

VITALITIES OF THE VIBRANT ORTHODOX PARISH (PART 4): CULTIVATING A VOICE OF SACRED SONG

by Father Frank Marangos

*“Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,
singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart.”*

Ephesians 5:19

The primitive use of the word *choros* (choir), originally did not refer to a separate group within the worshiping Christian community that was entrusted with the responsibility of providing musical support. On the contrary, it described the nature and characteristic of the congregation as a whole. The terms *choros*, *koinonia*, and *ekklesia* were used synonymously in the early Byzantine Church as designations for the congregation, at worship and in song, both in heaven and on earth. According to Saint John Chrysostom:

“Nothing so arouses the soul, gives it wings, sets it free from earth, releases it from the prison of the body, teaches it to love wisdom, and to condemn all the things of this life, as using the voice in concordant melody and sacred song composed in rhythm.”

As the 4th marked vitality of the vibrant Orthodox parish, community leaders should strive to cultivate a culture of liturgical participation that provides opportunities for young and old to use their respective voices in concordant melody. Worship in the vibrant Orthodox parish should be characterized by active participation of all the community’s faithful, particularly in the recitation of prayers, creeds, and/or chanting of hymns, responses, and psalms. Unfortunately, while designated chanters and choir members do and should provide uplifting and necessary musical leadership, some parishes have totally relinquished their corporate “liturgical voice” to these “specialists.”

The life of the fifth century Saint, Romanos the Melodist, wonderfully illustrates the impact of restoring the melodic voice of sacred song. The Church celebrates the memory of this most important personality of Christendom on October 1st. Romanos was tone deaf and not a talented reader or singer. Although he was initially ridiculed by his monastic community for having a harsh raspy voice, a miracle transformed him into a most prominent chanter and hymn-writer.

According to legend, while asleep during one particular Christmas eve, Romanos saw a vision of the Most Holy Theotokos who told him not to despair. Blessing him with her right hand, she invited him to consume a scroll that she held in her left hand. In his dream, Romanos opened his mouth and swallowed the parchment. The next morning, Romanos glorified God by mounting the monastery’s pulpit and beautifully chanting a kontakion in honor of the Holy Nativity that he presumably composed during the night. The sound of his now melodic voice stunned and transfixed his fellow monks who realized that a miracle had occurred. From that moment forward, Romanos was hailed as the “Melodist.”

Like Romanos – the contemporary Orthodox Church needs to “consume” the sacred scroll of Scripture. Only by feasting on the parchment of God’s Word can the local Orthodox parish regain its melodic and inspirational voice and thereby “sing and make melody to the Lord with all their heart” (Ephesians 5:19). Only in such a fashion can the Voce of Orthodoxy re-mount the contemporary pulpit and share the vitality of God’s Wisdom to a culture in need of Truth!