KAPITTEL 10

Orthodox Chanters as Divine Instruments: Pseudo-Dionysios and Beyond

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Abstract: The present chapter explores the Pseudo-Dionysian understanding of church singing and its influence on later liturgical commentaries up until the 20th century, including Maximus the Confessor's *Mystagogy*, (Pseudo-?)Germanus of Constantinople's *Ecclesiastical History,* Nicholas Cabasilas' *Commentary on the Divine Liturgy,* and Archimandrite Vasileios' *Hymn of Entry,* through three case studies: the Antiphons, Trisagion, and the Cherubic Hymn sung in the Divine Liturgy. These hymns are examined through the Pseudo-Dionysian notion of *hymnody,* in which the one chanting (either spiritually or concretely) steps onto the path of divine ascent. In the end, the difference between the faithful and the appointed chanters in the light of these texts is considered, providing conclusions to understand better the sacramental role of the appointed chanter in the Pseudo-Dionysian hierarchic worldview.

Keywords: Byzantine liturgy, church music, singing, mystagogy, hierarchy

In the late 5th or early 6th century, an anonymous author – according to most modern scholars, a Syrian monk of unknown identity – wrote a number of mystical treatises in Greek under the name of Dionysios the Areopagite, the disciple of Apostle Paul and the first Bishop of Athens (see Acts 17:34). We therefore we have to content ourselves with naming him Pseudo-Dionysios the Areopagite and designate this collection

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of works with the Latin title *Corpus Dionysiacum*.[1] The author has been characterized both as a Christianizing Neoplatonist and a Neoplatonizing Christian theologian,[2] but what is indisputable is his profound and continuous influence on the mystical theology of Christianity, from the appearance of his works up to the present day.

The Areopagite author promotes a Christianized Neoplatonic worldview, with a strong emphasis on the hierarchy of creation and its relationship to the divinity, nevertheless departing from a purely Neoplatonic cosmology: for him, the creation of the world is not an emanation, an outpouring, from the One divinity, but rather he opts for the Christian teaching of creation *ex nihilo,* from nothingness. There is, in other words, a substantial difference between the Creator and His creation, a gap that can never be fully crossed by mortals.[3] On the other hand, the main thrust of my article is more concerned with the idea of hierarchy and, in particular, mystical ascent through this hierarchy towards the One, an idea specifically promoted by the mysticist Plotinus, the most important Neoplatonic philosopher and founding father of this philosophical school in the third century.[4]

Pseudo-Dionysios discusses the question of hierarchy in two of his main works, the *Celestial Hierarchy,* where he is primarily concerned with describing the nine ranks of angels – an idea that still dominates doctrinal thinking about the angelic in most traditional Christian denominations – and the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy,* in which he explains how this heavenly hierarchy of the invisible church is reflected in the hierarchy of the visible church.[5] As a part of this second treatise, he provides a mystical commentary

1 The corpus has been critically edited: see *Corpus Dionysiacum* (Suchia, Heil & Ritter, 1990–1991). For an English translation, see *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (1987). The English translations used in this article are by Luibheid.

2 There has been increasing scholarly interest in the Areopagite in the last few centuries. For general overviews see, for example, Eric D. Perl, *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (2007), and Alexander Golitzin, *Mystagogy: A Monastic Reading of Dionysius Areopagita* (2013).

3 For a comparison of Pseudo-Dionysius and the Neoplatonic tradition regarding being and creation, see Perl (2007, pp. 17–34).

4 For a recent introduction to Plotinus, see Erik Emilsson, *Plotinus* (2017).

5 The critical edition is published in *Corpus Dionysiacum* (Suchia, Heil & Ritter, 1990–1991, pp. 61–132). For a brief introduction into Dionysios' texts on hierarchy, see Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (1993, pp. 47–132).

on various liturgical services, most importantly the Divine Liturgy (Eucharistic Office). This commentary proved highly influential to all later commentaries of the Divine Liturgy throughout the Greek world, especially through the work of the 7th century theologian Maximus the Confessor and his *Mystagogy* (1985), where he explains allegorically various aspects of the church space and the liturgy celebrated therein,[6] and the most influential Byzantine commentary of the Divine Liturgy, attributed to the 8th century patriarch of Constantinople, Saint Germanos,[7] as well as many others. Unfortunately, a work exclusively dedicated to hymn singing, written by Pseudo-Dionysios and called *On the Divine Hymns,* has not been preserved.

