

Choirs, traditions, and other “secondary adjuncts” in worship

Some messy thoughts

In all likelihood, I was no younger than nine years old when I first heard a hymn sung by a choir in an evangelical church (for in our own small parochial community there was not the slimmest chance of such a thing happening). At some point during the service, following some announcements, the pastor proclaimed in a stilted, gracelessly “ritualistic” manner: “And now, the choir will sing a hymn.” The thought which came automatically to mind (translated, that is, from my then puerile reasoning into more mature terminology) was this: “Well, what did **this** have to do with anything? Why have these blokes posed before us now? Are they here to entertain us?”

Several years later I made a connection and comparison between the aforementioned proclamation (which I kept hearing in that exact same form in other churches as well) and the well-known radio announcement “And now for a pleasant musical intermission...”; or its much more well-known equivalent on television, “We will be right back after these messages from our sponsors”...

Very rightly – and wisely – the ancient Church, eastern and western, “constructed” throughout the centuries a set of rituals aimed at the communal worship of God (giving them the name *Liturgy*), with some elements even somewhat reminiscent of the acts in a classical tragedy; the same has been subjected to certain adjustments in recent times (on the Roman Catholic side), or stayed unchanged throughout, with minimal augmentations after a certain early point in history (on the Orthodox side; a course of action which I deem sorely lacking in wisdom).

On the opposite end of the spectrum one finds the Protestant confessions, which (the bright exceptions of Lutherans and Anglicans notwithstanding) ignored any and all aspects of tradition, even those which were in complete accordance with Scripture, and progressively engaged throughout the centuries in an increasing deconstruction of the continuity of the Liturgy (which they also renamed into “worship”, or – as was the case with certain pietistic groups – merely “gathering” or “assembly”), thus granting independence unto each individual element of the same (prayer, hymn, lesson, etc.) and fully abolishing the usage of traditional, established texts, with the sole exception of the Lord’s Prayer and – to a very limited degree – the Nicene Creed. This approach was justified upon a rather controversial notion which found breeding ground mainly in churches attempting to follow what is known as “Gospel simplicity”, purportedly following the example of the early Church. According to this notion, in the same way that the truths of Scripture pertaining to matters purely spiritual are changeless and divinely inspired, thus as equally inspired and changeless must we (why, one wonders?) treat the practices of early Christians with regard to:

- Their ways of communal worship (i.e., without choirs or musical instruments; according to some fringe minorities, without any music whatsoever)
- Their view of art as an expression of faith (in essence, a strict distancing from any and all elements of art)
- Methods of church administration (e.g., that the offices of elder, bishop, and pastor should be held by the same person)
- Complete absence of later institutions (Bible colleges, conferences, etc.)
- And several other issues.

One is hard pressed to even imagine how and from where it follows that there is “divine inspiration” on par with the Bible in such notions and institutions, especially as it is evidenced that such a mentality has created, both nowadays and in earlier times, men and women who are dry, legalistic, excessively strict, and quite often also cantankerous, with a strong sense of “holy” justice, yet at the same time sadly deficient in terms of charity and understanding towards one’s brethren – a deficiency which invariably constitutes a staple of every kind of fanatic – in stark contrast to the example set by our Blessed Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

Finally, worth mentioning is an even more extreme approach followed by certain churches (mainly of Charismatic bent, or at least Charismatic influences) which have cultivated a style of worship relying to an excessive degree upon improvisation and spontaneity, lying thus in immediate danger of straying from the genuine Gospel of Christ – especially when dominated by “televangelists” of dubious spiritual integrity, or certain self-anointed “prophets” whose “prophetic” inspiration is scantily even bound by the prerequisites laid out in the word of God.

As usual, virtue lies in the *via media*. Extreme ideas and forms of expression have never benefitted the groups adhering to them, and this holds for all areas of life (though, to be precise, there is a canyon of difference between moderation and the *via media* on one hand, and spiritual and moral liberalism on the other; let this be noted, in the interest of avoiding misunderstandings). And when we speak of the *via media*, this means that, beyond the generally accepted facts and principles of Scripture, we ought also to retain and salvage a capable framework of tradition, as it has been handed down to us by people of wisdom and faith, people inspired by the Spirit of the Lord, in spite of whatever change we may wish to introduce (and it is of utmost importance that any innovation or change should also conform to Scriptural principles). And all this must be undertaken with sobriety, with a sense of responsibility, with insistence on quality, as is apt for the majesty of God and the ever-important affair which is the Gospel.

Speaking of the preservation of traditions, do not think I am calling for sophisticated or extreme measures; I am very sad to observe that, all too often, not even a bare minimum of standards is met. As a representative example, I recall the case of a Christmas morning service at a central church in a major city, where the musical part consisted exclusively of modern worship choruses, and was performed in its entirety by the contemporary praise band. Such phenomena, I very much fear, are rooted in the desire of certain groups to have everything “unto

themselves", exhibiting indifference or even contempt towards the spiritual needs and aesthetic sensitivities of their brethren, and towards the desires of some people (who are not necessarily of an advanced age) who wish to be exposed even to a small part of the rich (whether Christmas-centred or otherwise) musical tradition of Protestantism. Or, equally likely, these phenomena might as well be rooted in an indifference towards, or underestimation of, even the bare essentials of traditional worship, since all these aspects – music, poetry, plus forms of artistic expression engaging the sense of sight (which were so cruelly banished by the ethos of the Reformation and are so dearly missed by many) – are, according to a popular, publicly expressed aphorism, little more than "secondary adjuncts" to the flow of worship, where unchallenged primacy is reserved for the homiletic art. All this constitutes a grave error, which has led to the "desiccation" of communal worship and the stripping thereof of valuable elements. Most surely, no right-thinking believer ought to question the importance of sound preaching; concurrently, however, one cannot advocate for a "monopoly" of the homiletic and teaching ministry, either, at the expense of all other elements of worship.

