

The Ministry of Church Singers

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Part 1

There are few ministries of the Church that require the devotion and the dedication that church singing does. You who lead the singing as well as you who follow the leader are precious gifts to your parishes. You are as important to the parish as is the holy table itself. As there can be no liturgy without the holy table, there can be no liturgy without you. This is not to compliment you or increase your pride, but rather to put a little fear and awe in you, so you know what your responsibilities are.

Church singing is not a hobby. Being a choir director is not something one does for personal fulfillment. It is first and foremost a duty, a duty of those to whom God has given musical talents. It is sinful, in my opinion, for someone not to sing who has been given the gift to sing. Sinful! You join the angels, and do that which the angels do perpetually. That's not an interest, a vocation, or a hobby; it is a duty. Angels were created to serve and to praise, and you have been given voices for that same purpose.

I love to remind our church singers of the fact that we physically jump into something that goes on perpetually. We jump in and join with the angels for a couple of hours, and then we jump back out. The liturgy does not begin with "Blessed is the Kingdom" and your "Amen." Those phrases only define the time that we participate in the liturgy which goes on perpetually before the throne of God.

We've been told that singers should listen to each other for a good blend. The tenors should listen to each other, and then the tenors should listen to the sopranos. The sopranos ought to listen to the altos, etc. etc. That's fine for the street. For the church singer it is not the tenor, alto or soprano who stand next to you we need to listen to, but the angels who lead us in our singing. Those are the voices we need to hear and with which we blend our voices. What can sound beautiful to us can sound like cacophony at the throne of God, if we are not singing with the angels.

St. John Chrysostom tells us that while the priesthood is something that takes place here on earth, yet it is something that is super-heavenly, because the priest and the deacon do that which angels dare not do. The angels stand in awe, not at the priest or bishop or deacon, but at what they've been permitted to do by God's grace. If St. John Chrysostom had written a book on choirs, as he did on the priesthood, I'm sure he would say that while being a choir member, cantor or reader is something earthly, it is also something heavenly. That the angels stand there, perhaps not in awe, but at least with a

little bit of jealousy, because you who are flesh and blood have been called upon to serve in the same ministry as they have been created for.

It's a holiness. It's not *your* ministry. It's a ministry that belongs to the Church, and you respond to the call as well as recognize the gift which has been given you. The ministry which you fulfill in the church was, traditionally, and in some sense still is, an ordained ministry. The choir was not some club that existed in church for those with some particular musical talent. To be a church singer was an ordained office within the Church. Canon 15, from the Council of Nicea, the Council of the 4th century, makes its point clear that only canonical singers should be appointed for that kind of ministry in the Church. The means "one set apart" for that particular ministry. Today we might call them readers. While I am not saying that every choir member must be a tonsured Reader, I do say that if we fulfill at least the spirit, if not the law of the Canon, that each choir member ought to see his/her participation in the choir as seriously as the ordained clergy take their ministry. I don't know any priest who thinks that he can say on some Sunday, "I don't want to serve because I want to stand with my wife," or "I don't feel like serving today", or "I'm angry, one of the altar boys offended me, so I don't want to serve this morning."

As seriously as the ordained clergy need to take their ordination, so you ought to as church singers. Canonically, they are an order of the Church, to begin with. I am not proposing that we have all of you ordained, but I think we ought to at least incarnate the spirit of the law, which implies a great responsibility, a great sense of duty and a privilege that is given to him or her as a church singer. This, then, should create in all of us, whether or not we are ordained clergy, a real sense of humility. We should give thanks that God has been pleased to call us who were created from the dust of this earth to participate in the heavenly liturgy and to offer up praises with His angels to join the perpetual hymn of "Holy, holy, holy."

