



# SACRED WINDOWS

**Fifth Sunday of Lent—March, 22, 2026**

Greetings!

This week has been filled with **travel and a few days of retreat** for me, so I thought I would republish a very popular piece from 2022 which anticipates the **Solemnity of the Annunciation** which the Church will celebrate on Wednesday of this week.

This greatest but least known Ave Marie is worth listening to many times. Even though it is the work of a man, it feels as though it could easily have been **composed and performed by angels**.

In Christ and Our Lady,  
**Peter Darcy**



## **The Greatest But Least Known Ave Maria**

Have you ever found yourself so transfixed by the beauty of something that you become **totally absorbed in it**, or found yourself listening to a single piece of music over and over because it speaks so deeply to your soul?

That is what happens to me each time I listen to the queen of all *Ave Marias*, that of the **German composer, Franz Biebl** (pron. Bee-bul).

I believe the title is justified. It is also a tall order when you think of the magnificent *Ave Marias* of Schubert, Bach/Gounod, and Caccini. (You would recognize each of them even if you didn't know the composer). These classics vie with each other for the prize of **unsurpassed beauty honoring Our Lady**.

But Franz Biebl's *Ave Maria* is the greatest of them all due to its sheer artistry, its rich chord structure, and its **ability to evoke raw emotion from the depth of one's being**. The other compositions were written for solo voices. Biebel's is an amazing eight-part harmony.

### **Prisoner of War**

I became familiar with this *Ave Maria* when I sang in a chorus in college (hmmm, a hundred years ago), and it still tops my list of favorite compositions. However, I didn't realize **the composer had such an interesting history**, quite unexpected, for someone who went on to produce such a masterpiece.

Franz Biebl was born in 1906 and had been a soldier in Hitler's army. He was taken as a prisoner of war in 1944 and kept in a **military prison in Michigan** of all places from 1944-46.

There he was introduced to American culture and **the humaneness of the American ethic** of incarceration. He once commented how surprised he was that his wardens actually *fed* the prisoners enough food to survive!

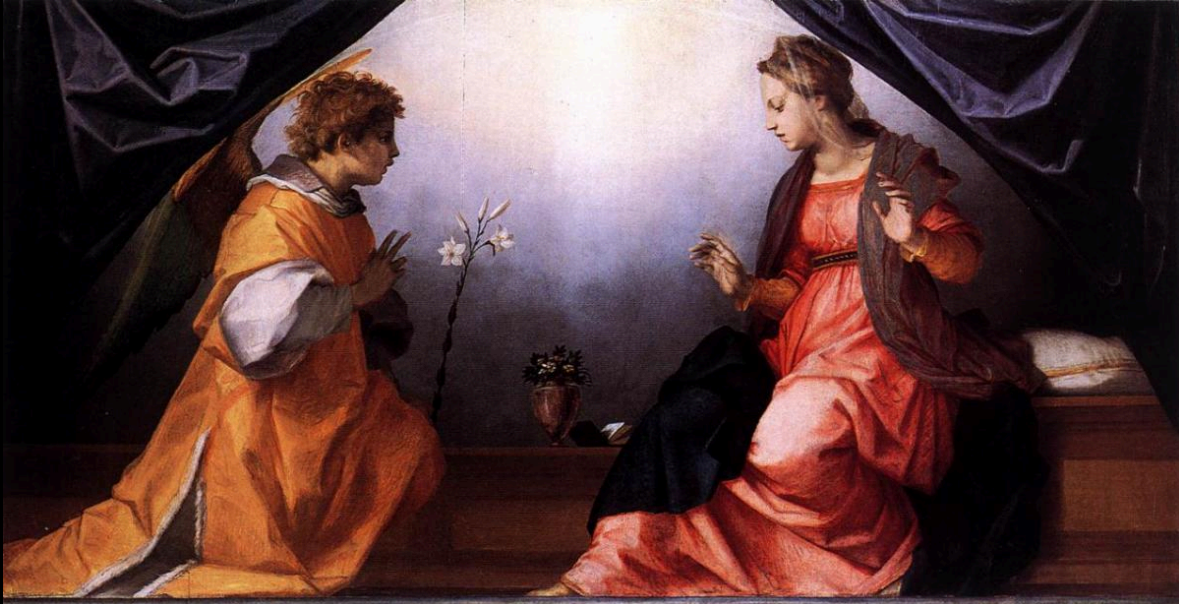
He developed a great respect for America as a result of that experience. **A mutual prisoner exchange** following the war's end sent him back to his native Germany where he took up his original profession of teaching, writing, directing, and performing choral music.

Two decades later, when he composed his famous *Ave Maria* (1964), it received little attention in Germany, so **he invited American choirs to sing his music on German radio**. These performances popularized the piece in his homeland, and those choirs then brought the piece to America where it has become a favorite of religious choirs, although it is still barely known to this day

**God's grace can do anything**. What is astounding to me is that such a lofty blessing came from an enemy soldier who was locked up in a prison in Michigan and then his handiwork returned to bless our land. Something so beautiful emerged from the chaos of a world war.

