

READERS, CHANTERS AND CHOIR SINGERS

A Gift and Duty

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<http://standrewlexington.org/choir/>, <http://www.stbarbarachurchnc.org/choir.html>,
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“The music of the Orthodox Church is Her evangelism, and the choir, Her primary evangelistic instrument. Sermons, church schools and Bible studies are important and good for Christian formation. But this is not how She draws near to the soul; it is through the depth of Her poetry as possessed in Her services. The fullness of Orthodox theology and preaching is expressed in hymnography. When sung within the context of worship, the words of Sts. Basil the Great, John Chrysostom, Ephrem the Syrian, John Damascene, and Romanos the Melodist give form to our experience with the visible and unseen worlds. After witnessing the beauty of Orthodox worship, the emissaries of Prince Vladimir returned from Constantinople to report, “We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth.”

This nearness [association] between heaven and earth, evoked in Orthodox worship, is not the musical “prettiness” found in the concert hall. Dostoevsky has said, “Beauty will save the world.” Through beauty, truth enters the heart and awakens our spiritual senses. It is the responsibility of the liturgical singers and chanters to convey, with all clarity and “sweetness,” the Beauty of God’s revelation to man, as extolled in the liturgical poetry of the Orthodox services. By not imposing the unique personalities of their individual voices or sounding forth above the company, the singers humbly strive to become one breath, one voice, allowing the redemptive words to take precedence over any necessity to be heard as separate singers. Thus, the liturgical voices are anonymously integrated into the rubrics of worship, so as not to disturb the prayer of the people but to carry their hearts, as it were, from earth to heaven. In this sense, Orthodox singing is prayer that assists the praying congregation. It is an aural icon which is both didactic (instructive) and pleasing (nourishment-giving) to the souls of the worshippers as they unite with the choir in the praise of the Holy Trinity.”

When we sing church hymns, we must be careful that we do not pronounce only the words with our tongues while our hearts wander elsewhere. - St. John Chrysostom

“Participating in divine worship services as a choir member is a sacred responsibility, not to be taken lightly. Choir members offer their God-given talents to the faith. It is a part of their stewardship – the giving of their time and talents. In Orthodox services, choir members represent and lead the the laity, responding to the liturgical dialogue set by the priest. This places a sacred responsibility on them during our worship services. They are called to be knowledgeable not only of the hymns and responses, but also about the correct order of the worship services. The choir is entrusted to be a participating part of the worship service and lead the rest of the worshipers in song. Its members respond to that trust accordingly. Not all choir members are or need to be trained musicians, able to read music or have experience in singing with a group. However, with love and practice, all can grow in their knowledge of the music and create a sound that matches the beauty of our services and their surroundings – the music, the chanting, the icons, the vestments all strive to be as perfect and beautiful as possible as we offer up worship to God.”

On the Duties of a Choir Singer

Cursed is the man that doeth the work of the Lord carelessly. (Jer. 48:10)

You have begun to sing in the choir; therefore, you glorify the Lord in the image of the heavenly hosts, who ceaselessly sing praise to the glory of their Creator and Lord. How fortunate you are! But do you acknowledge the full sacredness and importance of this godly work, which incomparably more than any other work is worthy to be called godly work? If not, then it is not superfluous to remind you of the threatening and terrible words of the Prophet: Cursed is the man that doeth the work of the Lord carelessly (Jer. 48:10).

You see to what a terrible accountability those are liable who negligently and carelessly perform the work of serving God. The chanter (or singer) is the mouth of the Church, i.e., of the society of believers who are praying in church; while singing prayers and hymns, he pronounces them not only for himself, but in the name of all who are present in church, and as all who are praying pronounce their prayers through the mouths of the singers, these last also are the mouth of the Church. Chant unto our God (Ps. 46:7), the Holy Church invites them, but chant ye with understanding (Ps. 46:9). Consider and take heed: of Whom do you sing, to Whom do you pray, before Whom do you stand? You stand before the One before Whom the angelic ranks stand and walk with fear, covering their faces! You sing praises to the One of Whom all the heavenly powers ceaselessly proclaim: Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord of Sabaoth! Understand how high the work of the chanter is. Understand and admire the mercy of God, Who allows even earthly sinners to bring praise to Him!

This heavenly work is the work of an angel and not of a man having unclean lips, as the holy Prophet Isaiah expressed, having heard heavenly singing: Woe is me, for I am pricked to the heart; for being a man, and having unclean lips, I dwell in the midst of a people having unclean lips (Is. 6:5). And you, infirm, weak, and sinful, have been entrusted with such a great work. This talent which has been entrusted to you by the Lord, is a talent which you must bring forth and increase by employing it with understanding. With all humility and fear towards God say mentally to your soul: Behold, my soul, the Master entrusts thee with a talent: receive His gift with fear; and thou hast heard the condemnation of him who hid his talent, O my soul: hide not the word of God, but proclaim, sing of His glory, increase the gifts of grace entrusted to thee, and thou shalt enter into the joy of thy Lord (Stichera on Lord, I have cried and on Lauds, Great and Holy Tuesday).

