

Heaven on Earth: Singing with the Angels

Your Beatitude, venerable hierarchs, reverend clergy, esteemed members of the Board of Trustees, distinguished faculty, students of the graduating class and those who remain, family and friends of the graduates, ladies and gentlemen.

Christ is risen!

It is an understatement to say that it is a great honor for me to be back at St Vladimir's to address the graduates of the class of 2011. And I would like to begin my remarks by first remembering with deep gratitude my teachers when I was a student at St Vladimir's. The faculty at that time included Fathers Alexander Schmemmann, John Meyendorff, and Paul Schneirla, Professors Sergius Verhovskoy, Nicholas Arseniev, Veselin Kesich, Alexander Bogolepov, Sophie Koulomzin, and Boris Ledkovsky. These eminent teachers were able to convey to me not only theological knowledge but their deep conviction that Orthodoxy was not just a treasure that was simply to be preserved, but that it was a living power, a force that should be taught and preached to the whole world. Because of their commitment and zeal I couldn't help but feel that our teachers were in touch with God and I was able to see in those blessed teachers the "image of God", personified in their daily life and personal sacrifices. And they are the ones who gave to St. Vladimir's a unique role in the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

When I came to St Vladimir's in 1956, the campus consisted of four rented apartments on Broadway. Most classes took place in 1W, a classroom in the basement of Union Theological Seminary. The physical assets of the school were an old presidential desk, a

Hermes manual typewriter, and an abacus, sufficient to prepare the meager financial reports of that time.

Much has changed at St Vladimir's since those days. Compared to the very modest and humble beginnings of the school, the seminary has certainly evolved – a wonderful campus, a beautiful chapel, a precious library, classrooms, dormitories, apartments for married students, housing for professors, a distinguished faculty, a world-renown SVS Press, a dedicated administration, a hard-working staff, and a full student body. For every step in the seminary's historical path there is a story. Not all of these are glorious, there have been hardships – disappointments – sacrifices; but God has indeed bestowed His rich blessings on the school for there have been numerous achievements and many successes.

However, in what is much more important than physical properties – the vision and the mission of the seminary – very little, if anything, has changed. Two words that I as a student remember hearing over and over – were the words *unity* and *sobornost*. And as used by our teachers these words went hand in hand.

Unity -- the teachers of the seminary were bound by a strong commitment to Orthodox unity and they were able to instill in almost every student who came into contact with them a similar commitment. They strongly believed in the structural unity of the Orthodox Churches in America and always promoted inter-Orthodox cooperation on all levels of church life.

Sobornost – Togetherness. They also worked as a team, even though, as Fr. Hopko has said, they were as different from one another as could be found on earth. They emphasized, time and time again, that all persons in the church -- bishop, priest, layman -- must work together for the building up of Christ's holy Church.

Unity and sobornost were the foundations of the vision for Orthodoxy in America as formulated and articulated by the faculty of the seminary. This was not merely a theory. It was real because, in fact, it was experienced. Faculty, staff, students, and trustees of the school were of Russian, Arabic, Greek, Carpatho-Russian, Romanian, Serbian, Albanian and, yes, even American backgrounds. At the seminary we lived one common life. Although we came from many different Orthodox and non-Orthodox backgrounds we soon discovered that we were not so different as we supposed. For we discovered that in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for we are all one." (Gal 3:25) Our faith in God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, united us and, with that in place, there was very little of importance that separated us. This is still true at the seminary today.

When asked to deliver the commencement address, I immediately knew that I would want to talk about the importance of church music and to share some of my convictions concerning the use of singing in Orthodox worship.

When we gather as the Church of God with Christ in the midst of us, the whole Church is standing with us, all those who preceded us, our deceased parents and grandparents, relatives and friends, and especially the saints and the angels. Our worship here on

earth is joined with the heavenly worship, as described in the book of Revelation, where the angels stand before the throne of God, singing eternally the hymn: “holy, holy, holy” (Rev 4:8), that same doxology as envisioned by the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah.

