

Psalm 103:33

By Fr. Bohdan Hladio

Several years ago I heard a young man in his late teens, himself very active in our church, say “If you want the youth to stay active in the church, you have to teach them to sing”! This might sound simplistic, but it’s essentially true. I know many dedicated, pious Ukrainian Orthodox teens and young adults who take great joy in singing the divine services. Conversely, I don’t think it’s an accident that youth who don’t grow up singing the services have an easier time leaving the church, if for no other reason than there’s one less thing engaging them there.

This truth can be extended to encompass all members of the church. In many parts of the Orthodox world the “participants” in the Liturgy rarely participate in singing: in the Byzantine world singing is for the most part carried out by a few chanters, and in our Ukrainian Orthodox tradition we have a tendency to limit singing to the members of the choir.

Neither of these practices is ancient or apostolic. Fr. Alexander Elchaninov writes: “We know little, and in most cases do not try to find out anything about our church services, about the life of the Church. We should fill this gap and become living members of the Church. Few people even realize that the so-called ‘choir’ speaks and sings in the name of the entire congregation, and that in the early Church there were none of those specially trained, professional singers who now perform this ‘duty’. All sang, testifying *their own* faith and with a sense of responsibility for the words they uttered. Sometimes we do not even know the words. And how many understand them? When we attend a service in Church, we seem to sign a letter we have not read, to assume duties which we ignore.”

In many parts of Ukraine congregational singing was the norm until fairly recently. “The eminent Slavic musicologist, Johann von Gardner, after 1917, spent four years living in Subcarpathian Rus’ and was particularly amazed at the religious knowledge of the simple peasants, acquired simply by singing in church. He describes the singing which he heard in the churches of the Carpathian regions: ‘In Subcarpathian Rus’ in all the villages both among the Uniates and also among the Orthodox, there was

always practiced only congregational singing of the complete services, not excluding the changeable (proper) hymns in all the varied chants. They sang according to the Great Zbornik (collection of prayers and liturgical texts) which contained every necessary text. The numerous chants (including all the podobny, not even found in the Synodal notated liturgical books) were known by everyone, even the children of school age. The leader of song – the most experienced singer from the parish – standing at the kliros sang the chant. As soon as the worshippers heard the beginning, they would join in the chant and the entire church sang; they sang all the stikhery, all the troparia, all the irmosy – in a word, everyone sang properly.’ Usually when the worshippers join in the singing, a second part, sung in parallel thirds to the melody, occurred.” (Prof. David Drillock, *Words and Music in Orthodox Liturgical Worship*)

It’s interesting to note that in a society with low rates of literacy the faithful knew both the text and the music of the services by heart – something rarely found even among church choristers today! And we’re not talking only about the basic texts or the usual melodies – “podoben” or “special” melodies are specifically mentioned, melodies which even most experienced church cantors nowadays don’t know, if they are aware of their existence at all.

The Liturgy is not a concert. Nor is it a “mystical rite” where only the properly trained and initiated priests, singers, and assistants can take part. It is the rational worship (*словесна служба; λογικη λατρευια*) of the people of God. It is, as we so often hear in the text of the services, something “we” offer to God – and this “we” includes all the congregants.

It’s true that the roles of priest, deacon, reader, etc. are clearly reserved for individual people. Everything else – responses, hymns, etc. – is the responsibility of all the faithful. When we don’t take an active part in singing at Liturgy, Vespers, and other services we deprive ourselves of the opportunity to strengthen our faith, and deprive God of our rational worship.

At this point I want to clearly and unequivocally state that I am not in any way suggesting that choirs are undesirable or unnecessary. My experience is that the vast majority of choristers in our parishes are dedicated, pious people who truly love to honour God with their voices. Our church would

be much poorer without them. But if the Liturgy is treated as a concert and only people with trained voices are welcome to sing, or if the congregants are actively discouraged from singing along, Christian worship is not taking place.

Choirs and trained cantors are necessary to sing or lead certain parts of the services (stykhyry at vespers, tropars at Liturgy, etc.), especially those services which occur only rarely or annually (e.g., for great feasts or holy week). But the existence of a choir doesn't preclude the possibility of congregational singing. The question is not "choir or congregation?", but "how can we integrate congregational singing into our liturgical services for the greatest possible spiritual benefit of our faithful and our Church?"

