

Music & Worship: Some Suggestions from the Russian Bishops of 1905*

by Fr. John Shimchick

The missionaries who came to Alaska in the 1700's brought not only the Orthodox faith, but also the Russian approach to the way in which this faith was expressed in worship. From that time on, the standard service books published by the pre-revolutionary Russian Church have been generally accepted as the norm for the liturgical life and practice for many Orthodox churches in America.

While some people look nostalgically back to this period as the "golden age" of Orthodoxy, it is an historic fact that the liturgical situation in pre-revolutionary Russia was not only unsatisfactory, but also chaotic and in need of substantial corrections and changes.[1] This fact is well-established in *The Responses of the Diocesan Bishops Concerning the Question of Church Reform*,[2] a collection of documents from Russian bishops of the pre-revolutionary era. These "Responses" were prepared in 1905 for the anticipated Great Council (Sobor) of the Russian Church that was eventually held in 1917-1918. While the bishops spoke on many other areas of Church reform, the purpose of this article is to discuss the relationship between their comments on worship and the liturgical situation presently found in America.[3]

The Orthodox faith is experienced, strengthened, and affirmed mainly in worship. Worship is justifiably considered as the best school for the teaching of faith and morality and it bountifully and generously acts on all the powers and capacities of the soul. But, in order for it to accomplish this, all believers must directly and actively be able to participate in it. It must take hold and draw them by its contents and celebration and become an indispensable yearning. It is terribly unfortunate, however, that one cannot say this about the worship of the Russian Orthodox Church" (II, p.454).

With these words, *Bishop Nazarius of Nizhni-Novgorod* not only introduced his own remarks about worship, but summarized what many of his fellow bishops felt and expressed. They understood the important position worship occupied in the life of the Church and realized, as well, how far it was from fulfilling this responsibility.

Several bishops excellently described what was no doubt the liturgical situation throughout much of pre-revolutionary Russia. *Bishop Constantine of Samara* wrote that:

The people have no true prayers. They patiently stand for whole hours through the worship in the church, but this is not prayer since the feeling of prayer cannot be sustained for whole hours without an understanding of the words of prayer, and the words

of the service in the church are above the understanding of the people. Divine worship is incomprehensible to the people not only because it is celebrated in the Church Slavonic language and with hurried readings, but also simply because a certain measure of theological education is needed to understand it.

Orthodox worship is a great treasure if we compare our church's chants with the rather shallow Lutheran hymns and someday all the Orthodox will take advantage of this. Nevertheless, at present this is still a treasure "concealed within the village walls," while the people are spiritually starving and impoverished having no prayer within reach of their understanding, except the litanies and to some extent the akathists, which the people love so much just because they are somewhat understood. It is necessary to educate the people so that they will consider not just the bows and the sign of the cross, not just mechanical readings or the hearing of the incomprehensible words of the psalter, troparia and sticheras as forms of prayer. What can be done so that the corporate worship, in the church, which in Greece was once such a perfect way of satisfying the spiritual needs of prayer, should again be turned into a truly prayerful attitude of worship? (I, p. 440)

Bishop Gury of Simbirsk offers a similar description:

Orthodox worship is one of the main expressions of love for God and the best school for development of the community spirit among the members of the parish, for here in the church hundreds of souls become one in praises, thanksgivings and supplications which unite the souls of the shepherd and his flock, the clergy and the people. This, at least, must be the ideal. Unfortunately, the present situation of Orthodox worship does not fully promote this merging of souls of the pastors and their flocks. Without mentioning the many defects in our worship, which are related to the abuses in the manner in which it is celebrated (extreme hastiness, unintelligible reading and singing, distraction in the celebration of worship and an absence of prayerful feeling in the people themselves) one cannot help but direct his attention to a feature of

our worship which, through being sanctified by church practice, leads to the separation of the clergy and people. While the clergy offer their hymns of thanksgiving, supplication, and glorification the people are reduced to the role of passive listeners. Hence, there exists a striking difference in spirit among the laity who, on the one hand, attend services in Orthodox churches and those who attend "non-Orthodox" (sectarian) churches and the difference is not in our favor (II, p. 20).