This is how St John Chrysostom describes it:

Above, the hosts of angels sing praise; below, men form choirs in the churches and imitate them by singing the same doxology. Above, the seraphim cry out in the thrice-holy hymn; below, the human throng sends up the same cry. The inhabitants of heaven and earth are brought together in a common assembly; there is one thanksgiving, one shout of delight, one joyful chorus".¹

The angels assist us in our celebrations by joining their voices with ours, so that there is only one liturgy, our earthly liturgy united with the one, heavenly liturgy. Nicholas Cabasilas writes:

“It is the acclamation of the one choir, composed of angels and men who have become one Church throughout the manifestation of Christ, who is at the same time of heaven and of the earth.”²

To an Orthodox Christian it is very important that our act of worship expresses the joy and the beauty of the Kingdom of heaven. This joy and beauty has to be experienced, it simply cannot be expounded in abstract arguments and logical explanations. As a well-known bishop and theologian has remarked: “the liturgical assembly is more than a public meeting with speeches and announcements.”³ The Divine Liturgy, as Fr Alexander Schmemmann has written, “is before everything else, the joyous gathering of those who are to meet the risen Lord, and to enter with Him into the bridal chamber.

¹ *Homilia I in Oziam seu de Seraphimis* I; PG lvi, 9. English translation in James McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature*, (Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 89

² Nicholas Cabasilas, *Explication de la divine Liturgie*, (Commentary on the Divine Liturgy), Migne, P. G. 150, col. 424 D. English translation in Rev. Boris Bobrinskoy, *Ascension and Liturgy in St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly*, Vol III, Fall 1959, Number 4, (New York City) p. 18)

³ Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Inner Kingdom*, (Crestwood, NY, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000) p. 64

And it is this joy of expectation and this experience of joy that are expressed in singing and ritual, in vestments and in censing, in that whole “beauty” of the liturgy.”⁴

Who can deny that once we enter the church, as we stand in the midst of holy people, prophets, apostles, martyrs, and saints portrayed in the icons, we light our candle, we smell the incense, we make the sign of the cross, a feeling of peace and joy can overtake us, not like that which we experience in our “outside” world with all of its mundane problems, its vulgarity and ugliness. No longer are we just simply inhabitants living in a particular place on the earth, but, in the words of the author of the troparion sung at Lenten Matins, we are “standing in the temple of Your glory, and we think that we are in heaven.”⁵ The Kingdom of God, experienced in the Liturgy, is thus an expression of the divine beauty: singing, hymnography, iconography, ritual, and solemnity are all part of what is experienced as the manifestation of “heaven on earth.” Photius, the Patriarch of Constantinople writing in the second half of the ninth century, in speaking about the beauty of the church, remarks that simply by entering the atrium, “it is as if one had entered heaven itself.”⁶

The story of St Vladimir’s conversion, recorded in the Russian Primary Chronicle, also relates to the divine beauty that permeates the Church of God. Returning to Kiev, the Russian envoys told Prince Vladimir about the Divine Liturgy which they had attended at the great cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. In describing their experience of the Liturgy, they wrote: “The Byzantines led us to the edifice where they worship their God, and we knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth. For on earth there is no such splendor or beauty, and we are at a loss how to describe it. We only know that God dwells there among men.”⁷ What is most significant in this report is not just

⁴ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*, (Crestwood, NY, SVS Press, 1988) pp. 29-30

⁵ *Troparion* at lenten daily matins.

⁶ See Cyril Mango, *The Homilies of Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1958) p. 177

⁷ S. H. Cross and O. P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle, Laurentian Text* (Cambridge, MA, 1953) pp. 110-111.

that the Russian emissaries witnessed a Byzantine worship service that they perceived to be “beautiful,” but that in this beauty they experienced the presence of God.

And so, that is what all of us here today must experience in our worship – an encounter with the presence of God and the foretaste of the heavenly kingdom. The purpose of our worship is not just to arouse our emotions when we encounter this beauty, but to enable us to enter into a direct and personal relationship with God, the Holy Trinity.⁸ Not only should our worship be beautiful, but, just as important, it can and should be life transforming. Our hymnology, especially our songs of repentance, can help us to begin such a transformation.

When Jesus appeared to his disciples after the resurrection, he commanded them to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them, and *teaching* them to observe all that he commanded. (Mt 28:19) Fr. Alexander Schmemmann has written that “the beginning of all Christian work is always in teaching.”⁹ In the liturgical life of the church, one of the ways that this command to teach is being fulfilled occurs through the chanting of hymns. St. Paul linked teaching with the singing of hymns when he wrote to the Colossians:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. (Col. 3:16-18)

We should understand that the rich repertoire of Orthodox hymnography contains literally thousands of hymns. They quote, paraphrase and interpret Holy Scripture, describe historical events, express, clarify, and define doctrinal statements, relate the achievements of the holy martyrs and saints of the Church, provide moral lessons for leading a good and holy life, contemplate the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus our

⁸ Bishop Kallistos Ware, *op. cit.*, p. 59

⁹ Alexander Schmemmann, “Problems of Orthodoxy in America, II. The Liturgical Problem” in *St. Vladimir’s Seminary Quarterly*, 1964, Volume 8, Number 4 (Crestwood, New York) p. 176

Savior, provide examples to the faithful for repentance and consolation, and offer simple praise and thanksgiving to God.