We jump in and we jump out. Some of us jump in on time and some of us jump in a little bit late. In my opinion, being in church for that first "Amen" is a sign, an indication of one's humility. And where humility is, indeed, a virtue, its opposite is a sin. The sin is not disturbing other people. The other people are not the object of our worship. It is rude, but not necessarily sinful, to disturb other people. But it is sinful to be presumptuous and prideful that one can jump in and sing with thousands of archangels and ten thousands of angels at one's own whim. "This Sunday I feel like singing, and next Sunday I won't sing, I want to stand with my wife." Leave that Hallmark—card kind of sentimentality for restaurants, concerts and cinemas. You sing with the angels, that is secondary to sitting with any husband or wife or children. We stand before the throne of God, and when we realize that, every other consideration, all of our own personal likes and dislikes become secondary. I'm, giving my opinion now, and hopefully it humbles all of us. It's a humiliation that in the end should be something that elevates us, that exalts us, something that gives us wings.

Part 2

Now, I would like to share with you some of the writings of the Fathers of the Church, and some homilies on the canons about chanting in Church.

The choir leads the congregation in prayer. The invitation to prayer is put out by the deacon or archdeacon. The deacon invites prayer, but the choir leads the congregation in the prayer itself. First I will share the words of St. Meletios the Confessor. He says:

“Prayer with musical chants and melodies, loudly voiced tumult and shouting is heard by men; but before God our Maker, the prayer which proceeds from a man’s conscience and God-imbued intellect stands before God as a welcome guest, while the former is cast out.”

There are choirs which make “loudly voiced tumult and shouting”. Yet I do not wish to imply, and I know that St. Meletios does not imply, that aesthetic beauty is the only criterion for chanting.

Here is a little story. Once upon a time there was a monastery of St. George, and the Abbott was blessed with monks which did not have such wonderful voices. The annual pilgrimage on the Feast Day of St. George was not all that impressive with the rather awful sounds coming from the choir. So the Abbott called together all the monks and said, “Look, this year I am going to invite the famous choir from the cathedral for the Feast.” Word went out and thousands of people came to St. George monastery for the feast and. It was a glorious day. The famous choir from the cathedral was in great form and used its best voices. The Abbott was thrilled and even the humble monks who were not allowed to sing that day were thrilled. Following the day’s festivities the monks went off to sleep, and the Abbott was sound asleep after all the excitement of the day. St. George came to him in his sleep and said, “Father, I think you missed my feast day! Today is my feast day and here you are, you didn’t do anything. Have I not blessed you this past year?” And the Abbott said, “Oh, St. George, I do not know where you were, but we had a glorious feast today. How could you not be here?” St. George said, “I was in the church and I saw a great multitude of people, but I heard nothing.”

You and your choir need be as aesthetically perfect as you are able. God not only expects, but He accepts only our best. If your best sounds like “a loudly voiced tumult and shouting”, but is indeed your best, then God hears you, and St. George does, too.

Here is a quote from St. Anatoly Zersalev of Optina, written to a new choir member. “The fact that you have started to chant is not important. The roosters out on the farm sing like anything. They will drown you out right away. But you are not a rooster, and you are not a hen. You have to remember that your singing should not be like that of a rooster, but like that of angels, that is done with humility, fear, ardent love and self reproach. Such is true and God-pleasing chanting. But the vainglorious kind, designed to please not God but men, is worse than that of the roosters. And this is precisely what you did not specify for me, that is, whom did you come closer in imitating when you chant, the angels or a hen?”

St. Simon, the founder of Simonos Petras Monastery on Mt. Athos says that “at the church services we should chant with solemnity and devoutness, and not with disorderly vociferation.”

And St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain counsels us, saying, “the psalmody which takes place in the Church is an entreaty to God. Now he who makes an entreaty and prays must be in a state of humility and contrition, whereas an unduly loud voice manifests audacity and irreverence.”

One of the techniques that many chanters and choirs use is attempting to interpret to the congregation what the text means: very loud at one point and very soft at another point, then slow, then fast. That is as artificial as controlling the emotions of those who stand in our churches by dimming the lights or turning them on brightly. Your task is to sing, not to interpret. The Holy Spirit is the One who will lead us into the knowledge of all truth, not the choir director or the chanter.

Again, he who prays “must be in a state of humility and contrition.” According to St. Nikodemos, a sign of humility and contrition is that one does not chant or pray with an “unduly loud voice”, interpreting the text. He says “Chanters should psalmodize in a reverent and orderly manner, with fear of God and piety and contrition.”

