

The Ministry and Song of the Liturgical Assembly

by Mark Bailey

Spring/Summer 1998

Introduction

It appears on the surface that no uniform conventions or standards are in place to guide assembly singing in North American Orthodoxy. Numerous conditions exist, however, from assemblies that stand inaudibly as the choir/cantors and clergy perform the services entirely, to assemblies that sing all non-clergy components, to assemblies that limit their participation to singing the Creed and Lord's Prayer, and finally to assemblies where some stand in silence, some sing "everything," and some sing only the Creed and Lord's Prayer – often at the annoyance of one another. Which then, if any of these practices, reflects the true nature and spirit of liturgical worship, and where does one find the answer?

Liturgical Factors and Determinations

Indeed, liturgy itself holds the answer and solution to the problem of assembly singing.¹ As a combination of specific related acts which, after being individually introduced into worship, have evolved and merged over time, liturgy unifies the collection of the faithful and places them on an ongoing and focused journey to meet Christ at the chalice. Liturgy further designates various ceremonial components so that those gathered may audibly express their presence and, as a result, their spiritual convictions toward this common Eucharistic goal. Inherent within liturgical structure, therefore, is the work of the assembly and their essential role at each ceremonial Orthodox gathering.

That is to say, an assembly's mere attendance at liturgy is profoundly inadequate toward fulfilling the mandate of corporate worship, and that participation is not merely an option, but a liturgical expectation. Members of the assembly are not the equivalent of audience members at a drama. But, like the actors, they have a specified role to play at each gathering, a role which is primarily manifested, by tradition, through singing: the assembly acts as liturgical respondents to petitions, prayers, statements, and scriptural verses of faith. By so doing, they affirm and punctuate each liturgical component, thus allowing liturgy to progress by unanimous corporate agreement. One could say, as well, that the assembly's ministry is to engage at each gathering in a series of liturgical dialogs – hence the responsorial characterization of their presence – which concludes at the Eucharist, and restarts again in preparation for the next gathering.

The uniquely responsorial nature of the Christian assembly is evident in several manuscripts, the New Testament chief among them. Early Christians were known to respond enthusiastically with acclamations such as "amen," "alleluia," and even "hosanna."² They would also engage in short formulas of praise, such as doxologies (Glory...)³ The assembly's responses were brief,

emphatic, and they indicated the interactive and charismatic nature of early Christian worship.⁴ And, even more importantly, these acclamations and formulas of praise remain prominently placed throughout liturgy today with the same intent.

The Orthodox litany is a prime example. Note that the celebrant does not come forward to recite an uninterrupted series of prayer petitions. On the contrary, the people are invited to interact with the celebrant by responding after each petition with "Lord, have mercy," or the like. When the prayers are concluded, the litany is punctuated with the doxological acclamation and the entire petitionary event draws to an end with a unanimous, "amen." The supplicatory role of the assembly, therefore, is to listen, to ponder briefly, and then to affirm each petition on behalf of themselves, the church, and the entire universe. As a result, the litany is alive, expressive of the faithful gathered, and therefore immediate and in the moment. This, in short, is the charisma of early Christian liturgy and the charisma which remains.

The Church of Constantine within the Byzantine Empire (beginning in 313 AD) eventually formalized yet another critical liturgical role which, modeled after Hebrew practice, had been evolving for Christians probably since the second century: the ministry of the singers, i.e. the liturgical choir/cantors.⁵ The responsorial psalm antiphon, in pristine form, is the popular liturgical structure which best describes and distinguishes this "new" role. The foundation of Byzantine liturgy was built on the extensive singing of Psalm texts. The cantors would announce a psalm, its refrain, and then chant the verses, to which the assembly as liturgical respondents would then sing the common response. This ancient practice reveals several things about the character of Byzantine liturgical execution. First, it underscores the continuing role of the assembly to listen and to respond as a unified body in a common dialog of faith. As well, the liturgical singers fulfill two primary roles as part of their ministerial offering:

- 1) to prepare and execute those textual and musical components which change from verse to verse, and furthermore from week to week, feast to feast, and season to season; and
- 2) to introduce, to lead, and to support the assembly in the singing of its own responses.

