

AGES Initiatives Vision

I. Introduction

Orthodox Christian worship, with all its beauty and majesty, has been described as “heaven on earth.” Entire peoples throughout history have converted to Christianity upon experiencing its splendor: those elaborate ceremonies executed according to intricate rubrics, visually featuring processions, vestments, incense, and icons, and audibly adorned with exquisite ecclesiastical poetry and refined chant. This beautiful audible art is often heard at its best in a concert setting. But its native and intended venue is the sanctuary, and the divine services of the worshipping Church.

The Orthodox Christian Church^[1], numbering 300 million believers worldwide, is the heir of a distinctive tradition of worship that is formed and informed by a distinctive tradition of theology. The believers worship their God through sacred ceremonies and a superabundant wealth of ecclesiastical poetry, adoring Him by reciting and singing back to Him what He has revealed about himself and what He has done for humanity throughout the ages.

Millions of people worldwide who identify as Orthodox Christians find strength and comfort in the hope-giving message they get in their church services, and in no small measure from the religious poetry and music that dominate those services. It is a thousand-plus year tradition of chant that is a kind of music therapy, because, at its best, it is an exquisite and refined art that is both moving and edifying.

Today, many people are engaging with the ancient Christian Faith for the first time after experiencing its worship. Therefore, we believe that the Music Ministry of the Orthodox Church has significant and original contributions to offer to the spiritual life of this country and the world. To this end, AGES Initiatives, Inc. will develop tools and programs to promote and sustain the Church's Music Ministry, using current and emerging technologies.

II. The Role and Content of Worship

Worship Manifests the Church

The Eastern Orthodox Church possesses a distinctive liturgical worship, which does not simply endeavor to engage the membership from time to time, but actually manifests the Church itself. True, it has a cycle of rites and ceremonies for every time of day and every day of the year. There are services for the sacraments, for the various needs and circumstances of each believer and the congregation as a whole, which is the Church, the Body of Christ. Yet, the ultimate purpose of the Church's liturgical worship is, as Fr. Alexander Schmemmann wrote,

AGES Initiatives Vision

to express, form, or realize the Church -- to be the source of that grace which always makes the Church the Church, the people of God, the Body of Christ, "a chosen race and a royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9). In fact... [the Church] embodies in worship her participation in God's Kingdom, gives us a glimpse of the mystery of the age to come, expresses her love to the Lord who dwells within her, and her communion with the Holy Spirit. In this sense worship is the purpose of the Church, but the purpose precisely of the Church, as the highest and fullest expression and fulfilment of her nature: of her unity and love; of her knowledge of and communion with God. (*Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, p. 29)

Benefits of Worship

In addition to the existential dimension of the Church's worship, the enactment of worship benefits the worshippers. During the services and ceremonies, attendees are edified, reminded, instructed, exhorted, guided, healed, uplifted, inspired. Fr. Alkiviadis Calivas wrote that worship and liturgy are understood as

the unique way in which Christ's saving acts are always remembered, renewed, and partaken of by the Church and her members.... [I]n its structure, content, and style Orthodox worship is replete with biblical themes, doctrinal teachings, and moral exhortations. Worship is, in fact, the Church's primary spiritual guide and teacher as it provides the worshipper with a fundamental understanding of the deeper meanings of the Scriptures and of the life of faith. (*Aspects of Orthodox Worship*, p.29)

Practically speaking, the more or less church services conducted in a parish are for some people their only contact with the Church, and the only time they actually pray, however substandard that may be. Therefore, it is important that services not be conducted in a manner that is haphazard or ill-prepared, but attractive, spiritually uplifting, and therapeutic, and in a sacred manner befitting the divine. After all, it is in the context of these services that worshippers may partake of the Church's sacraments.

Enactment of Worship

The worship services in the Orthodox Church require the participation of the clergy and the people. Typically that means there is a priest, who leads the prayers, and a church singer or choir that leads the singing. There are several other possible actors, like deacons, readers, acolytes, and of course the regular worshippers in the pews.

It is a basic expectation of every parish that their priest knows both what and how to sing. Seminary programs include training in church music. It is also an expectation that the parishioners in the pews will participate in the services, usually following along with a service book in hand. But it is not the priest nor the parishioner in the pew, but the designated church singers who actually enact the music ministry.