Many of the bishops referred to the church and particularly worship as the main school for Christians. *Bishop Ioanniky of Archangel* seemed to sense and express the real implication behind this image and its relation to the liturgical language. He wrote:

Worship is a powerful means of influence which the pastor has on his flock, and it has a religious, moral, and educational meaning. However, it will fully reach its goal only when it will be celebrated in a language which is understandable for all, that is, in the native Russian language. Holy Scripture says, "Sing to God with understanding." The apostles preached and prayed with the believers in all languages. We have in Russia the translation of the liturgy into Latvian, Zirian, Mordovian, but worship is not celebrated in our own native language. The sectarians lead some astray precisely because their worship is simple, comprehensible and served in Russian. The church building ought to be a school for the Orthodox layman, and the worship celebrated within it ought to be a series of individual lessons in Christian life, since here a man learns not only what he must do, but also what he must think and feel.

What can be said for a school that conducts its classes in an incomprehensible language? Every sensible person would say that such a school would be of little use, and would have little influence on its pupils. The Orthodox Church in Russia is, in this case, in a worse situation than all of the other schools for the people; everywhere, in all schools, instruction is carried out in a generally comprehensible language; only in the church is worship celebrated in the partially understood and for many even completely unintelligible Slavonic language. Being splendid in content, it remains incomprehensible, and as a result, does not have the

desired influence on the simple people. Therefore, it would be useful to substitute Russian in place of the Slavonic language. Such a change will give many the great joy of participating in worship often, not just by standing in church, but by taking part with knowledge (I, pp. 335-336).

Another area mentioned by the bishops concerned the structure of worship as indicated by the Typikon and the way that this was arbitrarily being practiced. *Bishop Michael of Minsk* wrote that:

The entire compilation of our present worship did not appear at one time. On the contrary, our worship has endured many alterations: from simple prayers, orders, and rites that existed at the time of the apostles, it has undergone constant stratification and additions and now appears in a complicated and many-layered form, intended for numerous hours. In order to celebrate our worship as is meant, without hurrying and distinctly, one would need seven hours to complete the All-Night Vigil before a feast day, three hours for the liturgy, and another two hours for vespers, which adds up to twelve hours. This is celebrated at a few monasteries - and only a few at that.

In some places where it is celebrated according to the rules, with all of the proper readings and hymns, the natural weakness of the clergy forces them to shorten it by hurrying and as a result the readings and hymns are irreverently and incomprehensibly rendered. From this one can conclude that out of the 50,000 Russian churches in the empire, worship is celebrated in 49,000 of them with extremely arbitrary abbreviations and also hastiness and very poor reading and singing (I, pp. 41-42).

Bishop Nazarius of Nizhni-Novgorod added:

Obviously, this matter does not simply concern the good or bad training of the readers and singers. There was a time when "psalm-reader" positions were assumed only by those people who had finished a seminary course of study; but even then it was not much better. The situation does usually improve in those places where the rectors themselves are concerned about the best execution of the reading and

singing and have the support of the other "clerics" ("psalm-readers" and others who help with the services) who in return welcome the pious zeal of the rectors . . . However, it seems that in most cases the liturgical service becomes a profession or formal job for the "clerics" and not something in which they direct all their energy. This leads to their coldness and indifference towards it and also, as a result, to the meaningless abbreviations of the services. Many of these abbreviations, because they were done so long ago and have been spread around to such an extent, have become accepted everywhere as normal and proper – and almost no one notices that they do not make any sense. The soul of one who does notice this mourns, grumbles and is filled with indignation. Here are some examples of the abbreviations:

1. *At the Vigil:*

The Opening Psalm "Bless the Lord, O My Soul" (104)

First Kathisma (Blessed is the Man)

Polyeleion Psalms (Praise the Name of the Lord)

Praises, before "Glory to God in the Highest"

The First Hour, when it begins directly with "Holy God, Holy Mighty."