“Pray gently and calmly. Sing with understanding and rhythm. Then you will soar like a young eagle, high in the heavens,” wrote St. Evagrios.

“He, the church singer, should chant without hurrying and without dragging, and he should pronounce the words clearly and distinctly. He should chant simply and reverently in a monotone, without expressing his feelings by modulations and changes of voice. Let us leave the holy prayers to act on the listeners by their own spiritual power. The desire to convey to the bystanders one’s own feelings is a sign of vanity and pride.” St. Ignatius Brianchaninov continues, “The singing should be begun and ended all together. Moreover, the hands should not wave in a distracting manner, and on no account should there be any moving around. The members should go in order quietly, one after the other, without pushing or hurrying one another.”

St Elias the Presbyter counsels us, saying, “When through continuous prayer the words of the psalms and hymns are brought down to the heart, then the heart like good soil begins to produce by itself, various flowers: roses, the vision or the incorporeal realities; lilies, the luminosity of incorporeal realities; and violets, the many judgments of God, difficult to understand.” These are the gifts, the graces that come to the church singer who sings with humility and contrition, who leaves aside his or her own personality and idiosyncrasies.

Part 3

If we are indeed singing with the angels, listening to their voices and melodizing with them, then we know the responsibility for conveying the import of the text does not rest upon our shoulders at all. That is not to say that we can mumble. The Fathers that we have heard say that we should chant with understanding, distinctly and clearly. But we do that because we wish to show respect to the text, not because we are trying to tell the congregation what the hymn is about. We are not there in positions of teachers, the Church says. We show respect to the text, not to the hearer. Our first concern is the text, the holiness of the words themselves. If we do that, the hearers will hear. They will be given all the tools necessary to understand the mysteries which are encompassed in the holiness of the text. And yes, the words are holy. And the sheets of paper that have music on them are holy, just as holy as a paper icon. Words have power. "The Word" is the title given to the Son of God Himself. The words and the music both have power. They have a holiness. The spoken word is a gift given to us, and given to none of God's other creatures. It is a gift that we perfect and offer back to God as a spotless sacrifice and a pure offering, to our God who gave us the gift of words and music to begin with.

Question: Should the first antiphon and cherubic hymn be sung in the same manner?

Answer: That is a good question, but I will speak (generally) about the interior attitude in the church singer. The music need be tasteful, beautiful and non-intrusive, so the liturgy flows. And again the flow is important, not so much because a break in the flow would be disruptive to those who hear, but that it would be cacophony at the throne of God. The object of our worship is not the congregation, but God Himself, and we do things well for Him. Everyone else may benefit, but they cannot be and must not be our consideration. Our consideration is that we offer God our best. The means: the best in sound, the best in taste (which may vary a lot, but that is fine.)

Q: What about dynamics and choral interpretation?

A: If they are done to make things more beautiful and not merely to express your own personal taste, then they are fine. There are some things that just naturally take a crescendo. It comes from the text in music that is well written. Where the music and the text marry, they are not obtrusive to each other. If they are a loving couple, the music does not need much external "mood setting". It does it by itself, especially when one chants with understanding and contrition. Submit yourselves to the text. Choir singers, submit yourselves to the director. Directors, submit yourselves to the choir and to the text.

Q: How do we find the balance between wanting it to be beautiful, but not going overboard?

A: What is one's motivation for doing it? When I was at a monastery on Mt. Athos, they had no choir. But they had a chanter that was out of this world. It was a three hour Orthros (Matins) with a one hour Liturgy and Fr. Theodore had been chanting for four hours. It was gorgeous. He had the most beautiful church voice; it wasn't a 'Frank Sinatra' voice. We've got plenty of those. I mentioned to one of the monks afterwards how blessed the monastery is to have Fr. Theodore. He said, "Excuse me, but

he distracts us from our worship. We would start saying, 'That was beautiful' ". What is our best and what is beautiful? Our best must be objectively discerned. Beauty is subject to taste. Perhaps this is a way of not answering the question, but I really do not know how to answer it.