For example, in the typical parish of the GOA (Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America), there is a mixed voice choir that sings at the Divine Liturgy on Sundays. If they have any training, it is in reading music and singing, but not in the liturgical order. In other words, their training is in how to sing, but not what and when to sing. There is also a chanter or group of chanters who sing whatever the choir does not sing, i.e. Matins, Vespers, Holy Week, etc. The head chanters might be trained, but often they do not read music. They usually have an understanding of what and when to sing, but it comes not from formal training, but from unmonitored

AGES Initiatives Vision

experience. Choirs and chanters, trained and equipped or not, are ultimately the ones who enact the Church's music ministry.

Content of Worship - Church Services

The liturgical cycle moves on four interrelated planes: the day, the week, the season, and the year. It incorporates the believers into the mystery of Christ, in order to transform the time they live and act in, into the decisive time of their salvation.

On each day of the year, there is a specific commemoration of a saint (e.g. Jan 1, St. Basil), or an event in sacred history (Dec 25, Christmas). Each day of the week has its own particular theme (e.g. Monday is dedicated to the Angels, Tuesday to St. John the Baptist, etc). Certain seasons of the year are characterized as preparation for or celebration of a great feast (e.g. Lent, Holy Week, Easter). Feasts and fasts punctuate the year, and all together these make up the Liturgical Calendar.

The commemorations and sacred themes that fill the calendar are the subject matter of the ecclesiastical poetry, the hymns that are the content of the Church's daily worship. The daily worship of the Orthodox Church consists mainly of Vespers and Matins, which are the longest and most elaborate services. Minor services, namely the Hours, Compline, and Midnight Office, complete the daily cycle. The Divine Liturgy (the Eucharist) may also be included in the daily cycle.

Contained in no less than sixteen separate books, there are over 50,000 hymns in current use; on a typical day, the services include about 150 hymns from at least three different books. The selection and order of hymns to be used in any given service is determined by a sophisticated system of rubrics.

Order in Worship - Rubrics and Typikon

With such a wealth of hymnological and liturgical texts, complex rubrics are unavoidable in the Orthodox Church. While there is diversity from church to church and a variety of venues, there is a universal commitment to the rich tradition, in other words, to complex rubrics. The sum of the rubrics for any given church and venue is the Typikon.

The purpose of the Typikon, according to Fr. Calivas, is to provide continuity in liturgical practice and ethos, secure recognizable standards and good liturgical order, and maintain a healthy, balanced tension between tradition and life, protecting the liturgy from whimsical experimentations, fanciful archaisms, and arbitrary decisions. (<http://www.goarch.org/archdiocese/affiliates/apc/presbyter/PresbyterJune2008.pdf>)

The establishment and enforcement of liturgical order is one of the duties of the regional synod and the local bishop. In the case of the GOA, priests agree to follow the accepted liturgical practices of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, as a condition for incardination.

That having been said, there are several venues of worship within any one jurisdiction, each with distinct liturgical needs and varying capacities to meet them. The content and order of services in a monastery will differ from that of a cathedral, which will differ from a smaller parish. A seminary, while training people for parish ministry, may actually have a liturgical life quite different, fuller, than the parish. And the liturgical needs of special venues, like schools,

AGES Initiatives Vision

camps, and retreats, are met in other ways. Insofar as a venue has a consistent way of worshiping, that content and order could be called its own Typikon.

Within a venue, specifically the parish, there is a measure of flexibility, since there are several factors that can affect the content of a service like Sunday Matins. The existence or not of trained personnel often determines whether or not the service is done at all, which parts will be done, and whether they will be sung or simply read. Time constraint is also a factor. A parish may allot a time frame for Sunday Matins that does not allow for all the content to be used. So, more or less of a service is performed depending on time and personnel.

Monasteries are famous for having and defending their own peculiar Typikons. Because prayer and liturgy have such an important place in the life of a monastery, and insofar as they are trusted to remain within the larger tradition, monasteries are typically permitted to maintain their own peculiar systems of rubrics.

All that having been said, there is no canon or rule of the Church that prohibits changes to the rubrics, even unilateral, local modifications. The naive statement, usually meant to trump every other argument about rubrics, that "that's how they do it on Mt. Athos," necessarily begs the questions, "Which monastery, and what year?"

