Seminary, Germantown, visited us this past month in the capacity of guest speaker. Sitting behind a desk in the large classroom, he reminisced humorously about his musical career. He recalled his early days as assistant choirmaster and organist in Westminster Cathedral, England; his association with Sir Richard Terry, the choirmaster of the Cathedral and the man who brought Plain Chant back to Protestant England. He then spoke of his arrival in America and the various teaching assignments he undertook here; of his days as choir director at Princeton and Germantown, and of his present position as Choin Master of St. Ignatius' Church, N. Y. He proffered his opinion on modern composers of church music; and gave us an insight on his interpretation of Gregorian Chant. It was a refreshing evening of reminiscences heartily enjoyed by all.

+ Joseph  
since  
coming to  
Philadelphia

In September, 1935, Silby resigned from the Cathedral in Philadelphia to assume a similar position at St. Ignatius Church on Park Avenue in New York City, the famous Jesuit church of NYC (now graced with the Mander organ and Kent Tritle's music program). Silby apparently had a rough time in Philadelphia: ten years of unruly and frequently absent choir boys, very low salary (Silby now with two young children!), no paid professional men singers, inability to attract a sufficient number of men let alone enough competent men singers, clergy that frowned on his repertoire choices and tastes (strictly chant and sophisticated polyphony as absorbed during his formative young professional years with Sir Terry at Westminster Cathedral). These points will be verified later in excerpts from Gerard Stief's collegiate- years diaries; Stief sang for, studied with, and deputized for Silby at the Cathedral, and they actually became quite social and friendly.

Silby's two decades in New York proved more to his liking and professional success. He presided at the 3 manual/81 rank Hook and Hastings organ, he enjoyed the support of the pastors and clergy and upscale congregation, he had paid men singers in the choir. He also taught some summers at the Berkshire Music Center. The Silbys also managed to have a summer cottage in Huntington, Long Island, which Gwyneth Silby still remembers so fondly!

Gerard Stief and Gwyneth Silby both spoke of Dr. Silby's sophisticated improvisatory skills at the organ. Silby also composed motets and Masses (as did Stief subsequently). Apparently Silby and Stief wrote to each other (I have given Gwyneth Silby one surviving hand written letter from Dr. Silby to Mr. Stief that I had discovered in sorting through Mr. Stief's belongings). As seen in this letter, both men sent each other motets and Masses that each had written for the other to review and to use with their respective choirs if desired.

Gwyneth Silby has told me that Cardinal John O'Hara (archbishop of Philadelphia 1952 to 1960) apparently had Silby as a chant and music instructor in seminary days (Washington, DC??) and subsequently held a life-long admiration for Silby both as person and church musician. Gwyneth relates that the Cardinal called Mrs. Alice Silby upon hearing of the Dr.'s death and told the widow that he wanted to come to NYC and preside at the funeral at St. Ignatius but could not because of a conference of bishops that he and the Philadelphia diocese were hosting.

Ironically, I overheard both my uncle Gerard Stief and my own mother talk on occasion (during my young grade school years) about Cardinal O'Hara's personal interest in and support of good music at the Cathedral and of Mr. Stief himself. On this last point I have very clear and vivid memories of my parents (with little me in tow) picking up uncle Gerard Stief at his very modest and small studio apartment at 1625 Summer Street (a block behind the Cathedral, now 'Franklin Town') during about six or so of the June months of the 1950's and driving him and his luggage and overflowing brief case to the then Idlewild Airport in NYC so that Gerard could go to Germany for a few months to study music (I still have postcards sent to my parents and other relatives from Gerard in both Bonn and Munich during these years). And

I can remember my father always sarcastically remarking on our way back home that he couldn't see why he uncle Gerard just didn't study here instead of going away to Germany! But more salient to this discussion is that I have always suspected that Mr. Stief's summer studies in Germany were financed by the diocese through Cardinal O'Hara's behest. Stief lived extremely frugally and simply; plus I heard my own mother (Stief's sister) say at times that the Cardinal "has been very good to Gerard." In later years when I questioned my uncle about this, he would just smile but not give me a denial or affirmation.