In the present chapter, I shall discuss an aspect dealt with only poorly in contemporary scholarship, namely adapting Dionysian thought on ecclesiastical hierarchy, but also on mystical theology from his homonymous work, to the act of church singing and what effects it has on those who chant. Though this is a topic that is not explicitly discussed in his extant treatises, it can nevertheless be easily extrapolated from them. Parallel with this, I shall provide comparisons with later works on the subject – liturgical commentaries by Maximus the Confessor, (Pseudo-?)Germanos of Constantinople, and the 14th century author Nicholas Cabasilas[8] – including similar elements, hopefully showing plausibly how Pseudo-Dionysian influence has been essential for the development of a "theology of Orthodox church music" in these sources. The last examples are from liturgical commentaries by Archimandrite Vasileios, a contemporary Greek theologian and the former Abbot of the Athonite Iveron Monastery. As these later sources shall show, the Dionysian

6 For a critical edition of the text, see *Maximi Confessoris Mystagogia* (2011). The English translation used here is *Maximus the Confessor: Selected Writings* (1985, pp. 181–226). See also René Bornert, *Les commentaires byzantins de la divine liturgie du VIIe au XVe siècle* (1965), a classic introduction to liturgical commentaries.

7 The classic edition and translation is *St Germanus of Constantinople: On the Divine Liturgy* (1984). See also the very recent edition of the primary redaction of the commentary by Fr Michael Zheltov (2021, pp. 57–137), in which the traditional attribution to Germanos is also questioned. Zheltov dates the commentary to the late 7th or first half of the 8th century.

8 For the Greek text, see *Nicolas Cabasilas: Explication de la divine liturgie* (Salaville, Bornert, Gouillard & Périchon, 1967). The English translation used here is *Nicholas Cabasilas: A Commentary on the Divine Liturgy* (1960).

tradition is still going strong in the Orthodox Church, demonstrating a 1 500-year-old continuity in understanding the theological significance of singing.

Before continuing, I should mention that when we speak of the "theology of church music" in the Orthodox or, even more narrowly, Byzantine context, there has been remarkably little written, especially in Western languages, when one takes into account the extremely prominent role singing has played in Eastern Christian liturgical life from its very beginnings and continuing until today. The few notable exceptions are the survey of dogmatic and ethical views on music in Greek church fathers by Athanasios Vourlis (Βουρλής, 1994), a short essay on the theology of Orthodox music by Nicolas Lossky (2003), and the large *oeuvre* of Professor Emerita Hilkka Seppälä (for example, 2018 and 2005),[9] mainly in the Finnish language. This lack will be, hopefully, in the near future, remedied at least in part by a multivolume *Oxford Handbook of Music and Theology* that is under preparation, but also to a modest extent by the present article as well.

We shall concentrate first on the general action of singing, and second, on particular hymns sung in the Divine Liturgy and how they are interpreted in various commentaries. Finally, I shall reflect on how all this is related to those who chant, and the personage of the "professional" chanter in particular, something that is not explicit or particularly apparent in the discussed treatises. The discussion here is complementary to, and draws inspiration from, my earlier series of publications that deal with the notion of performance in different liturgical sources (see, for example, Olkinuora, 2015; Damaskinos (Olkinuora) of Xenophontos, 2019; Fr Damaskinos (Olkinuora) of Xenophontos, 2020, 2021).

9 See also the anthology of patristic texts related to music translated by her late husband, Fr Johannes Seppälä, *Isien kuoro: alkuvuosisatojen opetusta kirkkolaulusta* (2010).

Pseudo-Dionysian concept of divine descent and divine ascent

First of all, we must remind ourselves of the general outlines of Pseudo-Dionysios' cosmology and its implications to theology and *theurgy*, a pagan term adopted by him for Christian usage. I mentioned above that he did not adopt the Neoplatonic doctrine of emanation as such, but for him, the descent of the divine to all of creation – what we would call the immanence of God in all things – is essential for the understanding of hierarchy. Even the lowliest created thing can be a link to the divine, thanks to the presence of God's activities in it. Being low in the hierarchy is far from what we as modern humans perceive when we think of hierarchy as a "power structure": as Dimitrios A. Vasilakis aptly notes,