Biebl died in 2001 at the age of 95. He **wrote over 2000 pieces of music** in his life, which few remember, but his supreme masterpiece to Our Lady lives on.





## What to Look For

As you listen to the videos below, here are a few items that will help you appreciate the glory of the prayer and the power of Biebl's genius.

- **Performed a *cappella***

This Italian phrase designates music that is sung by human voices alone, without any instrumentation. **The human voice is the instrument.** The phrase *a cappella*, means “at or in a chapel,” which is relevant to the next observation.

- **Antiphonal singing**

The “antiphonal” style of religious music reflects the way in which monastic communities pray the psalms to this day. They do so as a rhythmic cadence of verses **chanted back and forth across a chapel**, like the Seraphim calling to each other in the sanctuary of Heaven (Isaiah 6).

In the background of the first video below there are rows of seats on either side of the chapel where they are performing. That **setting was deliberately chosen** for a piece like this.

Biebl's creation is even smoother than the simple back-and-forth chanting of monks. It is a seamless integration of high and low voices echoing verses, phrase by phrase, playing off each other with **adaptations and flourishes** that bring out the unique beauty and character of each voice register. Throughout the course of the performance, the listener feels as though he is in a gently rocking boat, swept up as in a mighty river of harmony.



- **Based on prayer**

Anyone familiar with the words of the *Ave Maria* will know that it is the Latin version of the *Hail Mary* prayer. In the choral version, the verses are punctuated at intervals by three verses of **the other famous Marian prayer, the *Angelus*** (sometimes called by its original title “Angelus Domini” – The Angel of the Lord)—a description of Mary’s dialogue with the Archangel at the Annunciation.

- **Jesus is the center**

In the Catholic heart, devotion to Mary never distracts from Jesus. As evidence, the **sacred Name of Jesus** lies at the absolute heart of the *Hail Mary* prayer. So also in Biebl’s *Ave Maria*.

The second video displays the written music on screen, which will help you notice the many crescendos (i.e., *surges in intensity*, symbolized by the < signs above the score) that Biebl worked into the music to **highlight certain aspects of the prayer**. The most important crescendo occurs at the sacred Name of Jesus, which is highlighted twice at the repetition of the phrase, “the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.”



- **The great and final crescendo**

Speaking of crescendos, Biebl’s *Ave Maria* ends gloriously in what has been described as the “Amen of Amen’s” – that designation **will become apparent** to you when you hear it.

The final nine measures of the piece begin with the lowest note of the entire score (a low “C” on the bass register). From there the flow of music gradually winds its way up through the male registers (bass/baritone and tenor), then through the female registers (alto and soprano) – **crescendoing and echoing the entire way** – to a rousing unison of voices culminating in the highest note of the piece, the high “C”, two octaves above where the bass voices began.

It will put you **on the edge of your seat**.

- **The last letter**

More importantly, the voices during the last nine measures of the piece pronounce only one word: *Amen*. And don’t miss the **perfectly-executed and sustained “N”** at the end of *Amen* (especially in the male chorus version), which sweetens the entire experience like icing on the cake.

There is great competition in the world of *Ave Maria*’s, but **Biebl’s masterpiece** is the queen and sovereign of them all. After listening to it, I’m sure you’ll agree.



## Marian Devotion

In no Catholic devotion except for the adoration of the Most Holy Eucharist do we find a swifter and surer path to Jesus than through Mary.



**St. Louis Marie de Montfort** said that “it is easier to separate light from the sun than to separate Mary from Jesus.” There is something truly astounding about that observation.

If you did nothing but listen to Biebl's Ave Maria every so often, you would come away with a tender love of Mary to **nurture your soul and strengthen your love of Christ Jesus.**

She is the one who said to an angel: “**Let it be done to me according to your word**” (Luke 1: 38).

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### Lyrics (full lyrics in 2nd video)

**[Verse 1] *Angelus Domini nuntiavit Mariae / Et concepit de Spiritu Sancto.***

*Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum. / Benedicta tu in mulieribus / Et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Jesus.*

**[Verse 2] *Maria dixit: Ecce ancilla Domini. / Fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum.***

*Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum. / Benedicta tu in mulieribus / Et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Jesus.*