The hymns that we sing at Vespers and Matins throughout the forty days of the Great Fast actually comprise a complete book that will guide us in our preparation for the feast of the Resurrection of Christ.¹⁰ Fully participating in the Lenten liturgical services can be likened to the completion of a full curriculum on the subject of repentance. This is why Great Lent is sometimes called a “school of repentance” with the hymns of the church serving as our textbook.

St Theophan the Recluse had this to say about the teaching component of Orthodox hymnography:

All of our liturgical hymns are instructive, profound and sublime. They contain the whole of our theology and moral teaching, give us Christian consolation and instill in us a fear of the Judgment. He who listens to them attentively has no need of other books on the Faith.¹¹

A current bishop of the Orthodox Church, Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev, has said that the school of theology that formed his theological thinking was not so much a theological seminary, academy or university but the Liturgy and other services. He writes:

The liturgical texts of the Orthodox Church penetrated my mind and heart so deeply that they became, along with the Gospel and the writings of the church Fathers, the main criteria of theological truth, an inexhaustible source of knowledge about God, the world, the Church, and salvation.¹²

¹⁰ All of the changing hymns proper to the Great Fast are contained in a book called the *Lenten Triodion*.

¹¹ Quotation in Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev, *Orthodox Worship as a School of Theology*, a lecture delivered at the Kiev Theological Academy on September 20, 2002. See Russian Orthodox Church, Representation to the European Institutions, <http://orthodoxeurope.org>

¹² Ibid.

Fr Georges Florovsky, when he was dean of St Vladimir's, was once approached by a seminarian who asked "What would be the best way for me to learn Orthodox theology? To his surprise, Fr Florovsky answered: "Stand on the kleros for one full year and sing the hymns for Vespers and Matins."¹³

In similar fashion, Fr Alexander Schmemmann speaks of the interrelationship of "theology" and worship. He writes:

I am convinced that if people would really hear Holy Week, Pascha, the Resurrection, Pentecost, the Dormition, there would be no need for theology. All of theology is there. ... It's all in these services.¹⁴

Our liturgical hymns are much more than rational statements expressing theological, ethical, moral, or spiritual teachings about the faith. They are not meant simply to convey ideas about God, but to reveal and enable an experience of and with God. For this reason the texts of our hymns are not communicated in the liturgical celebration in the same manner that they would be in a classroom. In contrast to a formal teaching situation where they would be rationally presented and analyzed, they are presented in the liturgy in their fullness, in a context that involves all of the senses. These poetic verses convey meanings to us intuitively through images: images that are transmitted through melody and rhythm in chant, as well as in iconography and in the movement of the celebrants and the people. We carry these images home with us together with the

¹³ Fr Georges Florovsky, before his death, had prepared a text for an address that he intended to give in response to an honor that was being bestowed upon him. In this hand-written address he wrote: "My theology I learned not in the school, but in the Church, as a worshipper. I have derived it from the liturgical books first, and much later, from the writings of the Holy Fathers." For this address, see *Georges Florovsky, Russian Intellectual and Orthodox Churchman*, Andrew Blane, editor. (Crestwood, NY, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993), pp. 152-154

¹⁴ Alexander Schmemmann, *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemmann 1973-1983* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2002) p, 13

total memory of the liturgical event we have experienced. It is a memory to which we can return time and time again. Thus, the remembrance becomes an ontological part of our life. While countless examples can be given to illustrate this, one will suffice. Simply singing or hearing a short melodic pattern from the troparion, “The Noble Joseph,” one recalls immediately the image of the crucifixion and the taking down of Jesus from the cross by Joseph of Arimathea, the theme of the Vespers celebrated on the Friday of Holy Week.

Elevated words through the use of singing not only beautifies liturgical prayer, but the “rhythm of song – even when it is comparatively free rhythm – keeps everyone together and allows for audibility.”¹⁵ The melody of song also helps us to remember the words, nourishing for us a special vocabulary for prayer. The hymns that we sing not only teach us about the faith, but they can also teach us how to pray, how to communicate with God as we incorporate the words and phrases of our hymnology into our personal language of prayer. It is in the Liturgy that God speaks to us and nurtures our faith, enriching our lives so much that we can use God’s words themselves when we address to Him not only our words of thanksgiving and praise but also our petitions and supplications to help us with all of our problems, necessities, trials and tribulations.