> our modern sense of hierarchy has lost much of the original meaning invested in the term by Dionysius. For him, relating 'hierarchically' is not merely or mostly to outrank someone, but to invite someone to move up to God. (Vasilakis, 2019, p. 190)

As an answer to this descent, it is now creation's task to find a way to ascend towards the divine. The divine, being not only immanent but also transcendent, is hidden in creation, and because of the substantial gap between us and the divinity, this path is found only in contemplation. Here, the Areopagite coined two terms, *apophatic* and *kataphatic*, describing the two ways of speaking of a fundamentally unknowable God. Not being of divine nature ourselves, we can only describe what He is not.

The idea of contemplating the divine is, of course, not unique to Pseudo-Dionysios. Here he follows the centuries-old tradition of desert monasticism. But for the Areopagite, an ecstatic outreach toward the divine is essential: this he calls *hymn singing* (ὑμνῳδια or related terms). In other words, theology is not only what the word means, perceiving God in one's *logos* (intellect), but it is also what Pseudo-Dionysios calls *theurgy,* literally translated as "god-work". Our hymn singing to God or, in other words, our own theurgy in the sacred rituals, is a response to

God's work in the creation. *Theurgy* is the consummation of theology, the rational aspect of divine contemplation.[10]

This is the core of the understanding of liturgy for the Areopagite author: it is the descent of the Lord and the ascent of man. When describing the beginning of the liturgy, where the hierarch censes the whole church, he exhorts his audience to contemplate on this double movement by stating that:

> we must look attentively upon the beauty which gives it so divine a form (εἰς τὸ θεοειδὲς αὐτοῦ κάλλος) and we must turn a reverent glance to the double movement of the hierarch when he goes first from the divine altar to the far edges of the sacred place spreading the fragrance and then returns to the altar. For the blessed divinity, which transcends all being, while proceeding gradually outward because of goodness to commune with those who partake of him, never actually departs from his essential stability and immobility (κατ´ οὐσίαν ἀκινήτου στάσεως καὶ ἱδρύσεως). (Pseudo-Dionysios, 1987, p. 211)

But what is music about for the Areopagite? The act of *hymnody*, as he says, is about singing

> that most universal song of praise (ὑμνοῦσιν ὑμνολογίᾳ καθολικῇ) in honor of that source who is the worker and the dispenser of good, who has established for us those saving sacraments by means of which the participants are divinized. This hymn is sometimes called a confession of praise (ὁμολογίαν), sometimes a symbol of adoration (τῆς θρησκείας τὸ σύμβολον), sometimes – and here I think one is closer to things divine – a *hierarchic* thanksgiving (ἱεραρχικὴν εὐχαριστίαν), for this hymn is a summary of all the blessed gifts which come to us from God. To me it seems that this song is a celebration of all the work of God on our behalf. It reminds us that we owe to God's goodness our being and our life, that, using the everlasting model of beauty (ἀρχετύποις κάλλεσι), God has made us in his image and that he has given us a share of the divine condition and uplifting. Then it reminds us that when we had lost the divine gifts because of our own folly, God took the trouble to recall us to our original condition. (Pseudo-Dionysios, 1987, pp. 216–217)

10 For an introduction to the concept of *theurgy*, see Panagiotis G. Pavlos, "Theurgy in Dionysius the Areopagite" (Pavlos et al., 2019, pp. 151–180).

It might well be that *hymnody* here is an analogy, a verbal image for the sacrifice of thanksgiving man is supposed to return to God as a token of his gratitude for all the divine gifts, a sacrifice that happens through the hierarchic ascent. But we should not reject completely the application of this thought to the actual act of singing. In other words, chanting God's praise with one's mouth is a vocal actualization of man's purpose: divinization. If chanting truly happens in the state of *theurgy*, music is the aural icon of this inner ascent.

To express this thought in more concrete moral terms, Maximus the Confessor, one of the main commentators of Pseudo-Dionysios a century or so after the unknown author's texts began to circulate, summarizes in his symbolic interpretation of the liturgy the meaning of church music by saying that, "the spiritual enjoyment of the divine hymns signified the vivid delights of the divine blessings by moving souls toward the clear and blessed love of God and by arousing them further to the hatred of sin" (Maximus the Confessor, 1985, p. 198). The commemoration of Christ's salvific history through music is a form of art that, according to ancient treatises, harmonizes us with all of creation (see Saint Gregory of Nyssa, 2016) and aims at our own spiritual purification.

