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Rev. Robert Beale of Our Lady's Hill in Milton sings with spirit.

PHOTOS BY RICK HARRIST



A group performance by, from left, Fr. William Cummings, Fr. Robert Beale, Fr. Laurence Drennan and Fr. John Dwyer.



Eight vocal priests
take their show on the road

Singing fathers

By Nathan Cobb
Globe Staff

... And hey, we've got the Singing Priests with us tonight, ladies and gentlemen. When it comes to success, who says these guys don't have a prayer? I mean, they were so good that the last time we had them on the show they got a kneeling ovation. But they don't charge admission. Uh-huh. Instead, they take up a collection. I understand they wanted to call themselves the Supremes but the name was taken. Last year they did six weeks way off Broadway - in Rome. Their favorite comedian, you know, is Joey Bishop...

But seriously, folks:

The Singing Priests are out there, leading working crowds throughout the Archdiocese of Boston. There are eight of them, in their 40s and 50s, and they've been at it for several years, bringing an estimated \$500,000 into the coffers of various local charities. And we're not talking Gregorian chants here, or liturgy set to song. We're talking Rev. William Cummings of Our Lady Help of Christians in Newton kicking up his heels while belting out "New York, New York." We're talking Rev. Robert Beale of Our Lady's Hill in Milton ("I'm the only English priest in the Archdiocese.") doing a sudden segue from Beethoven into Shirley & Lee.

"This blows people's minds," confesses Rev. Patrick Dolan of Holy Family in Rockland, the one at the piano. "People think we say Mass in the morning and go back into the rectory for the rest of the day. They think we live in a cocoon."

Consider last Friday night. The modern 413-seat auditorium at Hanover High School was nearly filled, primarily with men and women who were middle-aged or older. On stage, seven folding metal chairs were neatly placed in a row. (Rev. Jon Martin of St. James in Salem had an unexpected commitment elsewhere, although the joking among the other parish priests had it

that he was probably lost somewhere among the mysterious back biways of Hanover.) Backstage, the preshow spread consisted of cups of water. Rev. John Connolly of Immaculate Conception in Stoughton sidled up to the curtain and peeked at the growing audience.

"I know what people say when they first see us," he said. "They say, 'What in the name of God is this?'"

During the next 2½ hours, they found out. One by one - and occasionally in groups - the men in Roman collars and dark suits took center stage. Their musical material relied heavily on show tunes, with additional doses of middle-of-the-road songwriters such as Neil Diamond and John Denver. Long jokes were told with professional and ethnic polish ("And so St. Peter says to the two men, he says...") and there was a brief pitch for recruits ("We're looking for a few good men and a few good women to become priests and nuns with us.") but mostly what went on was a semi-professional variety show set beneath a single row of spotlights and frequently accompanied by a sing-along audience.

The priests waved goodnight to a standing ovation.

The coordinator of all this is Rev. Ned Carroll, age 42, now of St. Peter's in Plymouth and originally of Lowell. Fr. Carroll is boyish and cherubic, the kind of son every Catholic mother wants. His own mother was a singer in vaudeville, while his father, among other occupations, ran a carnival. He took voice lessons for 15 years and became the student choromaster at St. John's Seminary in Brighton while studying for the priesthood. It was there, during the late 1960s and early '70s, that the group that eventually became the Singing Priests was organized. The precise moment of its official debut is a matter muddled by time - Fr. Carroll says it was in 1969, Fr. Cummings in 1975 - but in any case the concept caught on. "People actually liked us," Fr. Carroll recalls. "We couldn't get over it."

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