2. *At the Liturgy:*

The Antiphons (Bless the Lord, O My Soul and the others)

The usual practice in numerous cases is to sing some parts of the verses which are selected from the Psalms without any connection between the logical meaning and the structure. But everyone gets so accustomed to these abridgements that no one thinks about it and simply accepts them as being necessary and even appointed (II, pp. 454-458).

The *Deanery Assembly of the Shenkursk Province* (Archangel Diocese) wrote:

The Typikon, according to which the services must be celebrated, is only carried out in monasteries; in the parishes there is so much which is omitted, depending on the arbitrariness of the clergy, that the fair though offensive saying has come about that: "Each priest has his own Typikon." Therefore it is necessary to develop a special Parish Typikon (I, p. 403).

Bishop Eusebius of Vladivostok felt that guidelines were needed to regulate the already existing, though unofficial, "Parish Typikon." He wrote:

I would like to point out the desirability of introducing uniformity into the celebration of worship in view of the fairly long existence of a generally practiced and deviated form of the Typikon. This form is handed down in the village and city churches not according to a written, but oral tradition and could be recognized as a "Parish Typikon." On the one hand, it must be acknowledged that this abridged Typikon for parishes obviously is caused by the demands of life itself and the absence of a non-monastic Typikon. But on the other hand, all of these deviations, while being reinforced by long practice, still have not attained widespread agreement and uniformity.

As a result, this leaves a great deal of room for the personal and often completely arbitrary discretion of the negligent and shrewd pastors who usually justify themselves by saying that we do not have a monastery here, that abbreviations are done in all parishes and that if the services drag on for too long then the worshippers will not come. If it is necessary to shorten the Typikon, then it would be better to show some definite guidelines (IV, p. 202).

Many of the bishops also pointed out that liturgical music had an important role in making worship accessible to the people and in encouraging congregational participation.

Bishop John of Poltava wrote:

In regard to worship, both singing and reading have the same essential meaning and both should be understandable and prayerful. However, this prayerful liturgical character now is frequently disturbed by the musical rendition of the hymnography which was created on a basis alien to the spirit of our Church.

There are musical arrangements which are completely foreign to this humble and reverently prayerful character, such as "Our Father" ascribed to Mozart, "Open to Me the Doors of Repentance" by Vedel and others which are unfit for worship.

There are such arrangements which, because of their artistic execution, draw the attention of listeners more to their aesthetical than prayerful side, as seen, for example in Grechaninov's recent composition of "The Creed" for solo voice and most of the "concert" pieces. Such compositions are unsuitable for use in church. They offer truly beautiful harmonizations, but undermine the spirit of man which is turned to God. Instead of the spiritual movement toward the One who is everywhere, as appears in the intense elevation of our minds and hearts toward God, we get musical enjoyment instead. The result turns out to be a religious concert, but it is not prayer. Probably everyone who examines his own prayer life during the singing of this type will find that what has been said is correct (II, p. 334).

Bishop George of Astrakhan added:

It is necessary to turn our attention to liturgical singing and to use only those chants which are strictly in conformity with the spirit of Orthodox worship. Those presently selected now exhibit great arbitrariness and disorder. The pieces chosen are highly embellished, flowery, and in the spirit of Italian music, which, as a result, sometimes turn the church of God into a musical hall, and a religiously-prayerful spirit into one that is more concerned with artistic and aesthetical matters (I, p. 323).

Bishop Antoni (Khrapovitskii) of Volhynia felt that in order to do something about the condition of church music, one must first deal with those whom he felt are really in charge of the services. He wrote that:

The diocesan councils must discuss how to adorn the divine worship to God by its correct performance, how to manage the chief "regulators;" of our present worship that is, the choir directors), and generally, how to change its present and confused state. The order of each festal service is dependent not upon the priest or even on the "psalm-reader" but upon a hired "expert"

from a secular background who is completely ignorant and often a disgrace. During the service there is almost nothing that remains the same, but everything is abandoned in favor of two or three disgusting "concert" numbers that are not appointed by the Typikon (I, p.134).