The Lord is not slack concerning His promises (II Peter 3:9), (i.e., will not delay to fulfill them) to come again and exact an account from His slaves, whom He entrusted with His goods, His gifts and talents; take care, that you not hear the dreadful condemnation: Take from her My talent, which she did not wish to bring forth with great labor, and cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness (cf. Matt. 25:28, 30).

The great labor of a chanter consists in this, that all the strengths which have been given to him from the Lord's talents he unremittingly applies to the glorification of God. Sing to the glory of the name of God, sing not only with lips and voice, but sing with heart, sing with mind, soul, will, desire, zeal—with all your being. This is what it means to chant with understanding. The singing of the chanter passes over to the hearts of those who are praying; if the singing proceeds from the heart, it meets the heart of the listener and so influences him that it is able to rouse him to prayer, to incite reverence even in those minutes when the heart itself is distracted and hard. Often it happens that those who enter the church without any eagerness toward prayer, from compulsion or from propriety, begin to pray fervently and tearfully, and leave the church in quite another frame of mind, in a spirit of tender feeling and repentance. Such a revival is produced in them by the magnificent service and fine singing. And conversely, often it happens that those who enter the church with the intention to pray from the soul, to pour out before the Lord their sorrowful soul, when they hear scattered, careless singing and reading, themselves little by little become distracted, and instead of profit they find harm, they receive

no consolation and, having been tempted by the conduct of the singers, involuntarily fall into the sin of condemnation. And as the Lord says about those who cause temptation: Woe to that man by whom the offence cometh; it would be better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea (cf. Matt. 18:6,7 and Luke 17:1,2). If such is the terrible judgment of the Lord against everyone who shall offend one of these little ones (Matt. 18:6 and Mark 9:42), i.e., those who believe, then do not chanters, and generally all those of a clerical office who cause temptation, deserve an even more terrible punishment, who by their vocation ought to serve as a good example for others, and not as a temptation?

And so fear lest through tempting behavior on the cliros, through careless singing and dispersed conduct, you pour the poison of temptation into the hearts of those who are praying, and so be subjected to the punishment promised to those who tempt! Fear to do the work of the Lord carelessly, in order not to hear that curse which is threatened accordingly! Strive with all your strength to concentrate attentively on the words which you pronounce; pronounce them in such a manner that they come from the depth of your soul, which is singing together with your lips. Then the sounds of the vivifying current of your hymn will pour into the souls of those who hear them, and these souls, being raised from the earthly to the heavenly, having laid aside all earthly care, will receive the King of Glory Who is borne in triumph by the Angelic Hosts. Will you believe my words if I tell you from the narratives of the Holy Fathers that not only the human soul can be softened and moved by good spiritual singing, but even animals, those speechless creatures, somehow instinctively bow before it? Have you ever chanced to read the life of the Athonite monk St. John Kukuzelis? There are mentioned the following two events from the life of this great singer. Once he was pasturing the monasterys herds of sheep and goats. (Having entered one of the Athonite desert monasteries, John hid his position in the imperial court, calling himself a simple shepherd, and thus was sent to pasture the monasterys herds in the desert.) While sitting near his flocks at pasture, John began to sing the divine songs he had formerly sung in the imperial choir. His melodious voice flowed in the open desert, and John surrendered his whole soul to the singing, resting in the thought that he was alone in the desert and no one was hearing him. Meanwhile, his sheep and goats left off grazing and surrounded their singing shepherd: as if holding their breath, they stood motionless before him, directing their eyes to him as though fascinated by his angelic singing [1]. Behold deeply spiritual singing, coming forth from the depths of the soul and conscious mind! It is able not only to inspire the rational soul and lift it towards its Creator, but to touch even speechless and irrational animals. Once, according to custom, John sang the Akathist to the Mother of God together with other singers on the right cliros. After the vigil he sat down in a stall (a monks seat) in front of the icon before which they sang the Akathist, and being weary he slumbered lightly. Suddenly a gentle, sweet voice woke him with the words: Rejoice, O John! John jumped up; before him stood the Mother of God in the radiance of heavenly light. Sing and do not cease singing, she continued, and for this I will not forsake you! At these words the Mother of God placed in Johns hand a gold coin and became invisible.

Do you see of what great honors those zealous singers are thought worthy while still here on earth, who not only with their lips, but also with heart and mind sing of the Lord and His Most Pure Mother! Indeed, how will we avoid the just judgment of God for our listlessness and laziness and negligence, on account of which we willfully turn even the greatest gifts of God into our own property, which we dispose of as we want, according to our evil will and sinful habits. What a wonderful and great gift—the gift of a voice and the ability to sing! They were given to us for this, that with them we might both glorify the Lord ourselves, and incite others to do the same. And how often we turn these talents to our harm: becoming proud of them, we abase our neighbors who dont have them, we are idle in using them properly to the glory of God, and when we do, we do not use them in a fitting manner, nor as is required by the majesty of these gifts. May the Lord therefore give thee understanding (II Tim 2:7) to apprehend the height of your vocation in the office of singer in the chorus of the Heavenly King.