Discussing particular hymns: The Antiphons

The fact that Pseudo-Dionysios' idea of *hymnody* is not merely an analogy, but also related to the act of singing itself, is attested to by the way he and those influenced by him discuss the different hymns of the Divine Liturgy and their role. In the following, I shall pull together this material through three case studies, the first of which are the Antiphons.

At the beginning of the Eucharistic Office (a practice maintained today as well), there are Antiphons that are sung by the chanters and/or parishioners. They are usually psalm verses with a refrain. The saintly Areopagite sees the role of these hymns as a preparation for the Eucharist, saying:

> When these sacred hymns (ὑμνολογία), with their summaries of holy truth, have prepared our spirits to be at one (τὰς ψυχικὰς ἡμῶν ἕξεις ἐναρμονίως) with what we shall shortly celebrate, when they have attuned us to the divine harmony (τῇ τῶν θείων ᾠδῶν ὁμοφωνίᾳ) and have brought us into accord

> not only with divine realities but with our individual selves and with others in such a way that we make up one homogeneous choir of sacred men (ὡς μιᾷ καὶ ὁμολόγῳ τῶν ἱερῶν χορείᾳ), then whatever resumé and whatever opaque outline is offered by the sacred chanting of the psalmody is expanded by the more numerous, more understandable images and proclamations in the sacred readings of the holy texts. (Pseudo-Dionysios, 1987, p. 213)

What is also noteworthy here is that music itself, as a phenomenon, a) attunes the individual to be in harmony (ἐναρμονίως) with himself (in other words, not having capacities of the soul that are in discord, but all parts of this human being strive towards one goal, i.e. union with Christ), b) attunes man with the community of other men, forming a "choir" (χορεία), through the sacramental divine energies that act when singing, and c) attunes man with divine realities. This, by Pseudo-Dionysios, is literally called "homophony", ὁμοφωνία.

The other matter that is of significance in the passage above is the preparatory character of the Antiphons. Psalm verses, being drawn from the Old Testament, only prepare the way for the Truth. Similarly, the liturgy is a gradual process of unfolding divine truths, from the simple proclamation of prophecies to the eyewitnesses of the fulfilment of the prophecies and the substantial union with Christ through the divine mysteries. This is also affirmed by (Pseudo-)Germanos of Constantinople in his commentary, where he notes how:

> the antiphons of the liturgy are the prophecies of the prophets, foretelling the coming of the Song of God - - - The prophets are indicating His incarnation, of course, which we proclaim, having accepted and comprehended it through the ministers and eye-witnesses of the Word, who understood it. (Saint Germanus of Constantinople, 1984, p. 73)

In the 14th century, Nicholas Cabasilas notes in his commentary on the Divine Liturgy the meaning of the hymns chanted in the beginning of the service in a more developed way. He sees the Antiphons as a symbol of the "prehistory" of incarnation. A lengthy quote is in order here:

> First, let us remind ourselves that the sacrifice is a figure of the whole mystery of Christ's redemptive work; likewise, all the ceremonies and prayers which

> precede and follow the sacrifice symbolize this work. The sacrifice commemorates the death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord, since the precious gifts are changed into the very body of the Saviour, that body which rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. Those acts which precede the sacrifice recall the events which took place before his death—his coming, his first appearance, and his perfect manifestation; those which come after commemorate what Jesus himself called "the promise of the Father", that is, the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles, the conversion of the nations which they brought about, and their divine society. The whole celebration of the mystery is like a unique portrayal of a single body, which from beginning to end preserves its order and harmony, so that each ceremony, each prayer, adds something to the whole. Thus, the opening chants symbolize the first phase of the work of redemption – – – We have, it is true, ascribed another purpose to these chants and readings—they act as a purification and preparation for the holy mysteries—but nothing prevents them from serving in both capacities; these acts at one and the same time sanctify the faithful and symbolize the scheme of redemption. (Nicholas Cabasilas, 1960, pp. 52–53)

So, what can be seen here is a double function of the Antiphons: they are preparatory, both in the sense of preparing the faithful for meeting Christ and in the context of salvation history preparing Christ's incarnation. We should perhaps not see these two aspects as something contrary to each other, as Cabasilas himself implies in the closing sentence of this quote. On the contrary, I would argue that we have here what Terence Cuneo has called the "immersion model" employed in Orthodox liturgy (Cuneo, 2016). Through the process of sanctification, the believers (and, to a significant degree, the chanters as well) become involved in the narrative of salvation history – not in a "fake" sense, but in actuality, since for the Areopagite participation through symbols is true (see also Gschwandtner, 2017). So, here we have an exposition similar to that of the Areopagite, where commemoration as an ontological praxis provides the basis for the act of church singing.