Based on liturgy itself, nothing fundamental regarding these key ceremonial ministries has changed since their initial formulations and designated purposes. In fact, the structure of the liturgy today often clearly maintains these models in its primary textual presentation, e.g. the litany still requires a response after each petition; the prokeimenon still offers a common refrain to be sung after each verse; the Anaphora still begins as a dialog, and so on. Yet, various cultures and ethnic communities, usually while innocently and sometimes unknowingly embracing non-liturgical influences, have often wandered from these liturgical principles and adopted practices in fact antithetical to corporate worship.⁶ In other words, various forms of liturgical neglect over the centuries have led numerous communities to ignore liturgy's own revelation toward the expected participation of the assembly and its ministerial singers.

For example, Orthodox traditions which celebrate the Beatitudes as the third antiphon may choose, without changing the text itself, a more liturgically vibrant and accurate form of its expression. Christ delivered the Beatitudes, of course, during the Sermon on the Mount.⁷ While the text was fresh and new to those gathered, He structured and delivered the words according to

an ancient and familiar psalm formula. Thus, Christ through the Beatitudes underscored the overall scriptural tone of the event: the old being transformed and fulfilled in light of the new. That is to say, the psalm formula was old and familiar, the words being rendered in the psalm were new.

Most musical settings today begin the Beatitudes with "...remember us, O Lord, when Thou comest in Thy Kingdom." Astute singers will notice, however, that the phrase is not included in the Sermon on the Mount, but refers instead to the thief addressing Christ on the cross.⁸ The Church has given the text to the Beatitudes as a common refrain for the assembly, sung after each verse. While most communities now choose to sing the verses without the repeated refrain, the difference is dramatic. When the choir (possibly joined by the assembly) sings, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted..." the antiphon becomes merely a musical recitation or recreation of an important historic text; the initial emphasis, without the benefit of theological amplification and reflection, is on the text's meaning as it was articulated to those in attendance at the time. When, however, the assembly inserts the liturgically intended response in the following manner: "...Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Remember us, O Lord, when Thou comest in Thy Kingdom..." each verse is affirmed and therefore transformed into the living and vibrant expression of faith today for all those gathered. Therefore, the responsorial mode, among other things, indicates that these words, historically articulated by Christ himself, exist for the faithful here and now, completely in the moment.

As a result, belief becomes dynamic.⁹ And liturgy during its most formative stages has endeavored to preserve these dynamics in its textural structure and manner of execution. No theologian should ever have to convince the Orthodox that liturgy is the essential and vital way for Christians to express their faith; it should be obvious each time the faithful themselves gather.

Problems with Current Practices

An assembly which stands mute and abdicates its responsorial liturgical role to the choir/cantors introduces a profoundly illogical element into worship. Consider the following absurd scenario: a person walking down the street is greeted by a friend. Rather than responding directly, the person pulls out a tape recorder, pushes the play button, and the deeply resonant voice of James Earl Jones is heard saying "Hello" in response. Likewise, when the celebrant turns toward the assembly and greets them with "Peace be unto all," it is also absurd to have designated singing voices only from the side or back of the church respond elaborately, "And to your spirit." In this manner, the dialog of worship becomes contrived and removed, and liturgy is reduced to a religious presentation or performance with the assembly gathered as audience.

Communities which insist on trying to sing all musical settings with the choir/cantors also violate the spirit of worship by "recruiting the congregation into hyperactive participation."¹⁰ A dialog necessarily requires one to listen and to ponder, however briefly, in order to respond. Without this, the responsorial antiphon is lost, and liturgy instead begins to reflect a monologue in which the assembly turns into the choir. There are several hymns which engage all gathered, including the clergy, and focus everyone on the event at hand. Gladsome Light, for instance, is such a

hymn. Equally, there are critical times when the assembly should stand silently and ponder the text.¹¹