Q. How can we hear the voice of the angels?

A. That is not a hard thing to answer, but it is a hard thing to do. The way that we may hear them is to become childlike when we stand before God. Children can hear angels speak. Children see angels, and that is how we are told to be, like little children. Too often rather than being childlike, we become childish. To become childlike is to be innocent, to stand before God in the spirit of humility, and contrition, laying asides our own likes and dislikes, and our personality, if you will. Age or education does not necessarily mean that you cannot be childlike anymore.

There is a young man whom I have known since he was a teenager. He went on to law school and is now a very successful attorney. When he was about twenty-seven we met at a church gathering, and he asked if he could spend some time with me alone. We went off to the side, and he said, "You know, Fr. Basil, I am very disturbed because I do not see my angel anymore. I used to see my guardian angel by my bed every night. And I do not see him any more, not for the past three months." Here is a young man who, despite his sophistication, maintained his childlike innocence, when it came to things of God, until he was twenty-seven. Then something happened. What was especially beautiful about his attitude was his naiveté. For twenty-seven years he believed that everyone must, like him, see his guardian angel. He did not think that it was anything unusual. What he thought unusual was that he was not seeing him anymore!

We can see angels if we live with them, if we attune our ears to their voices, and focus our eyes on seeing them. They are there. Just because we do not see them, or do not hear them does not mean that they are not there.

Here is a canon that deals with church singing and church singers. It is from the 75th Canon of the Council of Trullo which took place in the 7th century (691-692)

"We wish those who attend church for the purpose of chanting neither to employ disorderly cries and to force nature to cry out loud, not to introduce anything that is not becoming and proper to a church; but on the contrary, to offer such psalmodies with much attentiveness and contriteness to God, Who sees directly into everything that is hidden from our sight. For the sons of Israel shall be reverent (Lev. 15:30), the sacred word has taught us."

There is that word again, contriteness or contrition. Either humility or contrition has come up in almost every quote. Not only the ones that I am presenting, but all the ones I could find from the Holy Fathers and from the canons. At our rehearsals, and our sessions with the choirs, we talk about promptness, generally, and about dedication, both of which are important; but we need also speak about humility and contrition. If we take a poll of the Fathers those are the two characteristics that seem to be most important for

church singers. Humility and contrition. They did not say anything about a beautiful voice. Did you notice that? It has to be orderly; it has to start together and stop together. That is a good thing for choirs. Blend your voices, another good and very practical thing. But sing with humility and contrition- that is the most important thing...

To be humble will be a struggle. We cannot buy humility; we cannot merely appear to be contrite. Humility and contrition are states of the heart and soul that then manifest themselves in the behavior of body and attitude, and word, and psalmody. They are things that we need to work on individually. There is no choir practice to rehearse humility. I wish we could! We cannot have a rehearsal for joint contriteness. When choir members come together in individual humility and individual contriteness, we offer up corporate doxology that He hears and that St. George would hear: something that is an acceptable sacrifice, an acceptable oblation before the throne of God.

Brothers and sisters, you have been gifted by God with an angelic gift. Using your voices for His praise is a gift given to you and not to everyone. It is a gift given to you but a gift which you share with the angels and the archangels. Make yourself worthy, by His grace, of that gift, and be worthy of the calling to which you have been called. Not to lead the congregation in prayer; that is secondary. Not to make a beautiful atmosphere for liturgy; that is tertiary, way down the list. But to offer up acceptable glorification before the throne of God, an oblation that he will receive upon His heavenly and ideal altar. An oblation, then, like our oblation of bread and wine, which He will in turn offer back to us. When He accepts your offering, He doesn't keep it. He will take it, transform it, and send it back to touch the hearts the minds and the souls of you and your congregants. He will do that. You do not have to worry about doing it. If he can make bread into Flesh and wine into Blood, know that He can make your psalmody into an instrument of the Spirit, which can lead you and your fellow congregants closer to Him. Let Him be the only object of your worship, the only object of your praise, the only object of your glory. Then you cannot help but be humble and contrite, standing and considering and seeing only Him.