



**Self-Ruled
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America**

The Diocese of Los Angeles and the West

The Right Reverend Bishop JOSEPH
Bishop of Los Angeles and the West

“I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being. Bless the Lord, O my soul! O Lord my God, Thou art very great!” (Psalm 104)

Right Reverend, Very Reverend and Reverend Fathers, Reverend Deacons, Subdeacons, Readers, Choir Directors, Chanters and Choir Members:

Throughout this blessed Diocese each week, chanters and choirs are working with great diligence to prepare for the services we hold to worship the True God in Spirit and in Truth, and I would like to take this time to salute them for their hard work in this important and doxological ministry.

I remind all of you that the music of the Church is not entertainment for the benefit of the listener. It is a sacrificial offering to God as is all prayer. It is not aimed at us, but is aimed at the Heavens, where it is received by the Lord of Hosts. Yet, as with all things in Jesus Christ, we benefit from it as well, for in the music of the Church we find the beauty and truth of God.

Music that draws us away from God and distracts us from prayer is not Orthodox and very dangerous. It leads to pride and all other forms of sin, as sin is anything drawn apart from God. We may have personal favorites when it comes to music, but we must remember that when we choose ourselves over others, we are departing from God and entering into the sin of selfishness. When we argue and fight over liturgical music, God is no longer present in our thoughts: we have become servants of the idol of ‘religiosity’ rather than Jesus Christ. This leads to conflict, disobedience, broken communion and self-condemnation.

My beloved, remember that the choir and the chanter’s stand are part of the *kleros*, from which we get the word *clergy*. What the Church expects of the clergy it also expects of the choir. When the choir and chanter’s stand are full of conflict and egoism, the spiritual disease of selfishness is sprayed out over the entire community through the

music it produces. Think of a sneeze spreading a cold and you will understand what I mean.

So, a healthy parish requires a healthy choir and chanter's stand. Those who sing must prepare themselves for the task of serving the parish by constantly pursuing a life of spirituality. Singing in the Church is far beyond musical settings and hitting notes: it is about prayer, and singers must first be people of 'inward' prayer before they become people of 'outward' prayer. Otherwise, we become hypocrites and condemn ourselves with our own mouths. After all, how can we sing the beautiful words of the Church when God is not within us? When He dwells within us, then His beauty within us will come out when we are properly prepared.

Let us also remember that liturgical music ought to be performed in a prayerful way. Pastors and choir directors must be willing not to perform music that is likely to draw people away from inward prayer. This includes overly-complicated settings or notes outside the reach of the singers' natural abilities. The best liturgical music is: a) sung towards God, b) peaceful, c) keeps the listener awake and mindful of the message, and d) does not require the singer to lose focus of his prayer. I highly recommend listening to CDs from Simonopetra Monastery on Mount Athos and Ormylia Convent for examples of men and women singing in such a manner. In the choir, women are particularly tempted to sing higher than their natural voices, and this tends to get screechy. The nuns at Ormylia do a wonderful job of demonstrating a prayerful woman's voice in its natural state.

Several of our clergy have visited Mount Athos, and they have all described it to me as I remember it: a place of profound spirituality. Their services are not like ours in some ways. The seats in the churches line the edges and columns of the church, so that most people cannot even see the iconostasis. If you ask the monks why, they will tell you it is because the services are meant to be heard, not seen. They are not theatrical performances, but the words of the clergy and chanters are meant to enter the ears of the congregation and transform their minds during the worship of God. As we glorify Him, He transforms us.

Those who serve in the chanter's stand or in a choir are deserving of our appreciation and gratitude. They work long and hard, preparing and practicing to serve their brethren and worshipping God in a manner befitting His Majesty. If you feel that you have not lived up to the expectations of the Church in regards to your ministry, do not despair: now is the time to begin anew. The fasts of the Church provide a wonderful opportunity to repent and make a new beginning in a spiritually healthy way.

Prepare the services adequately before they begin, so that you are not overcome with confusion and disruptions during the services. Make your practices joyful and people will not avoid them as a burden. Do not push yourselves too hard, but never stop trying to improve. Do not forget that you cannot improve if you are convinced you are doing it the 'right way.' When you are open to change, then God will lead you to what is better.

Finally, if you cannot smile at the end of a practice or a service, then something is wrong.

To those in the congregation, I ask you to reconsider your own participation in the Divine Liturgy: are you here only to be entertained, or do you come to pray to the Living God? Do not let social distractions and mental fantasies overtake you during the worship. Remember, the Divine Liturgy is hard work, and it requires focus and dedication. There is a reward of great joy awaiting those who are faithful in their prayers to God, for their sins are lifted from their shoulders and they experience the freedom of Jesus Christ in all parts of their lives.

Again I say that a healthy parish requires a healthy choir and chanter's stand. As one family in our Lord, Jesus Christ, I ask that all of us support the ministries and talents of our parish singers and chanters. Those of us who cannot sing can still play a part by adequately providing for our chanters and choirs, assuring that they have the materials and moral support they need.

During times of trouble at home and abroad, it is important that our worship to God be pure and our parishes be harmonious. Remember, my beloved children, singing praises to the Lord is about your holiness and your salvation. Let us work towards these blessings by blessing one another, and using this Advent fast as a time to reconsider our lives and make a new start. I pray that God blesses you all with a wonderful and joyous Feast of the Nativity.

Your Father in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Joseph', written in a cursive style.

+ JOSEPH

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