

ANCIENT AND MORE RECENT CHRISTIAN COMMENTARIES
ON CHANTING
(Part IV)

St. Hilary of Poitiers (+367), the "St. Athanasius of the West", was another champion of Orthodox Christianity. In his work *Instructio Psalmorum* (8), he tells us about the numbering of the Psalms, which, according to St. Hilary, was done, not by the Hebrews, but by the seventy translators of the Septuagint.

One should note that among the Hebrews there is no precise numbering of the Psalms; rather they are written with no indication of their order. They are not designated as first, second, third, fiftieth or one hundredth, but are run together with no distinction of order or number. For Esdras, as ancient tradition maintains, collected and presented in one volume, what had been disordered and scattered because of the diversity of authors and periods. But when the seventy elders, who remained in the Synagogue to preserve the Law's teaching in accordance with the tradition of Moses, were afterwards entrusted by King Ptolemy with the responsibility of translating the entire Law from Hebrew into Greek, they grasped the excellence of the Psalms with a spiritual and heavenly knowledge and reduced them to number and order.
(PL IX, 238)

The renowned St. Ambrose of Milan (+397) was also a composer of many Latin metrical hymns. This is what he writes in *Explanatio psalmi* (i, 9) and he thereby also gives us some insights about discipline in the church services:

What is more pleasing than a psalm? David himself puts it nicely: "Praise the Lord", he says, 'for a psalm is a good thing' (Ps 146.1). And indeed! A psalm is the blessing of the people, the praise of God, the commendation of the multitude, the applause of all, the speech of every man, the voice of the Church, the sonorous profession of faith, devotion full of authority, the joy of liberty, the noise of good cheer, and the echo of gladness. It softens anger, it gives release from anxiety, it alleviates sorrow; it is protection at night, instruction by day, a shield in time of fear, a feast of holiness, the image of tranquility, a pledge of peace and harmony, which produces one song from various and sundry voices in the manner of a cithara. The day's dawning resounds with a psalm, with a psalm its passing echoes.

The Apostle admonishes women to be silent in church, yet they do well to join in a psalm; this is gratifying for all ages and fitting for both sexes. Old men ignore the stiffness of age to sing [a psalm], and melancholy veterans echo it in the joy of their hearts; young men sing one without the bane of lust, as do adolescents without threat from their insecure age or the temptation of sensual pleasure; even young women sing psalms with no loss of wifely decency, and girls sing a hymn to God with sweet and supple voice while maintaining decorum and suffering no lapse of modesty. Youth is eager to understand [a psalm], and the child who refuses to learn other things takes pleasure in contemplating it; it is a kind of play, productive of more learning than that which is dispensed with stern discipline. With what great effort is silence maintained in church during the readings!

If just one person recites, the entire congregation makes noise; but when a psalm is read, it is itself the guarantor of silence because when all speak [in the response] no one makes noise. Kings put aside the arrogance of power and sing a psalm, as David himself was glad to be observed in this function; a psalm, then, is sung by emperors and rejoiced in by the people. Individuals vie in proclaiming what is of profit to all. A psalm is sung at home and repeated outdoors; it is learned without effort and retained with delight. A psalm joins those with differences, unites those at odds and reconciles those who have been offended, for who will not concede to him with whom one sings to God in one voice? It is after all a great bond of unity for the full number of people to join in one chorus. The strings of the cithara differ, but create one harmony. The fingers of a musician often go astray among the strings though they are very few in number, but among the people the Spirit musician knows not how to err.

(PL XIV, 924-5)

Niceta of Remesiana (today's Bela Palanka in Yugoslavia) (+ c. 414) speaks extensively about congregational singing in his time. Here, in part, is what he says:

Thus, beloved, let us sing with alert senses and a wakeful mind, as the psalmist exhorts: 'For God is king of all the earth', he says, 'O chant ye with understanding' (Ps 46.7), so that a psalm is sung not only with the spirit, that is, the sound of the voice, but with the mind also (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 holy religion; it must not proclaim theatrical distress but rather exhibit Christian simplicity in

its very musical movement must not remind one of anything theatrical, but rather create compunction in the listeners.

Further, our voice ought not to 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 and not project it outwardly in the manner of a cithara as if to make an immodest display ... And for him who is not able to blend and fit himself in with the others, it is better to sing in a subdued voice than to make a great noise, for thus he performs both his liturgical function and avoids disturbing the singing brotherhood.

(De utilitate hymnorum 13)

Augustine of Hippo (+430), of course, is well known. In one of his epistles (29:10-11) he tells us the following about a church festival:

In the afternoon, however, there was a larger crowd than in the morning, and until the time we came out with the bishop, reading alternated with psalmody; and as we approached two psalms were read. Then the old man ordered me, though unwilling and wishing this perilous day to be at an end, to say something to them ... And when, in accord with the time, something of the sort had been said along with what the Lord had deigned to inspire in me, vespers were celebrated, as is the daily custom. And as we departed with the bishop the brethren sang hymns in the same place, while a considerable crowd of both sexes remained until dark and chanted psalms.

In a fragment of a sermon that has come down to us, Pope Celestine (+432) speaks about the chanting of an Ambrosian hymn:

I recall that on the day of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ Ambrose of blessed memory had all the people sing with one voice, *Veni redemptor gentium* (Come, O Redeemer of the nations)....