If the words of God conveyed, explained, and interpreted in our hymns can serve not only as the textbooks for teaching and expounding the faith but also as our own prayerbook, then they must be accessible to the worshipper, i.e., they must be able to be

¹⁵ Dimitri Conomos, *Early Christian and Byzantine Music, History and Performance*, www.@Monachos.net

understood. This means that our songs must be executed in the language of the worshipper and in a way that the words are not obliterated by the sound of the music.

Church music, or more correctly “*Church singing*,” is not a “musical” end in itself and *can not* and *should not* be a distraction from the liturgy by the power of its own self-expression.¹⁶ The eminent Russian musicologist, Professor Ivan Alekseevich Gardner, warned against an understanding of church music that overemphasized the musical aspect at the expense of the liturgical function. He wrote:

The singing of the church must never stray from its central essence: the liturgy. It must avoid at all costs the tendency to pursue exclusively aesthetic or personal, subjective goals.¹⁷

Liturgical hymns with overly elaborate musical settings that call attention to themselves by overemphasizing certain elements at the expense of others equally important often distort the meanings of words or phrases in an attempt to achieve an emotional musical effect. Not only can the style of the music composition be such that it makes incomprehensible the meaning of the text, but how the music is sung can also render the meaning unintelligible. When this happens – “when,” as Bishop Kallistos Ware says: “our words have no literal meaning . . . our worship will degenerate into magic and mumbo jumbo, and will be no longer worthy of logical sheep.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Mark Bailey, “Toward a Living Tradition of Liturgical Music in Orthodox America” in *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly*, (Crestwood, NY) Volume 47, Number 2, 2003, p. 209

¹⁷ Johann von Gardner, *Russian Church Singing, Volume 1, Orthodox Worship and Hymnography* (Crestwood, NY, SVS Press, 1980) p. 13

¹⁸ Bishop Kallistos Ware, *op. cit.*, p. 95

Those of you who will be pastors or leaders of churches should take it as your personal responsibility to remind your choir director and singers that all singing in church is the prayer of the worshipping community. All that we sing in church is “prayer”, and our singing must never be changed into a song “about” prayer, for when that happens, our singing simply becomes a musical performance. It is not that difficult for the choir director and the singers to get caught up in the rhythm and the music and fail to realize that the words of the hymns should become each individual’s own words of prayer.

In our liturgical tradition, we have monophonic and polyphonic music. Whatever the form, be it unison chant, chant with ison, or 4 part harmonic composition, the music should not have to demand so much concentration and attention in order for it to be done well that it takes away any possibility for the singer to pray. Quite the opposite, the music should be *easy to sing, easy to learn, and easy to remember* so that at a liturgical service the axiom “one who sings prays twice” might always be applicable.

Our church music also must be capable of conveying both beauty and holiness while at the same time be in total harmony with our liturgical rite. Professor Gardner has also written:

In the realm of vocal music the liturgical singing of the Orthodox Church constitutes an autonomous realm that is guided by its own aesthetic laws and standards. It is self-evident that it would be a grave mistake to expect or demand from liturgical singing the same forms and genres that are found in secular music or even in religious music that is separated from worship. The intermingling of these two realms can lead, on the one hand, to misunderstandings concerning liturgical singing, expecting from it that which it is not meant to contain, and, on the other hand, to the introduction of foreign elements into the liturgy that can subtly and gradually distort both the forms of liturgical singing and the very

essence of the liturgy, resulting, once again, in an erroneous appraisal of its forms and aesthetic principles.¹⁹

Fr Sergei Glagolev puts it this way:

Music is neither supplementary to, nor an enrichment of, worship. It is the expression of worship itself. It is not an accompaniment, a background, a preparation, a mood setter, or any such thing, and it is certainly not a divertimento . . . Church music as an art can only be interpreted according to its true liturgical function.²⁰

What this means is this: *it is the Liturgy itself that defines the structure, the form, and the style that our church singing must take.* The form of the music must fit the liturgical form. As we examine the Liturgy, its contents, structure, and form, we discover not only what is to be sung, but who is to sing and how, in what particular form and manner, this singing is to be performed. Music for the Litany, the *Prokeimenon*, the Alleluia at the Gospel, and the Communion hymn should not be in the form of an anthem. Common refrains, such as “through the prayers of the Theotokos, save us,” the Troparion at feast days, “Christ is risen” during the Paschal season, meant to be sung by the congregation, should be written and sung with this function in mind. One can hardly call “liturgically appropriate” a large choral work for the responses of the Great Litany, a setting for the creation psalm at the beginning of Vespers that employs only the refrains and not the psalm verses, or the use of an ornate concerto-style composition to replace the psalm appointed during the priest's communion. Clearly there are parts of the services which, by their liturgical form, such as the responses to the litanies, common refrains, and short