The Trisagion

Our second case study is the Trisagion, *Holy God, Holy Strong, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us* (Ἅγιος ὁ Θεός, ἅγιος Ἰσχυρός, ἅγιος Ἀθάνατος, ἐλέησον ἡμᾶς). This hymn became a part of the Eucharistic Liturgy at

least several decades before the Areopagite wrote his treatise. The hymn was a matter of controversy between the so-called Monophysites and the Orthodox due to confusion over whether it was directed to the Holy Trinity or to Christ – the latter was the Monophysite view. According to liturgical sources, a child was raptured to the heavens, where angels taught him the proper way of chanting the hymn. Because of the dogmatic importance of this particular hymn, it is one of the few hymns dealt with separately in liturgical commentaries.[11]

The fathers we studied above are unanimous in stating that the symbolic meaning of chanting this hymn is the union between men and angels, whereas semantically the hymn words are connected to the Holy Trinity. Even though Pseudo-Dionysios does not mention this hymn in his treatises, his influence on the later commentaries is apparent. Maximus the Confessor notes in his *Mystagogy*:

> The triple exclamation of holiness which all the faithful people proclaim in the divine hymn represents the union and the equality of honor to be manifested in the future with the incorporeal and intelligent powers. In this state human nature, in harmony with the powers on high through the identity of an inflexible eternal movement around God, will be taught to sing and to proclaim holy with a triple holiness the single Godhead in three Persons. (Maximus the Confessor, 1985, p. 201)

Here, Maximus introduces an eschatological dimension: it speaks of the perfect recapitulation of men and angels in the age to come, an "eternally moving stillness" (ἀεικίνητος στάσις) in Maximus' words, or a constant ascent in the celestial hierarchy according to Dionysios' terms. The triple number as such is related to this circular movement, as also in Neoplatonic thought it represents this circularity. This is also *why* the Trinity is a Trinity, according to the Cappadocian theologian Gregory of Nazianzos, the church father most respected by Maximus: the triple

11 For a more detailed discussion on the dogmatic importance of the Trisagion hymn and its background, see Fr Damaskinos (Olkinuora) of Xenophontos, "Singing of divine identities in a liturgical space? John Damascene's treatise on the Trisagion and his anti-heretical polemics" (2018, pp. 17–26).

number expresses how the divinity steps beyond the duality of matter and form.[12]

(Pseudo-)Germanos adds, a century or so after Maximus,

> The Trisagion hymn is (sung) thus: there the angels say "Glory to God in the highest"; here, like the Magi, we bring gifts to Christ—faith, hope, and love like gold, frankincense, and myrrh—and like the bodiless hosts we cry in faith. (Saint Germanus of Constantinople, 1984, p. 75)

In other words, there are two aspects to the hymn: it is an imitation of angelic singing and, at the same time, our offering to Christ through the Pauline triad of virtues. In the ascetic tradition, this triad is linked to spiritual growth, considering love as the highest form of approaching God.

The Cherubic Hymn

Our final case study is one of the key hymns of the Byzantine liturgy today: the Cherubic Hymn, during which the holy gifts, bread and wine, are brought to the altar table in a festal procession. At this moment of priestly action, the choir sings the following:

> We who in a mystery represent the Cherubim, and who sing the thrice-holy hymn to the life-giving Trinity, let us now lay aside every care of this life. For we are about to receive the King of all, invisibly escorted by the angelic hosts. (*The Divine Liturgy of our Father Among the Saints John Chrysostom*, 1995, p. 22)

The theology this hymn conveys is particularly Dionysian: the angelic, heavenly liturgy is symbolized mystically by men serving this theurgy – but this hymn is not included in the Areopagite's treatise, since it was first included as a part of the liturgy a century or so after the *Corpus Dionysiacum* appeared.