In more recent times, St. Seraphim of Sarov (+1833) tells us what he thought about the introduction of "another new way of singing" (i.e. European four-part harmony) into the Russian parishes when he was living:

An incident from the life of Saint Seraphim of Sarov demonstrates clearly how, despite the popular trends and fashions of those times, the Saint himself did not approve of these developments. A certain Ivan Tikhonovitch, a man with great

ambitions and even greater ideas concerning himself, asked the saint to make him choir leader of the nun's community at Diveyevo. After much hesitation, the elder yielded to his request. Then, taking advantage of his new title, Ivan began introducing to Diveyevo the new trends inspired by Italian music which was then all the vogue. Everything traditional in monastic chant seemed to him old fashioned, "Oh, how it grieves me!" said Father Seraphim to a close friend, "Look how he's bringing this new way of singing here!" (At the same time, significantly enough, Ivan Tikhonovich was beginning to initiate the sisters into "another way" of painting icons.)
(Taken from the book *St. Seraphim of Sarov*, by Valentine Zander)

And finally....

The following letter that appeared in the November, 1977 issue of *The Orthodox Church* (published by the new calendar jurisdiction, the OCA) needs — I believe — no comment:

POSES MUSIC QUESTION

TO THE EDITOR:

An article in the April issue of *The Orthodox Church* by Fr. Dimitri Ermakov of the OCA Music Department stated in part: "Orthodox prayer script set to melodies of Protestant hymns such as singing the Cherubimic hymn to the tune of 'Nearer My God to Thee' cannot be tolerated in our Orthodox liturgies."

May I remind the good Father that we are living in America, the melting pot of the world, rather than under the despotic dictatorship of some foreign country. We are privileged to absorb the best of the creative effort of mankind, and music is a universal language.

In our church, as in others, the Cherubimic hymn to the tune of "Nearer My God to Thee" has been sung for years during the Lenten season. The words, in Church Slavonic (by Fr. Lampert, incidentally, an Orthodox priest, now deceased), lend themselves beautifully to the melody, the combination of which truly inspires a meditative and reverent mood. Does it matter that a fellow Christian practicing the worship of God, albeit in a manner somewhat different from us, wrote the music? Will God turn away our prayers because they were not presented with an Orthodox melody? This melody was composed strictly for the worship of God. In retrospect, we are sanctioning the continuing use of music in our liturgies taken from secular opera. Did Tchaikovsky write the music "Bless the Lord" for use in the church liturgies or for

the "Overture of 1812"? Or is the mere fact that he was Orthodox in an Orthodox country make his music acceptable for the liturgical hymns?

In conclusion, what difference does it make what sounds we use in our petition to and worship of God? Will he refuse to hear us unless we present an all-Orthodox concert? Our prayers should be from the heart, the mouth being only the means of conveying our thoughts.

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AN APPENDIX

Some of our Russian people have wondered whether there is any answer to a dilemma they have. As we know, today's Russian ecclesiastical music is famous for its beauty. However, as many realize, it also represents a departure from the more ancient and traditional form of ecclesiastical chant. On the one hand, many of our Russian people would like to have music that is more traditional. On the other hand, Byzantine and even the ancient Zhammeny chant of Russia seem foreign and difficult to modern Russian ears, for the most part. "Isn't there some appropriate form of church singing", they ask, "that could be adopted, which is relatively simple, and yet beautiful, and more familiar to our ears?"

There is.

The ancient chant of Valaam is an almost perfect solution to this dilemma that many of our Russian people feel today. Recently, recordings from Valaam have become available and, in fact, may be purchased from the monastery of Holy Transfiguration Monastery in Brookline, Massachusetts and at other of our HOCNA bookstores.

Below, we print a portion of a review of these Valaam recordings in order to give our people an idea about their character:

Chants From Valaam is a recording of the current monastic choir of Old Valaam. The singing is a synthesis of Slavic and Byzantine elements. Traditional Slavic melodies (Znamenny, Kievan and Valaam Chant) are sung either in unison or with the Byzantine *ison* (tonic note). Whether through a conscious effort to return to Byzantine roots or out of pure practicality (the need for fewer singers), this combination proves highly effective. This is not innovation, but restoration — recent research by Russian musicologists has shown that the *ison* was employed in Russian church singing in the past.

The hymns are grouped into main categories: "Selected Hymns from the Services and Triodia" (Lent and Pascha) and "Hymns of the All-Night Vigil." The very first hymn, "Behold the Bridegroom comes at midnight..." clearly sets the tone. The combination of the Kievan melody used in many Slavic parishes sung with the *ison* is at the same time original, yet familiar. The setting of "Remain with us, O Lord of Hosts," is of particular interest. The psalm verses and refrains are sung in the Valaam melody with the *ison* and the concluding *stichera* are then sung in unison. The singing is rhythmic and displays the subdued joy of the 'Lenten spring' and not the gloominess displayed in popular Lenten piety. Throughout this recording, whenever the *ison* is employed, the text is not only sung by the chanter, but also by the *isocrats* (holders of the *ison*) as well. Therefore, the text is conveyed with clarity and not obscured by the *ison*.

Anyone interested in learning more about this may contact Father Sergius at Holy Transfiguration Monastery in Brookline, Massachusetts [617-734-0608].