III. The Challenges

Uniformity and Diversity

As a matter of fact, from the fifteenth century until the nineteenth century, all Orthodox Churches, both parishes and monasteries, theoretically followed the same basic Typikon of the famous St. Savas Monastery in Palestine. But parishes are not monasteries; and in order to meet the constraints of time and personnel, parishes inevitably shortened their services. This presented the opportunity for arbitrary and ill-advised modifications from parish to parish. In order to discourage such arbitrary modifications of the rubrics, in the mid nineteenth century the Ecumenical Patriarchate created what would become the parish Typikon. The body of liturgical materials remained the same, but many abbreviations and changes in the order of the services were made for parish use.

For the churches that have adopted the "Greek" parish Typikon, additional books are published that reflect the new order. Since there has been a reluctance to change the traditional books, i.e. *Octoechos*, *Menaion*, etc. these new books make reference to the traditional books with respect to content, while indicating the new order with rubrical instructions. The instructions can be intricate and confusing to both priests and singers.

This new parish Typikon has not been universally adopted by all Orthodox Churches, but only those under the influence of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. For example the Jerusalem and Moscow Patriarchates did not adopt it; and obviously the monasteries did not. That diversity becomes more apparent in the USA, where neighboring Orthodox parishes of different jurisdictions use a variety of Typikons.

Another issue is the non-uniformity of content. While the content of the traditional books is basically the same, in recent centuries additional hymnography has been composed for saints

AGES Initiatives Vision

and commemorations specific to local churches. These new hymns and services are typically published in separate booklets. However, in some cases the newer material has made its way into more recent editions of the traditional books like the *Menaion*.

So there is the challenge of producing and providing suitable materials for multiple venues within a single jurisdiction using the same content and basic Typikon, and for venues in jurisdictions that use different or additional content and a different Typikon.

Translations and Versions

Add to the diversity described above the multiple English translations of basically the same material. These various versions differ either in style of English (i.e. Elizabethan or Modern), style of translation (prose or metered), cost (free or for sale), and medium (print or electronic). They also differ in scope. It may happen that no single version has everything needed for a particular service, and therefore some parts of the same service are taken from different versions. This applies both to hymnology and to scriptural verses and passages used in a service. The preference for one version over another is sometimes determined by the jurisdiction or ruling bishop.

Then there is the issue of new, improved, and approved translations. When a translation of a particular hymn or of an entire service is added, changed, or made the official version of a jurisdiction, the challenge is in distributing it. New books are expensive to publish and expensive to buy, especially in the large quantities needed by parishes. Therefore new publications featuring improved and approved texts are few and far between. The high cost of new books, therefore, becomes an obstacle and deterrent to further improvement.

IV. Solutions

Prepared Services

One solution to the problem of lack of trained church singers is to train more church singers, so that they will have both the skill and the knowledge to navigate the complex rubrics and perform the correct material. This is easier said than done. Most church singers in the GOA are untrained volunteers, and their parishes currently do not want to pay professional music directors. So there is little incentive to pursue advanced training.

The other solution is to have someone else do the more difficult task of preparing the texts and music for the services ahead of time. In 1991, then Bishop Philip of Atlanta imagined publishing a digest of prepared complete services for parish use; but he was unable to complete that project before his death.

In 1994, Narthex Press began producing and marketing its semi-annual publication of the complete Sunday Orthros (i.e. Matins) service, in Greek and English, for every week of the year. It has become a familiar resource, and because of its size it is referred to as the "phonebook."

In 2002, Fr. Seraphim Dedes, then superior of St. Gregory Palamas Monastery in Ohio, began publishing what has come to be known as eMatins material. These are also prepared texts, in Greek and English, of primarily Matins services, with associated scores in staff notation. The

AGES Initiatives Vision

eMatins publications differ from those of Narthex Press in that they are offered as online downloads at no cost.

Disruptive Technology

With the advent of the personal computer and more recently of the iPad and other e-readers, the door is wide open for digital solutions and answers to the challenges described above. The advantages of digital solutions include consistency, efficiency, flexibility, and low cost of maintenance.

As early as 2002, at St. Gregory Palamas Monastery, Fr. Seraphim was faced with the challenge of managing liturgical texts from several sources for its full monastic church services. He experimentally implemented a kind of digital chanters stand in the monastery chapel. It consisted of a touch screen connected to a small PC, running a homemade application he called AGES (Auto-Generated Ecclesiastical Services), and now referred to as proto-AGES. Proto-AGES was a database of liturgical texts in Greek and English, a rubrics engine capable of producing prepared, complete services on demand, and a viewer for use in church. While the experiment was short-lived and the proto-AGES code is obsolete, it serves as the prototype for the platform that AGES Initiatives is currently developing.