On the other hand, such discourse might sound strangely out of place in an age in which Hillsong-style gatherings tend to displace any and every other form of worship. Even the Church, you see, was not proven immune to the virus of populism, and this is most clearly manifest in the demotion of traditional hymnody, but also in the gradual extinction of the institution of the choir & organ. We would be all but justified in suspecting (without aphorising, of course) that it was the aforementioned fragmentation of worship into independent elements with no mutual connection or logical succession ("And now the choir will sing a hymn", "Now we will stand up and pray", and other similar habits) which led to this view of music and other arts as a "secondary adjunct" which could very well be abolished completely with little to no harm done to the Church. Additionally, it might very well have been the same which has resulted even in the depreciation of the worth of the sermon itself in certain churches; since we do become accustomed to the luxury of cutting down on whatever we consider "superfluous", to bloat whatever induces a spiritual "high", to devalue the "secondaries" – after all, we live in the age of images (Evangelicals speaking of images and icons?? Heaven forbid...), "classical" sounds exhaust us, and lengthy lectures are unnecessary and antiquated. A five-minute talk is more than enough, and the image of an endless popular feast under the leadership of praise bands at a youth-oriented worship evening is something much more fitting to our tastes – and our zeitgeist. To paraphrase Cavafy, "Wherefore shall we speak of choirs now?"

Not that we ever took them all that seriously to begin with; not even in the bygone era when they were secure in their double-digit membership in many of our churches. And this is precisely because we were never able to rightly appreciate the role, or the meaning, or the value of music or (more generally speaking) of art in our individual lives, but also in our communal, ecclesiastical life. Especially with regard to the institution of the choir, purveyor of the most evolved kind of hymnody and one of the most elegant genres of music, its later development – after the initial enthusiasm which briefly took hold in the 40s and

50s – assumed all the characteristics of our Greek Evangelical “idiosyncrasy”: a sloppy and opportunistic treatment of a discipline which requires earnestness, dedicated study and knowledge, but also various other traits and skills largely uncorrelated with talents and experience in other areas of the musical art. Even in large and otherwise respectable churches, we assumed that simply being able to accompany a song on the guitar or playing a melody on the piano is qualification enough for one to become choirmaster; and we acted accordingly...

To these considerations, add also the immense gravity of respectable behaviour and good witness; the post of the choirmaster requires an impenetrable “spiritual gut” made of steel, perhaps more than any other ministry does. I recall the case of a certain youngster at one of our Springtime Conferences, who knew some “notes” himself, and proceeded to approach me during a break, evidently in a great hurry: “Listen, man, I was thinking about setting up a choir at my church, you know, I have a small bunch of people who are interested, could you spare a bit of these 15 minutes of our break to give me some quick advice so I can know how to conduct them?” Does this strike you as comical and strange? Yet even so, even though most may not express themselves in such a crass manner, this is the way in which most people estimate the assets prerequisite of a choirmaster and Director of Music...

And in such a manner have we arrived where we are now. Then, along came the modern zeitgeist, with its “praise-bandocracy” and the like, as the cherry on top. Thus, we are preparing a tombstone and obituaries for an institution which always had the potential to offer a lot – and **has** done so. When, in the 70s and 80s, we were inquiring our youth whether they would be interested in becoming members of our choir, we were flooded with responses, and didn’t know how to organise the multitudes! But for the past score of years or so, it is debatable whether even three or four young people have joined the forces of the traditional music ministry at our church; and those were already people with serious music studies under their belt, eager to make serious effort, “classical screwballs” to begin with. You can only get so many to become serious about this work; all others opt for the easy paths...

What though choral singing might resound from coast to coast in the United States, or in Germany, involving choristers of all ages, and choirs of all sorts, and all genres of Christian music – classical masterworks by Bach and Händel, traditional hymns, gospel music, spirituals, musicals, divers contemporary works, and all this both within churches and without. What though 4-part congregational hymnody might flourish in many churches, such as the strict *Brüdergemeinden* in Germany; what though, in countries such as the Netherlands, one will find even entire congregations singing the anthems alongside their choir; what though youngsters even in our country (in Eastern Orthodox churches) might hasten to unite their voices to sing the works of our “very own” J.S. Bach!...

Requiem aeternam sing we, then, for a tradition slowly perishing, and allowed to draw its terminal breaths in an overwhelming minority of our churches (not more than three in the entire country, I assure you). God is all but eager to grant us His gifts in abundance, but He does not hesitate to revoke them when we are not willing to appreciate them. Many of you may recall the England of Wesley and

Moody, with its revered spiritual past, with renowned preachers and missionaries whose spiritual “radiation” spread throughout the world; remember the way it used to be, and compare with the state of things nowadays: a country long denuded of its church choirs (save for the exception of the cathedrals and an extremely slim minority of parish churches). What though choral singing might flourish in the secular sphere...

Is this a coincidence? I cannot answer with confidence. Who could possibly know...

Stephanos Katsarkas
Civil Engineer
Choirmaster at the Evangelical Church of Thessalonica

[Article translated by P. Triantaris]