Bishop Constantine of Samara wrote about congregational singing:

We must restore singing to the state it should and formerly did have. It is necessary to renew in the minds of the people the notion that congregational singing is the norm, and that choral singing is only a substitution for this, just as the work of cantors only replaces the choir in those situations where a community is unable to have a choir. The idea of the choir as only a replacement for congregational singing, whenever it is impractical for the whole church to sing something (depending on the existing conditions of time and place), must be taught to the people through worship in cathedrals and in the churches of the ecclesiastical schools where the worshippers would mostly consist of students.

Congregational singing can begin most easily with the singing of psalms, using melodies that are not very complicated and fairly well known. The text could be published with divisions into musical phrases (as when the stichera are published) so that all churches would be able to utilize it in worship. After the psalms, one could use some of the various hymns that make up daily worship and whose melodies are known throughout the whole church. For example: "O Gladsome Light," "St. Simeon's Prayer," "Only Begotten Son," "Glory to God in the Highest," "Holy God," and "Come, Let us Worship" (I, pp. 440-441).

The *Deanery Report of the Onezh Province* (Archangel Diocese) concluded:

It is desirable to introduce the practice of singing some of the psalms such as "I will bless the Lord at all times," Ps 34) and "Have mercy on me, O God, according to Thy great mercy," (Ps 51) so that those parishioners who would like could sing them during Holy Communion . . . In addition, it would be good to teach all parishioners the following hymns: "The

Creed," "The Anaphora - It is meet and right;
Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord of Sabaoth!; We praise Thee,"
"It is Truly Meet," and "Our Father." These hymns
should especially be taught to school children, who will
be able to continually sing them as they grow older (I,
p. 339).

Bishop Gury of Simbirsk, while encouraging the introduction of congregational singing, realized that "it will not be very organized (especially at the beginning); but what a change for the better can come about in the spirit of the faithful!" (II, p. 20)

As we have seen, the Russian bishops touched upon many aspects of worship. Their "Responses" reflected the desire that worship should be intelligible, that the congregation must be able to participate in it, and finally that it must return to its role as the "school" for the teaching of the Christian faith. Andrew Kuharsky, an Orthodox layman, once listed some of the problems that he has experienced in contemporary Orthodox worship.^[4] These included such things as: lack of uniformity in the celebration, careless and hurried reading and singing, the need for a parish typikon, the problems of liturgical language, and the need for congregational singing. Not much has changed since the Russian bishops submitted their "Responses" almost 90 years ago! The problems are the same, and they concern not only the topic of worship, but the typical approach of Orthodox people toward their faith. How does a church which prides itself in tradition recognize creativity and change? Is the Church the preservation of customs and identity or is it the living continuity of the faith of the apostles of Jesus Christ? Are the unchangeable essentials of this faith accessible to every age?

These are the questions which we as Orthodox Christians (and not just liturgical musicians) must face. These are the questions which we, unlike the bishops of 1905, (who were prevented by the Russian Revolution from even further discussing), have the possibility of answering.

NOTES:

[1] Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, "[On the Question of Liturgical Practices - A Letter to My Bishop](#)," *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly*, 17:3/1973, pp. 227-38.

[2] *Otzyvy eparkhial'nykh arkhirey po voprosam o tserkovnoi reforme*, 3 vols. St. Petersburg, 1906, and supplement (contains a total of 79 reports from 64 bishops).

[3] Various aspects of these documents have been studied:

- Fr. John Meyendorff briefly presented the background and outlined some areas of their discussion in "[Russian Bishops and Church Reform in 1905](#)," *Catholicity and the Church*, (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1983), pp. 143-156.

- James W. Cunningham studied in great detail the documents and the movement for Church renewal in Russia (1905-1906) in *A Vanquished Hope*, (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1981).
- Liturgical reform has been discussed by Nicholas Zernov, "[The Reform of the Church and the Pre-revolutionary Russian Episcopate](#)," *St Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly*, 6:1962, pp. 128-138, and in *The Russian Religious Renaissance of the Twentieth Century*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1963), pp. 53-85.

[4] "Lipservice to the Lord," *The Orthodox Church*, May, 1984.

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