In 2009, the St. Nektarios Greek Orthodox Church in Charlotte, NC installed and implemented digital chanters stands on the solea of its sanctuary, at the recommendation of Fr. Seraphim Dedes, its Music Director since 2007. The ill-adapted *analogion* (lectern) was removed, and in its place are three A/V carts (draped in black velvet), on which are three 19" flat screen monitors connected to one PC. Using mouse and keyboard, the choir director navigates through the pages of text and music and leads the 10-15 singers who cluster around the monitors. The same setup is replicated on the left side of the solea for the women's choir.

V. AGES Initiatives

Because the maintenance of the DCS library, and its source, the eMatins.org website, require many hours and specialized knowledge and skill, without which DCS and eMatins would cease to exist, in 2011 Fr. Seraphim decided to revisit the idea of auto-generated services and to resurrect the AGES project. In 2012, with the blessing of Metropolitan Alexios of Atlanta, AGES Initiatives, Inc. was founded as a nonprofit corporation, to promote and sustain the Church's Music Ministry.

Vision

AGES Initiatives envisions all Orthodox Churches having the texts, music, and trained singers needed to maintain the fullest possible liturgical life. To that end, it is developing a multilingual database, rubrics engine, and applications for church, home, and classroom, as well as translation tools for use in the mission field.

AGES™ is a software platform that will store, organize, and deliver Orthodox Christian liturgical texts and music to support the education of church singers, and to facilitate the smooth performance of church services, using current and emerging technologies.

AGES Initiatives Vision

AGES Workbench

AGES Workbench will be a cross-platform, role-based software product that provides tools for the creation and review of translations of Eastern Orthodox liturgical texts and the generation of services for specified days. This will be accomplished through a software component called the AGES Rubric Engine, which will read source texts (original and translations), and apply rubrics and templates to produce a service for a specific day in a variety of formats such as PDF, HTML, or ePUB (for viewing on mobile devices such as smart phones or tablets). Although Workbench will itself be capable of generating services, its primary purpose is to provide efficient, user friendly software tools to develop the texts, capture the rubrics for specified typikons, and create templates.

AGES Workbench will be cross-platform in that it can be run on Windows, Linux, or Mac operating systems. It will support the following user roles: translator, reviewer, rubrics administrator, template administrator, and others. It will be capable of use while disconnected from the Internet, in order to support the needs of users overseas who might not have continuous Internet access. Workbench will allow them to synchronize and backup file versions with an AGES server.

Clergy, chanters, and others will primarily make use of a future web-based AGES system that will read the files and database produced by Workbench and generate services in requested formats.

Library - Collection

AGES Workbench will be used to create the AGES Library, the collection of liturgical texts in the original Greek and other languages, including multiple versions of English. Through a unique system of coding and tagging, texts will be linked to musical scores and audio recordings that support learning and performance.

DCS

An integrated library of texts and music called DCS was developed for use on the Digital Chanters Stands at St. Nektarios Church in Charlotte. An installer/updater program (for Windows 7) was built, which allows choir members to access texts and music of upcoming services at home in order to practice.

Most parishes are not yet ready or able to adopt this digital solution. However, it is not uncommon for individual chanters to use e-readers in church instead of books and printouts. As a matter of fact, Metropolitan Alexios of Atlanta has openly admitted to accessing eMatins materials on his iPhone in order to perform a service.

Forward thinking iPad users have experimented with various workarounds to use DCS on their devices. Plans are in the making to build an iOS app that will access and display the DCS library.

Virtual Instructor

Perhaps the biggest challenge the Church's music ministry faces on the parish level is the shortage of trained and equipped personnel. AGES proposes to create tools and methods to meet that challenge. Imagine Parish Music Ministry "in-a-box," everything a parish needs in liturgical texts and music to perform all its church services.

AGES Initiatives Vision

Seminary is where training for parish ministry takes place. It is no secret that the liturgical music learned and used at the Seminary is markedly different from what is typically used at the parish. The fact, however, that our bishops approve of what is taught and used at the Seminary has to be understood as their preference for it and their unspoken hope that the Seminary's liturgical music experience will somehow be transmitted to the parish along with everything else future priests are learning in preparation for their ministry.

Virtual Instructor is a tool that seminarians can use as they learn church music and also as they perform the services during their time at the Seminary. Virtual Instructor accesses the AGES integrated digital library of liturgical texts and associated musical scores and audio recordings. It can be made to operate on multiple platforms, e.g. iOS (for iPad), as well as desktop and Web applications.