Bring the gift as a sacrifice to its Giver, for what hast thou that thou didst not receive? (I Cor. 4:7). Are not all our talents and abilities from the all-generous God, and will He not require from us an account of their use?

Having arrived at the cliros and stood in your place, first of all cross yourself and bring to remembrance that you have come before the invisible face of the King of Glory, Whom at this very moment, as always and ceaselessly, all the heavenly hosts glorify, and that presently your feeble and insignificant voice must join this celestial praise. Impress this upon your consciousness, turn mentally to yourself and say to your self, i.e., to all the powers of your soul: mind, thoughts, heart, will, zeal, and the rest: Come, let us worship and fall down before Christ, and let us weep before the Lord Who made us! (Ps. 94:6).

The Lord will protect the good free-will actions of your heart, will give you His grace, will renew your powers, and, as the perfume of sweet-smelling incense, your singing will ascend before the Altar of the Most High. For strengthening and consolation remember more frequently the most sweet words of the Mother of God to her wonderful singer John: Sing and do not cease singing, and for this I will not forsake you! Believe and hope that the Most Holy Mother of God will not abandon you either in this extremely difficult world, nor in the future blessedness, where she will vouchsafe crowns of glory unto those who sing hymns of praise to her. Amen.

The Ministry of Church Singers

The following article is taken from the newsletter PSALM: Pan-Orthodox Society for the Advancement of Liturgical Music, Spring 1996, written by His Grace Bishop BASIL.

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, avocation, 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," and it doesn't end with "Through the prayers of our Holy Fathers" 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 stands 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, and is an ordinance established here on earth, yet it is something that is super-heaven, 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 John Chrysostom wrote 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 that 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 that the gift which you specifically 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. That means "one set apart" for that particular ministry. Today we might call them Readers. While I'm 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 sit 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'm not proposing that we fulfill the letter of the law by having you all 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 in the church 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 sit with my wife." Leave that Hallmark—card kind of sentimentality for restaurants, concerts, and cinemas. You sing with angels, that's 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 its end, should be something that elevates us, that exalts us, something that gives us wing.

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. ... 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 it is indeed your best, then God hears you, and St. George does too.

Here is a quote from St. Anatoly Zertsaley 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 those of roosters. And this is precisely what you did not specify for me, that is, whom did you come closer to in imitating, when you chant, the angels or a hen?"

St. Simon the founder of Simones 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 bright. 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 of contrition.

According to Saint 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. Evagrius.

“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 be waved in a distracting manner.” You should not do in the choir loft or the choir area, that which you would not do in the sanctuary. “The hands should not be waved 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 into the heart, then the heart like good soil begins to produce by itself, various flowers: roses, the vision of the incorporeal realities; lilies, the luminosity of corporeal realities; and violets, the many judgments of God, difficult to understand.” There 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.

If indeed we are singing with the angels, listening to their voices and melodizing with them, then we know that 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. And 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. And “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. And it is a gift that we must perfect, the gift of speech, the gift of communication, and the gift of music. 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.

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 if one chants with understanding and contrition. Submit yourselves to the text. Choir singers submit yourselves to the director. Directors submit yourselves and the choir 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 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 some '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 subjective to taste. That's a way out of not answering the question, but I really don't 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 aside 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 anymore, 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 it anymore!

We can see the 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 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 in Trullo that 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, nor 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 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.

Now about forcing nature, here is a famous commentary on Canon 75:

“The chanting, or psalmody, that is done in churches is in the nature of begging God to be appeased for our sins. Whoever begs and prayerfully supplicates must have a humble and contrite manner. But to cry out manifests a manner that is audacious and irreverent. On this account, the canon commands that those who chant in the churches refrain from forcing their nature to yell, but also from saying anything else that is unsuitable for the Church. But what are the things that are unsuitable for the Church? The expositor Senoras replies that there are womanist members and warblers (which is the same as saying trills and an excessive variation or modulation in melodies which inclines towards the songs sung by harlots). The present canon, therefore, commands that all these things be eliminated from the Church, and that those who chant therein shall offer their psalmodies in great care to God, Who looks into the hidden recesses of the heart, into the psalmody and prayer that are framed mentally in the heart rather than uttered in external cries. The sacred words of Leviticus teach us, ‘sons of Israel,’ to be reverent before God. That is why divine Chrysostom says that these things (meaningless utterances, singing words that either make no sense, or singing without understanding) are natural, not to those who are engaged in doxologizing God, but to those playing, and mingling the sport of demons with angelic doxology. By means of many arguments he, Chrysostom, teaches that we ought to offer up doxologies to God with fear and a contrite heart, in order that they may be welcome, like fragrant incense.”

The common thread that runs through these quotes is the need for humility and contrition. 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 words, 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 does not keep it. He will take it, transform it, and send it back to touch the hearts, and 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.

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