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12 "The monad is set in motion on account of its richness; the dyad is surpassed, because the divinity is beyond matter and form; perfection is reached in the triad, the first to surpass the composite quality of the dyad, so that the divinity neither remains constrained nor expands to infinity" (Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orationes* 23.8, PG 35, 1160C); the English translation is from Daniel B. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Theology: A Contemporary Reader* (2003, p. 174).

However, when (Pseudo-)Germanos' treatise was written, this hymn had already become an inextricable part of the liturgy.[13] Therefore, he notes:

> By means of the procession of the deacons and the representation of the fans, which are in the likeness of the seraphim, the Cherubic Hymn signifies the entrance of all the saints and righteous ahead of the cherubic powers and the angelic hosts, who run invisibly in advance of the great king, Christ, who is proceeding to the mystical sacrifice, borne aloft by material hands. Together with them comes the Holy Spirit in the unbloody and reasonable sacrifice. The Spirit is seen spiritually in the fire, incense, smoke, and fragrant air: for the fire points to His divinity, and the fragrant smoke to His coming invisibly and filling us with good fragrance through the mystical, living, and unbloody service and sacrifice of burnt-offering. In addition, the spiritual powers and the choirs of angels, who have seen His dispensation fulfilled through the cross and death of Christ, the victory over death which has taken place, the descent into hell and the resurrection on the third day, with us exclaim the *alleluia*. (Saint Germanus of Constantinople, 1984, p. 87)

In this multi-sensory description, the symbols of the heavenly realms are realized through different media, of which the hymn is a part. This moment is a particularly impactful one in the Divine Liturgy: the same message is conveyed audibly by the hymn, visually by the fans (that depict the seraphim), olfactorily by the incense, and kinesthetically by the movement of the procession (especially by the deacons, who are often in liturgical sources paralleled with the angels). One could even claim that the presence of bread and wine, though not yet consecrated and turned into the Body and Blood of Christ, brings at least an association of taste, even though not yet concretely tasted by the congregation.

What is strange is that Nicholas Cabasilas does not mention the hymn at all in his treatise. But more than a millennium after (Pseudo-)Germanos, Archimandrite Vasileios provides an explanation of the hymn itself. He begins by showing the mimetic relationship between

13 It is not completely clear if Saint Germanos refers to this particular textual form of the hymn, but it indeed seems to be so: on the history of the Cherubic Hymn, see Robert F. Taft, *The Great Entrance: A History of the Transfer of Gifts and other Pre-anaphoral Rites of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* (1978, pp. 53–118).

angels and the ones chanting the hymn, something that we referred to above as the "immersion model". Iconicity is not mere symbolic imitation but true participation:

> We are an image of the cherubim, that is to say we are identified with them; we are cherubim "in a mystery", that is to say inwardly and liturgically, and hence truly. - - - "Representing in an image" has to do with the deepest relation between persons and things, and the greatest respect for distinctive personal qualities. (Vasileios, 1984, p. 72)

Archimandrite Vasileios is faithful to the patristic tradition in seeing the act of hymn singing as a form of ascent towards the divinity. His description also seems to allude to the above-mentioned miracle of the child being taken up to the heavens and taught the thrice-holy hymn. This miracle that becomes a common experience to all believers elevates them into the anagogical reality of liturgy:

> We sing the thrice-holy hymn as we celebrate the mystery; and this celebration of itself sends forth the hymn. Representing the cherubim in the liturgical singing of the thrice-holy hymn, we are caught up into heaven – – – and we sing the triumphal hymn with the blessed powers. When we are there, beyond space and time, we enter the realm of eschatology. (Vasileios, 1984, p. 72)

Indeed, Fr Vasileios takes his interpretation along a rather Areopagite path by describing this spiritual ascent through *hymnody*. As a result of this ascent, the faithful descend back to this world, however in an altered form:

> Thus anyone who participates in the Liturgy, who is taken up, acquires new senses. He sees history not from its deceptive side, which is created and passes away, but from the true, eternal and luminous side which is the age to come. Then the believer delights in this world too, because he experiences the relation between it and the other world, the eternal and indestructible: the whole of creation has a trinitarian structure and harmony. (Vasileios, 1984, p. 72)

In Dionysian terms, this transformation could be seen as *theurgy*: the transformed believer acts God-like and sees the presence of divinity in all

of creation. Most importantly, in musical terms, by chanting the liturgy the believer begins to experience the Trinitarian harmony of creation.