Singing only the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and perhaps a few other select settings, is not only inadequate as aforementioned, but misses the point. Once again, the centrality of the dialog as the primary means by which to affirm faith and to travel to the chalice is neglected in lieu of singing a few favorite hymns. Rather than emphasizing the actual ministry of the assembly, such reduction implies that they need to be reawakened and re-engaged every so often, lest they mentally withdraw from liturgy all together. The point, however, as Justin Martyr underscores in his invaluable *Apologia* of circa 150 AD, is that at the time when the gifts are blessed and transformed, all chime in with an "amen."¹² That response is first and foremost the responsibility of the unified assembly, serving as witnesses to the holy transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. In other words, that "amen," rather than the Creed or Lord's Prayer, is the necessary point of departure toward fulfilling the assembly's ministerial role, which may very well include singing both components when other elements are in place.

Finally, communities which allow members of the congregation to do as they please in these regards emphasize Christian individuality at the expense of the unity of the assembly. As a result, worship becomes disorganized, even chaotic. By responding at the appointed times in one unified musical voice under the guidance of the choir/cantors, liturgical organization and focus, as well as the spirit of unity, is restored.

The Assembly's Voice

The sound of an assembly fully engaged in liturgical singing will differ from the sound of the choir or the cantors. The assembly is its own unique musical instrument with the allowance to vary greatly depending on the size and make-up of the community. To expect polished artistic presentations of sacred music from them would overshoot the goal. At the same time, the words of the assembly much be elevated, understood, and absorbed. Therefore, to the extent that intonation, articulation, and concise rhythm and flow contribute to this goal, they must be well-accounted for. The nuances of expressive singing, however, such as subtle crescendos and decrescendos, or intended tempo fluctuations, are probably outside the scope of the assembly's general abilities and beyond the call of their ministry. Indeed, those gathered to proclaim their worship in congregational song may sound beautiful and be profoundly moving, but in a different way than one would expect from the choir/cantors.

Inevitably, the execution of assembly singing will evolve during any given setting through repetition, which is part of the liturgical formula. Also, they will likely catch on more quickly to short acclamations, as opposed to longer troparion refrains, which became popular around the middle of the first Christian millennium. Finally, they will sing with greater confidence music already familiar to them, although, in accordance to human nature, they also will tire of the same melody repeated service after service, year after year. Patience with the assembly, coupled with polished, accurate, well-prepared, and confident musical leadership from the choir/cantors, will yield the best results.

Consider, for example, the festal third antiphon (a responsorial antiphon) which consists of psalm verses and a common troparion refrain, eventually during which the little entrance takes place. After the choir/cantors introduce the first verse, the assembly should just listen and attempt to memorize the first utterance of the troparion refrain, which will likely consist of several textual lines. On subsequent reiterations, the assembly may and should join in, each time with greater confidence and accuracy. The better the musical setting and polish with which the choir/cantors lead the singing, the quicker the assembly will catch on. Handing out music to the assembly, therefore, should be unnecessary.

Musical Settings for the Assembly

Just as the sound of assembly will differ from the sound of the choir/cantors, so should the assembly's music. Simply turning to those gathered and beckoning them to sing the choir's repertoire is often problematic, as choir music or cantorial chant is written for a different "instrument" than the congregation.

Groups of relatively or fully untrained singers primarily rely on two musical qualities to enable them to sing together: structured melody and rhythm, both of which should serve the natural enhancement of the syllabification and stress of the text. Consider popular secular songs such as *Happy Birthday* or *My Country 'tis of Thee*. A group of Americans anywhere at anytime can energetically launch into either setting at a moment's notice. Yet, Orthodox congregations continue to fail to sing with the same vitality and accuracy much simpler settings of litanies or various hymns which contain lines of extended text over one or two fundamental tonal chords. What these unimaginative liturgical settings lack is melodic contour, rhythmically shaped, for the ear and voice to grasp and reiterate. That is not to imply that congregational music should become trite in the style, say, of a bad singable nursery rhyme. On the contrary, the point is to infuse the ingredients of structural integrity into the song of the assembly to ease their ministerial expression of faith.

