

ANCIENT CHRISTIAN COMMENTARIES
ON CHANTING
(Part III)

From Theodoret of Cyrus (+466) we learn about the possible origins of antiphonal chanting. As bishop of Cyrus, he was at first a supporter of Nestorius, but later he repented and returned to Orthodoxy. (Incidentally, some scholars of liturgical chant find what they feel is evidence for antiphonal chanting —i.e., alternating choirs on the left and right sides in the temple — in the Old Testament):

That remarkable pair, Flavianus and Diodorus, though not yet engaged in their priestly ministry and still numbered among the laity, urged on all, night and day, in the pursuit of piety. They were the first to divide in two the choruses of psalm singers, and to teach them to sing the Davidic song in alternation And what was introduced at Antioch spread everywhere, reaching to the ends of the earth. They gathered lovers of holy things into the shrines of the martyrs and spent the entire night with them singing hymns to God.

(Ecclesiastical History, II, 24, 8-9)

In the *Apostolic Constitutions* (c. 4th century) we are told of some of the liturgical practices of the early Church. From the following passage, we learn of the use of Psalm 33, and also we see that the chanters were considered as being among the clerical orders. The words that were addressed to the communicants when they received Holy Communion are used to this very day in the Liturgy of St. James.

And after this let the bishop receive, then the priests, and the deacons, and the subdeacons, and the readers, and the chanters, and the ascetics; and among the women the deaconesses, and the virgins, and the widows; then the children, and then all the people in good order with reverence and piety and without commotion. And let the bishop give the oblation saying, 'The Body of Christ', and let the one receiving say, 'Amen'. And let the deacon take the chalice and in giving it say, 'The Blood of Christ, the cup of life', and let the one drinking say, 'Amen.' Let the thirty-third psalm be sung while all the rest receive. And when all have received, men and women, let the deacon take what remains and carry it into the sacristies. And when the singer is finished, let the deacon say...

(8, 13:14-17; 8, 14-1)

The Holy Canons of the Council of Laodicea (A. D. 365) have something to say about chanters and other clerical orders, and the behavior expected of them:

Canon 15:

No others are to chant in church, besides the canonical chanters who ascend the ambo and sing from a parchment.

Canon 23:

Neither the readers nor the chanters ought to wear the *orarion* or thus to read and chant.

Canon 24:

The priestly orders from presbyters to deacons, and in turn those of the churchly order, to subdeacons, readers, cantors, exorcists, porters, and the order of ascetics, ought not to enter a tavern.

Canon 54:

Priests or clerics of whatever rank must not look upon the spectacles at weddings, or at banquets, but they must arise and depart from there before the entry of the musicians.

Canon: 74:

When a reader learns to play the cithara, he shall be taught to confess it. If he does not return to it, he will endure his punishment for seven weeks. If he persists in it, he must be discharged and excluded from the church.

Cyril of Scythopolis (+558) wrote the Lives of St. Euthymius the Great (+473), St. Theodosius the Cenobiarch (+529), St. Sabbas the Sanctified (+533), St. Cyriacus the Anchorite (+555), St. John the Bishop and Hesychast (+558), and was a staunch defender of Orthodoxy. In the Life of St. Cyriacus, we find the following account, which also proves the ancient adage: the two greatest curses in life are wealth and beauty (because they both attract unwanted friends and attention):

"It would be profitable," [says Cyril of Scythopolis] "to relate the following, which Father John, the disciple of the blessed Cyriacus, told me as we walked through the desert. At one point, he stopped and said, 'There is the abode of the blessed Mary.'

"I asked him to tell me of her, and he began by saying, 'Some time ago, as I was going with my friend, Brother Paramon, to Father Cyriacus, we saw a man standing in the distance. Thinking that he was a hermit, we hastened toward him, that we might revere him. As we drew near, he hid himself from us. We were seized with fear and held fast in terror, for we thought that we had seen an evil spirit, and we began to pray. After we had prayed, we looked about and noticed a cave in the earth, and we understood

that he had concealed himself from us. We approached the cave and besought him to reveal himself to us for God's sake, that we be not deprived of his prayers and edifying discourse. And we heard from the cave the following reply, 'What profit do you think to receive of me? I am a sinful and simple woman.' Then she asked us, 'Where are you going?'

"We replied, 'We are going to Father Cyriacus the hermit, but tell us, for God's sake, what is your name and what manner of life do you lead? Where are you from and why have you come here?'

"She replied, 'Go to where you are going, and when you return, I shall tell you.'

"But we refused, and vowed, saying, 'We will not depart until we learn your name and you tell us of your life.'

"When she saw we were not going to leave without her first appearing to us from her cave, she began to tell us about herself". My name is Mary,' she said, 'and I was a chanter [Gr. *psáltria*] at the holy temple of Christ's Resurrection [in Jerusalem]. The devil wounded many through me. I became afraid that I had become the cause of temptation and vile thoughts in others and that I might add to my own sins, so I prayed to God earnestly to deliver me from sin and temptation. One night, my heart full of compunction and the fear of God, I went to Siloam and filled a vessel with water. I also took a basket of soaked wheat and left the Holy City. Entrusting myself to God's help, I departed into the wilderness. God was pleased to lead me here where I have lived for eighteen years. By the grace of God, neither the water nor the wheat in the basket have failed me. But I beg you, go now to Father Cyriacus and do what you must do. When you return, visit me, the wretched one.'

"We went to Father Cyriacus and told him all that we had heard from the blessed Mary. Father Cyriacus marvelled and said, 'Glory to Thee, our God! How many are Thy saints — not only men, but women as well — who labour for Thee in secret! Go now, my children, to God's handmaiden, and do whatever she tells you.'

"As we returned from Father Cyriacus, we arrived at the cave of the blessed Mary, and we cried out thus, 'O handmaiden of God Mary! We have come, just as you told us to!' But there was no reply.

"We entered the cave and found that she had reposed in the Lord. Her holy body emitted a sweet fragrance, but we had nothing with which to clothe and bury her. We then went to the monastery and

brought all things necessary, and having dressed her, we buried her in the cave, sealing the opening with a stone.'

"As Father John told me these things, I marvelled at the life of this handmaiden of God, and I resolved to commit it to writing, that those who heard it might be moved to compunction and that God, Who loves mankind and is merciful to them that love Him, might be glorified."

God willing, I hope to have one more installment concerning chant ready for you soon. Please pray for me.

In Christ,

✠Ephraim, Metropolitan