As a learning tool, Virtual Instructor can function in several ways. For example, the teacher can create a set-list of hymns to be studied and learned, whether as part of a class exercise or as homework. Virtual Instructor displays the selected texts for these hymns in whichever language or version desired. The interface provides the student direct access to the musical score of a selected hymn, in whichever notation or composition is desired. Furthermore, the interface links the score to an audio recording. Thus, through frequent listening and singing along, the student will learn to sing accurately and he quickly becomes proficient. Another way Virtual Instructor can function is to display an entire prepared service for any given day. The user can then study the text of each hymn, view the musical score, listen to the audio recording, and thus be prepared for a specific service.

The convenience provided by the integrated AGES library extends beyond the classroom to the Seminary chapel itself. Students are already using e-readers in church. Accessing the AGES library, such devices can function as Digital Chanters Stands (DCS) and Service Books. For the chant groups, the existing stands can be outfitted with monitors or simply made to accommodate portable devices. The worshipping students in the pews will no longer have to lug their personal library of service books to chapel, since the prepared service text and even music can be displayed on their e-reader. Everyone can have everything they need at their fingertips.

Finally, by implementing Virtual Instructor and DCS, the cost to the student for a liturgical library is decreased. Especially as regards the Greek texts and music, not only are the books expensive, but they are also not easily obtained.

As seminarians graduate and move on to real parish ministry, for which the Seminary prepared them, Virtual Instructor and Digital Chanter Stand can be taken to or found at the parish, where a similar music ministry can be implemented. These programs will contribute to mending the bridge between what is learned at Seminary and what is experienced in the parish.

Applications

Additional applications can be developed to deliver specific content from the AGES Library to desktop and mobile devices such as tablets and readers. Once the AGES platform has been built, methods will be made available for third-party developers to utilize the Library.

VI. Advantages

The digital solutions that AGES offers are not limited to the convenience of automatically prepared services and access to other digital resources. There are additional advantages.

Authenticity

Not everyone has or uses the authentic or approved texts, when such exist in a jurisdiction. The AGES digital library can serve as a repository for the Church's approved texts, e.g. the original Greek. One can imagine a committee or department of the Church using AGES to certify and safeguard the authenticity of liturgical texts.

As translations are improved and approved by the Church, the AGES library is able to be updated immediately through online synchronization. Since there are no expensive publishing costs, AGES users will always have the latest version. This advantage extends beyond the charters stand to the worshippers in the pews using digital service books.

Regulation

AGES enhances the reach of church leaders with regard to monitoring the liturgical life of the parishes under their jurisdiction. As an AGES user, a ruling bishop can regulate the content and order of services, as well as specify the approved translations. He can even customize the rubrics of special services, like Christmas Eve, and push prepared texts to his parishes in a variety of formats.

Flexibility

AGES can be customized to accommodate all liturgical languages and rubrics. Therefore it has global application.

Translation Support

Liturgical texts in the mother-tongue of the people are critical to the establishment of vibrant Eucharistic communities. There is a need for an electronic library of liturgical texts in the original Greek and other languages, and also for translation software that makes use of the library of liturgical texts and provides tools for development of new translations.

The AGES database will contain the entire library of liturgical texts. In addition to the original Greek and other traditional liturgical languages, publishers of English and other language versions will be able to use AGES to store, organize, and deliver their own content. The latter serve as translation models that can be studied by a translator.

AGES Workbench will include tools that support the translation of liturgical texts, and indeed in the mission field. The AGES LiturgiText (ALT) will facilitate the creation of new versions to be added to the library. The AGES Analysis and Research Tool (AART) will support the needs of translators and scholars studying the library.

VII. Conclusion

In many churches, the rich and complex tradition of worship—so important in the spiritual life—is fading from existence. Doing church services is hard. It is complicated. It requires knowledge and skill. There is a shortage of singers, students, and the means to teach them. They lack the required texts and musical scores, as well as the knowledge of rubrics, to perform the services correctly. As a result, there is a temptation to simplify or eliminate church services. The authentic liturgical tradition is diminished or even lost. Clearly, something needs to be done.

AGES Initiatives is determined to meet these challenges. In partnership with other interested organizations and with funding from private individuals and grants, it purposes to use current and emerging technologies to develop innovative solutions, to promote and sustain the Church's Music Ministry.

Last revision: 06-26-12