

The Orthodox Church in America – Department of Liturgical Music & Translations
Music Chatroom Transcript – September 5, 2006

Moderator: *David Drillock*

Chat room topic: **Good Models of Pastor-Choir Director Communication**

Professor Drillock: welcome to the fall session. Tonight we will begin with a discussion concerning the relationship between a choir director and the pastor.

I want to begin by emphasizing that the choir director needs to set a good example for the singers in the choir, and for that matter, for the entire parish. First of all, the choir director should have a good prayer life. As you all must know from experience, the choir director will be tempted by so many little as well as big problems and situations and in order to overcome such temptations, the choir director needs the help of the Holy Spirit. A good way to begin is to have a good prayer life.

Certainly before the beginning of work, choir rehearsal, or liturgical services it is good to say a prayer. On my way to the church I would always say the trisagion prayers and then just reflect a bit on a few words of one of those prayers. I found that such a practice always put me in a good frame...at least to begin. Sometimes for sure that good frame was tempted immediately.

I would like to add, that long ago, a priest told me that it is not important that you pray for a long Time, but that you pray, even if it is only a minute or so.

Question:

I have a question based on what you're saying, I like the idea of saying prayers or at least the trisagion en route to church, but say you're going to do Third Hour, if I understand correctly, you would still say a prayer before that? Even if it was the trisagion, and that would be said during Third Hour?

Answer:

Yes, I am talking about a personal prayer before the third hour and I do this before I even enter the church.

Question:

Almost like your own personal entrance prayers, then?

Answer:

Well, yes, and certainly private prayer. I found that if I said just a brief prayer before the service began, on the way to the church, it already put me in a different frame of mind instead of thinking about the altos, basses, sopranos, or tenors, or a particular problem which might not put me in a good frame of mind. I was thinking about God and how He is always present among us.

I most always would concentrate on the words of O Heavenly King. Of course, the value of prayer for Christians is obvious, but how many of us actually practice it? And especially before we begin work? Usually our mind just before the beginning of that work is on the work itself.

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I found that personal prayer was always able to help me, to give me peace of mind. As an example: after the prayer as I might enter the church and a singer greets me with some bad news or makes a provocative statement, such as, “I won’t be singing that horrible piece of music you introduced at rehearsal” I found that instead of just picking him apart or responding with an insult, my approach was always calmer, more relaxed, and I could respond in a calmer way. My response or answer to such a provocation was always better.

Or, if the priest spoke with me before the service and said something that wasn’t exactly complimentary; such as “Please don’t sing that Cherubic Hymn that you introduced in your last rehearsal; I really don’t like it;” (Of course, that was exactly the hymn that I was intending to use at this service.) my response to him was usually calmer and most often the words that I chose were not provocative. I might even accept his request or criticism in an acceptable manner.

You know, there is a prayer for icon painters, in fact, a set of prayers that an icon painter is to pray before he/she begins to “paint.” Well, the choir leader might also have such a practice.

Question:

I think it is a good idea to pray for clarity of mind before going into every service, you know ‘now lay aside all earthly cares.’

Answer:

That’s very good.

Question:

Is there a prayer specifically for the choir as there is for iconographers?

Answer:

No, not that I am aware of.

Now, as I said in the beginning of the session, the choir director should be a good example. And a good example consists first of all of being competent. The choir director should know the service and should know the music very well (know and be able to sing each part, alto, soprano, bass, tenor and be able to direct it in a manner that produces sound that is both musical and prayerful. He or she should know more than just the fundamentals of music and liturgy.

The choir director should be well organized, and the music should be in order on the stands. He / She should not be LOOKING FOR the music during the service (most time just before it is to be sung.)

Before beginning our general discussion, let me say that I think so many problems between choir director and pastor occur because of a lack of communication. Priest and choir director must cooperate with one another. They both are responsible for the good order of the liturgical service. Communication is imperative. In my opinion, the choir director should meet with the priest at least once a week. This meeting is best in private, person to person, however, if for some reason not possible, then at least by telephone or by email. Such meetings should not only be concerned with what music is being sung or what changes in the liturgical order might occur, but

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should also include discussions about the vision that the pastor has for the parish, especially concerning worship and singing. What does the priest wish to emphasize? What does the choir director think about the singing? What are his goals and are they compatible with the pastor's thoughts about the music in the parish. What are the opinions of the singers or the parishioners who do not sing? Should we encourage more participation by the congregation and, if so, how best might this be accomplished? Is the music prayerful? Is the music liturgical? How is this defined in practical terms? There are so many questions that could be added to this list and all should be topics for such discussions. Liturgical surprises to the priest or to the choir director should never occur if there is good communication.

Comment:

I think also that choir directors need to hold themselves to a higher level of behavior. If they do not know the cycle of services, or if they ask clarifying questions and act in a proactive fashion, early intervention prevents difficulty later.

Response:

That is what I meant by being a good example.

Might I just add that when the choir director has answers to those questions discussed at meetings with the pastor, that information might be passed on to the singers. In that way, the choir director is fulfilling the teaching function of his/her office.

Comment:

When you are new at the choir director role and you don't know better, sometimes younger directors need good perception and mentoring.

Response:

For those who cannot go to school or take formal lessons, the tutor is extremely beneficial.

Question:

What kind of a tutor?

Answer:

A person who is able to guide the choir director in acquiring knowledge and technique that will enable the choir director to grow and become better in his position.

Question:

Like a very understanding priest or a very good choir director?

Answer:

Yes.

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Comment:

One thing I have done in the past is go to friends' parishes and watch them direct during vespers to pick up tips. Also, in learning how others give pitch is beneficial.

Response:

That is very good. You know, I think that each time I see someone direct, I learn something. And sometimes, well, many times, I learn something that I should NOT do.

Question:

Is it hard to learn to give a pitch?

Answer:

I think it is not difficult at all. You can begin with solfege exercises. I used to practice solfege walking to and from my classes at college.

Comment:

In a nutshell you need to make the time to reach your full potential. It really requires self-motivation and humility, a delicate yet crucial balance.

Response:

That is correct. It is so important that the liturgical service not be seen as a haphazard event. As with many people in other professions, self-motivation and humility do not always go together.

Question:

What about a director who is not concerned with what the priest has to do and rushes the singing?

Answer:

That means that the rhythm of the prayer (singing) is broken, interrupted, and results in stress, tension, and the loss of beauty.

Comment:

Conversely, if the priest is 'flying along' and the choir is slow like molasses, that's also being self-centered.

Response:

In that case, that is exactly what should be discussed at one of the meetings between pastor and choir director. Issues need to be put onto the table for frank discussion. and that is where prayer is the needful thing. I think we all realize that the choir director works "under" the direction of the pastor – the choir director "reports" to the pastor.

At the Psalm conference in August, there was a recommendation that all choir directors have, what would be called, a job description, in which the responsibilities and expectations of the choir director are clearly defined and that this be in written form.

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Comment:

Our parish has a job description that was formulated in the late 1990's. I think that if the OCA were to put together a template, it would certainly be useful for choir directors, clergy, parishes, and choirs. Something like that could serve as the building blocks for what choir directors need to learn/study/enhance, etc. Of course only an outline - some go above and beyond.

Response:

That is a good idea, not that difficult to construct. We might begin work on that and circulate it among both choir directors, pastors, bishops, and perhaps even singers.

Thank you all for participating tonight. We hope that you will be able to participate at the next session, September 19, 2006 at 8:30pm EDT.

I will be leaving now and hope to see you all next time, good night.