Therefore, when assigning dialogic responses for the assembly to sing – as found in litanies, the prokeimenon, the alleluia before the gospel, the opening of the Anaphora, the communion antiphon, and so on, one should choose settings with identifiable melody, well-shaped by rhythmic patterns, variation, and flow, and well-set to the text. Also, remember that assemblies rarely will have the ability or even the desire to sing in four-part harmony (otherwise they should train musically and join the choir). Therefore, in homophonic choral settings, the melody should not only be prominent and musically unobstructed, but, assuming it resides in the soprano voice, the melody may be doubled an octave lower by tenor and bass congregational voices. The more that structural integrity is composed into the anatomy of the melody, the better it will sustain octave doublings without effecting the choir's harmony. As well, the melody and its setting should be written and pitched in a generally singable range for the mixture of voice types present in the congregation.

One should also consciously choose assembly-friendly settings which maintain consistency from one response to the next. For instance, a Great Litany which boasts up to eleven different and independent melodic responses of "Lord have mercy" is not only potentially unfriendly to the assembly – unless they know it exceptionally well, but liturgically unnecessary and confusing.

The idea is that "Lord have mercy" is the common response to the changing petitions; this should be reflected, not contradicted, in the music.¹³

All things being equal, an assembly will probably do best to sing only what it hears, i.e. a single or double melody likely in both octaves. This by no means suggests that the church should abandon good harmony or polyphony, rather that musical elements of greater intricacy such as these should be reserved for the choir/cantors as they render verses or other liturgical segments legitimately within their charge.

Adapting Current Repertoire

There is a relatively small selection of published settings and several more that are unpublished or about to be published – that address fully the needs of the assembly's singing ministry. Modifying current repertoire from whatever Orthodox style or period of influence is necessary, therefore, at least temporarily. Music harmonized in four parts from the western-influenced Slavic church is perhaps the most challenging. To begin, choose a setting which features well-structured melody, as previously described. When performing the prokeimenon, or any similar psalm antiphon, the chanter should intone the actual melody during the introduction, thus teaching it to the assembly. In extended settings such as Holy God, the choir/cantors can sing the first time through themselves, perhaps the melody only. The assembly may join in the second time and thereafter.¹⁴ In *It is Truly Meet*, the choir/cantors in the same manner should sing the opening verse, to which the assembly can answer, *More honorable...*

The Ministry of Choral or Cantorial Singing

An in depth discussion of the musical and liturgical role of the assembly also has profound implications for the liturgical role of the choir/cantors. Members of the church's singing ensemble are responsible, as aforementioned, for the preparation and polished execution of special and changing musical settings, e.g. psalm verses in responsorial antiphons, as well as for leading the assembly in the singing of their own liturgical components, e.g. refrains attached to verses in responsorial antiphons. The musicians of the ensemble therefore are engaged in the vocation of the word, its elevation and communication. And with any vocation, the singer should feel the unquenchable need to train and sustain such a music ministry – that one would not be fully human if he or she did not sing for the church.¹⁵

Each choir member or cantor is vocationally engaged in church leadership, therefore, and carries the weight of that constant and rewarding responsibility. Rehearsal preparation and attendance, liturgical awareness and dedication, vocal and diction training, are all indisputable activities which the singer should welcome, let alone commit to. As the assembly looks to its clergy for spiritual and theological guidance so should it be able to look to its choir members and/or cantors for musical guidance and insight into the sacred texts of worship.

Practical Issues

The distance between ideal liturgical practice and a community's current mode of worship can be enormous. Movement toward the ideal, which inevitably involves change, must be slow and

incremental. A thoroughly considered step by step progression toward fuller and more meaningful assembly participation is the only way to prevent a parish community from going into spiritual shock over the suggestions of this article. Perhaps the next Great Lent, for instance, can provide an opportunity to engage the assembly in the singing of litanies. As Pascha appears, the assembly can also be engaged more vibrantly in the singing of common refrains, such as the troparion *Christ is Risen*. And so forth.

Another indisputable factor toward achieving dynamic worship is that any "new" practice must be designed for immediate success. The assembly has to enjoy and be able to sing what they are given as a refrain and response. Likewise, the choir/cantors must sound articulate, polished, and beautiful on their verses. Finally, the assembly should be informed on the principles which govern these changes, realizing above anything else that they too have an essential ministerial role in the act of worship. There are several strategic and sensitive approaches, therefore, that church leaders should simultaneously cultivate to guide a community as it migrates toward more meaningful assembly participation.

