

The Orthodox Church in America – Department of Liturgical Music & Translations

Music Chatroom Transcript – January 9, 2007

Moderator: *Professor David Drillock*

Chat room topic: **Techniques for effective Church reading**

Professor David Drillock, Chair of the OCA Department of Liturgical Music and Translations

Tonight, we had hoped to welcome Father Sergius Halvorsen as our guest speaker to discuss techniques for effective Church reading. Unfortunately, he is unable to participate because of technical difficulties in accessing the chat room discussion. Instead, I will lead the discussion and we hope to have Fr Sergius join us another time in the future.

Let me begin by stating that church reading is really a minor order in the church and it does have an “official” liturgical function, which, of course, implies responsibility.

Among the most important aspects of church reading are knowledge of the language, i.e., ability to not only read but also to understand and be able to convey the meaning or sense of the texts that we read. Another important aspect is projection – we are not reading for ourselves when we read in church, it is not just our “private” or “personal” prayer. It must be heard and understood by all. Still another aspect is the fact that what we read in church is prayer: sacred scripture, sacred writings, and therefore must be done with piety and reverence.

I have just received via email from Fr Sergius Halvorsen a short introduction to this topic. He was going to begin with this and so I will type it as I have received it.

Fr. Halvorsen:

My most sincere apologies for not being able to join you. But here are some thoughts that I prepared in advance:

Church reading is VERY, VERY important! As I wrote in my article from PSALM Notes,

“The primary task of the church reader is to proclaim the Word of God, and thus help facilitate the celebration of the Good News of Jesus Christ.” If you are a reader, then it is your job to give voice to the Word of God. Moreover, if you are someone who teaches and prepares people to serve as Church Readers, then you are preparing them to do nothing less than actualize the Word of God. When I say “actualize” I am referring to the dynamic, personal quality of human language. Sure, you are reading my typed words right now on your computer, but in the Liturgy of the Church, it is the spoken, sung, and heard Word of God that makes it possible for us to come into communion with God, in his Son, Jesus Christ, by the grace of the Holy Spirit. The liturgical object made of ink on sheets paper, bound in bejeweled covers of precious metal, is not “The Gospel.” It is when these words are read out loud by a living breathing human being, and those words are heard and understood, that those assembled have a chance to hear the Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, the term that we use for the reading from one of the four evangelists, namely, “The Gospel.” can be misunderstood, particularly by Church Readers. And here is another point that I raised in the article, sometimes, people are tempted to think, “I’m just a reader...it doesn’t really matter how I do this.” Or for those of us in positions to train or manage readers, we may be tempted to think, “Well, he really isn’t that good at reading, but it will be cute.” or, even worse,

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“Sure, nobody can understand what he says, but he’s always done it that way, and after all it is just the epistle.” But the epistle IS the Gospel. St. Paul is quite explicit about this throughout his writings, and most forcefully in his epistle to the Galatians. St. Paul wrote his letters before the evangelists wrote their accounts of the life of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. So, if you read the Epistle you are reading the Gospel. Furthermore, just think of those liturgical celebrations where the scriptural account of the feast being celebrated is found in the reading from Acts? Pentecost? Ascension?

What a disaster it would be if we gathered to celebrate one of these feasts and were unable to understand the Biblical text, or worse, if the reading was done so poorly that we didn’t want to listen. On these feasts especially, and on any other day that the Church gathers together to celebrate the Divine Liturgy, the ministry of the Church Reader is VERY VERY important.

So, with that I will conclude my opening comments, and open it up to you.

What questions do you have about Church reading? Or what questions do you have about training those who read in Church?

Question:

Where can you get trained as a reader?

Answer:

Well, of course, if one can go to seminary, training is done there. There are institutes of church singing, in which courses for church readers are given. But, in my experience, it seems that very little importance is given to those who read in church, or especially to how well is the church reading done. I can suggest that local area workshops for church readers might be scheduled.

Follow-up Question:

Where are these institutes of church singing?

Response:

St Vladimir’s Seminary includes church reading in its Liturgical Music section of its Summer Institute which is held the last week of June. Holy Trinity Seminary in Jordanville, NY has a summer training program. PSALM sponsors a West Coast Seminar usually in January or February. These are the ones that I am aware of.

Comment:

Each diocesan bishop should take the lead on training readers.

Response:

I think that is a good idea, but as of now, this has not been a major priority. There are courses of study for deacons at the diocesan level which include practice sessions for chanting in church.

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Question:

I have had trouble with certain emotional reading, like the Prophecy of Ezekiel during Holy Saturday Matins, read on Holy Friday evening. You can't read well if you are crying. Any suggestions?

Answer:

Well, I think that you really have to think of reading as a vocation, as a sacred work, just like the priest or the choir director. If the priest becomes too emotional that he can't serve the liturgy, where would we be? Or if the choir director becomes emotional, has a "break-down" and stops directing, where would we be?

So, the reader, has to take very seriously the responsibility to do it as perfectly as possible, so that all understand completely. The church reader should never look upon his reading as something that must be uttered just to get through it.

It is not simply a liturgical rubric that you go through just to be able to "check it off" as on a check list. Pronunciation is important, projection is important, tempo is important, understanding is crucial, emphasis on appropriate accented syllables helps one to understand – this is so important.

There is nothing more distracting than to try to understand a reader when the reader misaccents the words, or does not appropriately combine the thoughts in a phrase, accenting the wrong syllables. It is not only sloppy reading, it is absolutely distracting and leads to non-comprehension.

Question:

If you realize you just read something incorrectly, should you correct yourself and then keep reading?

Answer:

If you realize it, just as you say the word, then yes, repeat the word. But if you read through an entire phrase or sentence, and it is really wrong – gives an opposite meaning, then I would say yes, repeat the whole phrase. But if you just skipped one word, then I would say no, go on.