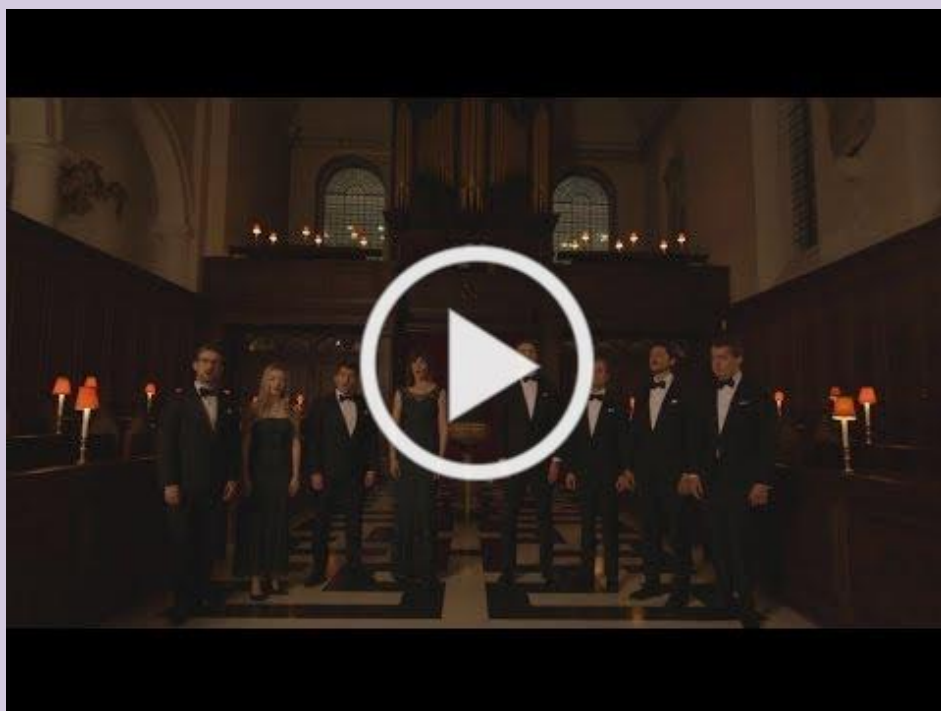
**[Verse 3] *Et verbum caro factum est / Et habitavit in nobis.***

*Sancta Maria, mater Dei, / Ora pro nobis peccatoribus. / Sancta Maria, ora pro nobis / Nunc et in hora mortis nostrae.*

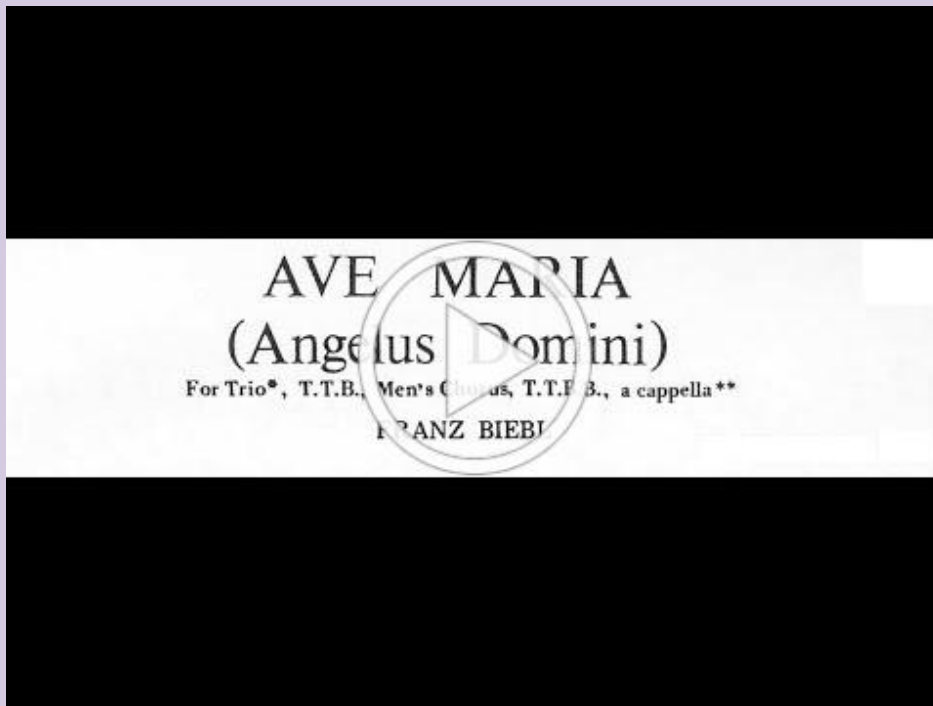
**AMEN.**

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Soprano-Alto-Tenor-Bass Chorus (duration, 4:08)



All-Male Chorus (duration, 6:27)



God bless you and our family during  
the season of Lent.

*Peter Darcy*

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**CONTACT US:**

Email: [peterdarcy@sacredwindows.com](mailto:peterdarcy@sacredwindows.com)  
Author's Website: <https://peterdarcywriting.com>  
Substack Page: [Sacred Windows Vignettes](#)



Peter Darcy / Sacred Windows | PO Box 346 | Port Salerno, FL 34992 US

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