There are other practical factors to consider as well. In Hagia Sophia, the great church and center for Christian worship in the Byzantine empire, the cantors sang from a raised platform located near the center of the church. This prominent position allowed them to lead that assembly with audible and visible clarity. Wherever the singers and their leader reside in the worship space today, they must be accessible. To have the choir tucked away in the choir loft,¹⁶ for instance, is as illogical as expecting a symphonic conductor to direct a performance while only being visible to half the orchestra. While today's cantor or conductor need not stand in the middle of the church per se, his or her presence somewhere in the front of the church – preferably in an uncovered kliros, is essential.

Summary

Standards and conventions which guide and encourage the Orthodox assembly to embrace their ministerial role through singing do indeed exist and matter. They originate from within the structural shape and content of liturgy, and they survey the past for the most vibrant and dynamic means of worship in the present. If early Christians in the face of daily persecution and martyrdom had the conviction to worship charismatically through acclamation and dialog, then that same spirit of faith should logically exist today. To bring worship into the moment as the living expression of those gathered surprisingly avoids intensive liturgical revision, but simply calls on the church to honor the integrity and essence of corporate worship which never really disappeared from liturgy in the first place.

Endnotes

1. First articulated by the author in his lecture and subsequent article entitled, "Choir and Congregation: Liturgical Components and Discrepancies as They Relate to the Restoration of Congregational Singing in Orthodox Worship," presented at St. Vladimir's Seminary Institute (Crestwood, New York, 1991, 1993).

2. Edward Foley, *Foundations of Christian Music: The Music of Pre-Constantinian Christianity* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996) 77.
3. Ibid., 71.
4. Ibid., 77.
5. Choirs and Cantors, though linked to contrasting Orthodox traditions, perform the same liturgical function and, therefore, are considered synonymous for the purposes of this article.
6. Many blame western influences exclusively for these liturgical departures. Aspects of neglect also occurred during indigenous periods of church existence, reflecting a fascinating and complex issue far too large for the scope of this article.
7. Matthew 5:3-12
8. Luke 23:42 with "me" having been changed, logically, to "us." Note the similarity to Psalm 106:4. Also used as the closing phrase (refrain) of the communion prayer, "Of Thy Mystical Supper."
9. Words emphasized by Metropolitan Theodosius of the Orthodox Church in America, as delivered during his commencement day liturgical sermon at St. Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary, Crestwood, New York, May 16, 1998.
10. Borrowed from William Fr. Buckley Jr. discussing Roman Catholic congregational singing after Vatican II in an interview by Raymond Arroyo, *Eternal World Television News*, Faith and Values Network, 1997.
11. See David Drillock, "Liturgical Song in the Worship of the Church," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 41:2-3 (1997), 192-193.
12. Justin of Samaria, *First Apology*, as cited in *The Early Liturgy to the Time of Gregory the Great*, Josef A. Jungman, SJ (University of Notre Dame Press, 1962) 42.
13. See the author's article entitled, "Liturgical Singing as Icon," *Psalm Notes* (Spring, 1998).
14. The verse, "Glory...now and ever..." should be sung by the choir/cantors only, to which the assembly will respond on the refrain melody "Holy Immortal..." to maintain the responsorial integrity of the text.
15. Borrowed from Sister Wendy Wendy Beckett speaking on the nature of vocation in an interview with Bill Moyers. *Conversations with Bill Moyers*, WGBH Boston (Public Broadcasting System), 1997.
16. In relative terms, the choir loft is a recent and uninformed addition to Orthodoxy, and in many ways it directly opposes the functional requirements of liturgy.

+

Mark Bailey teaches composition and choral leadership at St. Vladimir's Seminary. He also directs the New Haven Oratorio Choir and Orchestra, as well as the Yale Russian Chorus and the New England Benefit Orchestra.

He can be reached at: mark.bailey@yale.edu