¹⁹ Johann von Gardner, *op. cit.*, p. 62

²⁰ Archpriest Sergei Glagolev, “An Introduction to the Interpretation of Liturgical Music” in *Psalm Notes*, Volume 2, #1, Spring 1977, p. 2

acclamations, such as “Amen” “and with your spirit,” should be sung by the entire worshipping community.

The sound of the full congregation in song will differ from the sound of the choir and professional chanters. To expect from the congregation an artistic presentation as one would expect from a well-trained choir is really missing the point. That is not the goal. However, one must expect that the words sung by the congregation will be elevated, understood, and prayerful. Intonation, articulation, and appropriate rhythm can and must be expected so that the sound, albeit different from the sound of the well-trained choir, is both prayerful and beautiful.

The words of St Nicetas, an early fifth century bishop, can be directed to those whose churchly vocations are expressly dedicated to the elevation and communication of the word; the word being Jesus Christ Himself. He writes:

Thus, beloved, let us sing with alert senses and a wakeful mind, as the psalmist exhorts: ‘Because God is king of all the earth’, he says, sing ye wisely’ (Ps 46:8), so that a psalm is sung not only with the spirit, that is, the sound of the voice, but with the mind also (I Cor. 14:15), and so that we think of what we sing rather than allow our mind, seized by extraneous thoughts as is often the case, to lose the fruit of our labor. One must sing with a manner and melody befitting holiness; it must not proclaim theatrical distress but rather exhibit Christian simplicity in its very musical movement; it must not remind one of anything theatrical, but rather create compunction in the listeners. Further, our voice ought not be dissonant but consonant. One ought not to drag out the singing while another cuts it short, and one ought not to sing too low while another raises his voice. Rather each should strive to integrate his voice within the sound of the harmonious chorus ...²¹

²¹ Niceta of Remesiana, *De utilitate hymnorum* 13, English translation in McKinnon, *op. cit.*, 138

A person who serves the church as a singer, a choir director, or church composer, is responding to a vocation which demands strong faith, great modesty, and a high sense of integrity. This also requires self-denial, putting oneself in the background, thanking God for the privilege of allowing one to sing in the services, following instructions from the director and from the priest in all humility, and putting aside any notions of self-gratification and the imposition of one's likes and dislikes. One who directs the singing has already been blessed by God with the desire to use this talent for the glory of God and must lead by example, not by command. This means knowledge of the church services, understanding of the meaning and function of each liturgical hymn, and prayerful rehearsal of the texts and the music, without which one cannot lead oneself and others to prayer. One who composes music for the church must avoid setting the text in such a way as to attract all the attention to the music so that the sacred word is obliterated and incomprehensible. The musical art must not be separated from the teaching of the Church; it cannot be separated from the Liturgy itself and it must be capable of revealing the glory and the light of the Kingdom of God. Any kind of conscious self in his art must be divested and replaced by the consciousness of the Church so that the composer is free and open to receive the inspiration from the Holy Spirit, the true source of the Church's artistic creativity.²² As illustrated by the story of Romanos and the writing of the Nativity Kontakion, the creativity of beauty in the world does not belong to the artist alone, the iconographer, the hymnographer, or the composer, but rather is a transmission from the Creator of All, God Himself.

St John Chrysostom told the people in his worshipping community that they should not leave the church with empty hands but rather gather up the songs that they just sang as though they were gathering pearls, and to keep them always with them, to meditate on them, and to sing them to their friends at home. If they became angry or if any passion would trouble their soul, they should sing these songs assiduously. In that way they will rejoice in great peace in this life, and obtain eternal rewards in the next, through the grace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ.

²² Nicholas Lossky, Some Thoughts on Liturgical Music, in *Orthodox Church Music*, No. 1, 1983 (Syosset, NY)

Let me conclude by directing these words of St Paul to the graduates of the Class of 2011:

Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you must also do. But above all these things put on love which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts. (Col 3:12-15)

Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father. (Eph 5:18-21)

Christ is risen! Indeed He is risen!

David Drillock

May 21, 2011