Conclusion: Chanters and the faithful

So far, the discussed treatises have dealt with the general act of church singing, usually described as the participation of the critical mass of believers in worship. The commentaries do not make a division between the "professional" chanters and the body of the faithful in the church, and at least on a theoretical level, they mainly stick to the idea of all the faithful singing together: as we read earlier, Maximus noted that *all the faithful* chant the Trisagion.

Indeed, fundamentally, there is no significant difference between the "ontological" aspects of singing, whether it was performed by chanters or the simple faithful or both of these groups together. They both consist of chanters, and everything the commentaries mention, and what we saw above regarding the act of church singing, might be applied to both. However, if we want to bring this question to the special role of the chanter, as someone who is specially educated and appointed to this task, we should reflect on this matter in relation to the practicalities of Byzantine chanting and the differences between the faithful and the chanters in written sources. In some ways the roles of the faithful and the chanters as performers overlap, but my question is: can we see some kind of Dionysian idea of hierarchy between them?

The truth is that, at least in larger city churches and monasteries, the services were not chanted exclusively by the laity. There was a professional group of chanters who were specially ordinated to perform their task, whereas the laity sung refrains and other simple responses. Moreover, the whole vast tradition of Byzantine musical manuscripts shows that the music was far too complicated for simple parishioners to sing, and it took a long time and much toil to learn the art of music. As compositional techniques evolved, the role of professional chanters became more prominent. Even in the liturgical books, up until the current day, the designation "laity" (λαός) has meant, in practice, the chanter or the choir, and the designation was a mere relic from an earlier tradition. Byzantine canon

law stipulates that chanters need to sing from canonical books – i.e. only texts that have been accepted by the Church – and they should not force their voices into an unnatural scream. Because they were ordained to the so-called lower clergy, the Church considered them to have a particular importance for the liturgy.[14]

It is evident, then, that there is a hierarchy between singers – those who are more initiated to sacred chanting (the trained and appointed singers), and those who can participate in it only partially. In light of this, how should we see the role of the trained chanter in liturgy through a Dionysian lens? Naturally, everything that applies to the faithful chanting in the church also applies to the chanter: he is, in the end, one of the faithful. But at the same time, even though Pseudo-Dionysius does not explicitly mention this, the chanter is a part of a hierarchy (in the earlier tradition, also as an ordained lower clergyman) and plays an important role in transmitting divine truths to the faithful. This can be seen, among other sources, in Byzantine monastic foundation documents that describe the role of the chanter in monastic communities. Their task is to intercede on behalf of the rest of the community and the other monastics are supposed to serve them in material matters to support them in this important task; simpler monastics, on the other hand, can grasp only a part of the divine meanings transmitted by singing (see Fr Damaskinos of Xenophontos, 2020). This shows that the reality of Byzantine monasticism gave a sacramental, almost priestly, role to the chanter as the representative of the community. Being a part of the upper hierarchy means that they first have to ascend to the divine realms, outside of time and space.

But we must remember that the notion of hierarchy also includes the descent of the divinity toward us. In order to unfold the mystery to others, we need eyewitnesses: Christ showed himself to the apostles who, in turn, showed to us what the prophets meant, and the prophets brought forth to us their first spiritual vision of the divine. In the hierarchy of the synaxis, according to the divine Dionysios, "those who are stone deaf

14 See Seppälä, *The Song of Fire and Clay* (2005, pp. 9–25), for a survey of the canonical position of singers in the Orthodox Church.

to what the sacred sacraments teach also have no eye for the imagery. Shamelessly they have rejected the saving initiation which brings about the divine birth" (Pseudo-Dionysius, 1987, p. 214). On the contrary, conveying these truths requires spiritual vision. The appointed chanter, being an instrument of the divine hymns and a mediatory level between the ordained hierarchy and the simple laity, is a step for the divinity to descend and for the faithful to ascend. In the Pseudo-Dionysian spirit, this must be acquired through personal spiritual struggles, a vision of God through mystical contemplation and ascetical practices. This should be the stable ground, I think, of how we pastorally approach today the question of spirituality in making church music in the Orthodox context.

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