I am truly blessed that in the congregation I serve the faithful feel comfortable singing along with the choir or cantor during services. On Bright Monday we had 32 people at the Liturgy, the singing was led by our cantor, and everyone was participating – loudly and joyously! Our Paschal services were beautiful and solemn, but this weekday Liturgy was especially joyous and uplifting. Everyone present was, as Fr. Elchaninov notes, testifying to their own faith, their own joy. With their singing they made this faith and joy palpable.

Congregational participation in the Liturgy is only possible where the congregation is encouraged to sing and the choir or cantor facilitate this participation. As to how this participation is facilitated I would offer the experience of my parish here in Oshawa. The conductor chooses choral arrangements which are simple and beautiful, usually some version of Kyivan style "obikhod" or "usual" melodies. These same melodies are sung all the time (this is a case where familiarity breeds comfort, not contempt) so the faithful are familiar with them. We have liturgical hymnals in the pews, so the faithful can read the words with their eyes, hear the words with their ears, and sing the words with their voices.

When the Liturgy is sung by a cantor she generally uses the same melodies as the choir does, but there are some very specific techniques which cantors can use to encourage participation. The cantor must sing only the melody, and it must be sung clearly, in a voice which is dominant but not overpowering; "not too fast, not too slow, not too high, not too low".

What happens if I want to sing, but I'm not sure of myself? Whether in the choir or in the congregation, these simple rules will keep us out of trouble.

1. No one must ever sing in Church if they cannot attentively listen. Though this might sound odd, if we wish to sing, we must concentrate on listening. Put another way, the most important element of our singing will not be our voice, but our ears. The faithful must listen intently and follow the lead of the cantor or choir; the cantor must listen to the people in order to regulate pitch and tempo; and choir members must listen to each other as well as the conductor. This factor is so important that one can almost say "if you listen everything will be OK".
2. The melody line is the most important part of the music. When unsure what to sing, sing the melody.
3. If you cannot confidently sing the melody *by yourself* don't harmonize.
4. When harmonizing Kyivan chant, the most important line to add after the melody is the bass, and after that the tenor and/or alto parts. Conversely, in Galician chant, after the melody is established a harmony in a parallel third would be added, and then after this a bass line might be added. The melody line should always be firmly established before any harmony is attempted.
5. If you don't feel confident it's OK to "sub-sing", i.e., sing in a quieter voice in order to learn the melodies, and as you become more confident you can increase the volume.
6. No matter how confident you are, never sing so loud that you can't hear others. If you do this chances are you're overpowering them.
7. If you sing in a choir, watch and follow the conductor at all times.
8. When a hymn whose text or melody you don't know is being sung it's OK to stand quietly and listen. Everyone doesn't need to sing everything. We have enough variety in our services that everyone has the opportunity to participate both actively and passively.
9. Always enunciate the words clearly. In Orthodox worship the music exists to support the words, not vice versa.

“The Orthodox Way is all about balance – not extremes, but balance.” (Abp. Seraphim of Ottawa). With liturgical singing the two extremes we seek to avoid are chaotic cacophony, where everyone sings whatever they want, however they want, without knowing what should be sung or listening to others; and empty aestheticism, where the “music” is beautiful, but emanates from a spiritually empty and faithless heart.

Jesus teaches us that we should worship “in Spirit and in Truth” (Jn. 4: 23-24). Our faith is more important than any talent or technique we might possess. We cannot give something we don’t have, manifest a spirit we don’t possess, or convince others of a truth we don’t believe. The primary resource we draw upon in our liturgical participation will always be our faith. If I sing the Creed but don’t believe in the divinity of Christ I’m a liar. If I sing “Lord, have mercy” but don’t know or care what this means I’m not worshipping, I’m at best just present at some generic ritual.

Singing together is a very powerful act. It affects us positively in a physiological, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual way. This is why from time immemorial singing has always been an integral part of the worship of the people of God. The more we as individual members of the Church participate in singing our liturgical services the stronger our faith, our parishes, and our church will become.

To complete the aforementioned quote from Fr. Elchaninov: “*The Church is alive and will live forever. Let us not hang like dry, withered leaves on this ever-living tree.*”