But this is where one should always prepare and read the passage at least once before you read it in a liturgical service. It is also necessary if you are a church reader to ask someone who has good experience to give a critique. Ask such a person how do I read, can you understand? Do I read too slow? Too fast?

Question:

Is it better to be too loud or too soft?

Answer:

It is best to be not too loud and not too soft. You need to know your acoustics. The reading should be prayerful, that does not mean piously soft. Think of the deacon or priest, chanting the

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litanies. If too loud, it is almost offensive. If too soft, you cannot hear and understand and the prayer is distracted.

Good projection and clarity are needed. Do not use the same pattern to begin each and every sentence, that leads to monotony and usually results in those who are trying to be led by you in prayer to get turned off.

Question:

Is there any universal Orthodox tradition concerning gender roles in church reading, or does it simply vary from one parish to another?

Answer:

At this time, in our history, it probably varies from parish to parish. At the seminary, and at the All-American Councils, both men and women are accepted to read at the services.

Question:

How does one vary the pattern, is there a rule or by intuition?

Answer:

If one is reading the psalms, then there is a more traditional way of chanting, it is most unison: i.e, the pitch does not vary much, perhaps a rise in an accented syllable at the beginning of a phrase, but certainly not EVERY phrase. Or even the beginning of EVERY phrase. At the end of the complete phrase, there is usually a retard, with a hold on the last accented syllable.

When reading the Epistle, however, the reading should be done a bit slower with the emphasis on the meaning. Remember, the psalms, and most of what the reader reads during the services of vespers, matins, and hours are poetic, therefore they do have a poetic structure. The epistles are letters written in response to issues confronting the church. So the style of reading is slightly different.

With the epistle reading, it is very important that the reader prepares well in advance and understands very well what St Paul is saying and explaining. Thus, this must be read as if you are actually “teaching.” Whereas, the psalms are poetic and are prayers that are read frequently. We hear those same psalms at each and every vespers, etc. So we are actually leading the whole congregation in prayer and so if we read those as if we are trying to teach someone using what I would call subjective emphasis, then it is sometimes quite difficult for those in the congregation to be praying with you.

Question:

What about reading in one tone?

Answer:

Reading in one tone, if done very well, can be very good. But if there is insufficient projection, not enough emphasis, then reading on one tone can be “boring,” in the sense that it becomes difficult to pray with the reading.

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Don't go up and down like a rollercoaster, and remember, it is not like reading the New York Times. It is never like that, because you are not reading TO YOURSELF.

Question:

I only know how to read in one tone (I never read the Epistle, women in our church do not) how can I become good at recto tonal reading?

Answer:

Practice, and especially practice on vocal projection and clarity. Keep in mind understanding and proper phrasing.

Follow-up Question:

Clarity as in good diction?

Answer:

Yes, clarity as in good diction. It might be a good idea if you are responsible for setting up a music workshop in your area or at your church, that church reading be included in the agenda or schedule.

Question:

Should I read louder when the censing starts as it does during the 6th hour?

Answer:

If the censing makes it impossible to hear the reader, then yes, after all, the whole purpose of reading in church is to either lead the people in prayer or to teach. But if they can't hear, how can they pray with you or how can they understand or learn from what you are reading that they can't hear?

There was a time in our history (14-15th centuries) where in order to get through an entire service one reader would read the psalm, another reader would read another psalm and the deacon would chant the litany and the priest would read the prayer all at the same time.

This was called *mnogoglasie*, or simultaneous chanting. "many voices" literally, and this was condemned. In order to not skip anything at all from the complete service, and to do it in a shorter time, they reverted to the practice known as *mnogoglasie*. This should not be done in our church services.

Question:

What should one do for better diction?

Answer:

There is a book, *The Singer's Manual of English Diction*, by Madeline Marshall which is very good. There are other books that also have exercises for good choral diction and you can practice those exercises. I would say, read a passage or a psalm from a liturgical service and record your reading, then listen to it. You will be amazed what you yourself will discover. It is a very good tool to use in order to know what you do sound like and what needs to be improved.

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Also, ask someone to listen to you and make suggestions. You will be amazed how quickly you will discover things to improve.

Just remember, when you are reading in church you are reading the sacred words of the prophets, of Jesus, of John the Baptist, of the Apostles, of the saints.

There are a couple questions that you can ask yourself: What do you all think is the best reader that you have heard and why? Of course, the question pertains to readers in church. Have you ever heard a reader who you thought read too fast?

Question:

I once did read and tried to read it the way I heard others read them, by beginning very low (low pitch) and ending very high (high pitch). I hear men read this way often, is it ok for women to also read like this?

Answer:

First of all, remember that the reading is sacred, that it must be understood, that it is prayer, it is not a vocal solo, and what is important is that the text be understood, not that the congregation is enamored with your voice. With that in mind, keep in mind that there is a difference in the timbre of the female voice compared to the male voice. I don't think that there should be a difference in the way between the way a male reads as opposed to a female reader.

Question:

I have noticed that sometimes the musicality and the clarity of a reading do not go together
What is the priority: louder or clearer?

Answer:

The whole purpose of singing in church is to make the text clearly, understood, and beautiful, since it is poetry.

Your reading in church should be with the understanding of “uplifting” the sacred text, to “actualize the Word of God, so that it is possible for all of us to come into communion with God through our liturgical prayer.

On the 23rd of January, His Grace, Bishop Benjamin, Auxiliary to His Beatitude, Metropolitan Herman and Administrator for the Diocese of the West will be the guest speaker and will present a guide to the Hierarchical Liturgy. We hope you can join us!

Good night.