

A brief outline of the Hierarchical Liturgy for choir directors

His Grace, Bishop Benjamin (Peterson) of Berkeley
The Orthodox Church in America, Diocese of the West

1. The Entrance of the Bishop

Upon entering the temple, the bishop is greeted by the clergy who gather at the entrance doors. It is the custom in some places for the choir to sing: “From the rising to the setting of the sun, the name of the Lord is to be praised. Blessed be the name of the Lord, from henceforth and forever” in an unhurried manner. [A setting of this hymn can be found in the Liturgy book published by St. Vladimir’s Seminary, Crestwood, NY.] It is then the custom for the choir to pause as the church warden and pastor greet the bishop.

After the cross has been venerated by the bishop and concelebrating priests, the deacon will intone in a loud voice: “Wisdom” and in a lower voice “It is truly meet....” The choir sings “It is truly meet...” softly, melodiously, and slowly as the deacon continues to recite the entrance prayers. [If the liturgical season does not call for the singing of “It is truly meet....,” then the proper festal hymn to replace the Hymn to the Theotokos is sung instead.] The clergy proceed to the foot of the amvon. The singing of “It is truly meet...” must last through the entrance prayers, that is, until the bishop has completed his veneration of both the icon of the Savior and Theotokos and turns to bless the congregation. Often, it is necessary to repeat the section “More honorable than the Cherubim...” once or even twice to cover the liturgical actions. However, if the tempo is slow enough, one should normally need to sing only once.

The bishop is handed his staff when he completes the entrance prayers and turns to bless the faithful. As he blesses, “Ton dhespotin” is sung by the choir. Thus, it is necessary to be prepared to sing “Ton dhespotin” immediately.

The clergy go to the kathedra to receive a blessing from the bishop to vest. The choir sings: “The prophets...” as the subdeacons receive the bishop’s klobuk, prayer rope, panagia, and riassa to prepare for the vesting. The deacon comes out of the sanctuary with a censer, receives a blessing, and exclaims: “Let us pray to the Lord. Your soul shall rejoice in the Lord....” The choir sings: “Your soul shall rejoice....” but only after the deacon has begun to recite the prayer. This hymn is sung slowly during the entire vesting. In most cases, it will be necessary to repeat it several times and should be timed to end as the subdeacons are standing beside the fully vested bishop with dikiri and trikiri in hand. The deacon will then exclaim: “May your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify our Father which is in heaven, always now and ever and unto ages of ages.” The choir responds with “Ton dhespotin” and the bishop blesses the faithful.

2. The Hours.

During the reading of the Hours the choir sings nothing.

3. The Liturgy of the Catechumens.

The Antiphons are sung as usual. The clergy come out of the altar during the singing of the Beatitudes to be in place for the Little Entrance. After the bishop has blessed the entrance and kissed the Gospel Book, the deacon holds the Gospel Book aloft and says: “Wisdom. Attend.” The clergy then sing, “O come let us worship....” The bishop descends the kathedra and ascends the amvon. When he begins to ascend the amvon, the choir sings on a recitation tone with cadence: “O Son of God, Who rose from the dead, save us who sing to Thee. Alleluia.” This text may change with the season. [Music for this may be found in the SVS Liturgy book.]

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The bishop goes into the altar and begins to cense as the clergy continue singing: “Save us, O Son of God...” When the clergy have finished, the choir [in the Slavic tradition, a trio] sings softly and slowly: “Eis polla eti dhespota.” “Eis polla...” is then sung by the entire choir followed by the troparia and kontakia proper to the celebration are begun.

The choir does not sing the final theotokion [or, in festal seasons, kontakion]. Rather, the clergy sing, “Now and ever...” and the final theotokion or kontakion. This should be coordinated with the clergy [preferably the deacon before the service begins].

The deacon leaves the altar through the royal doors and exclaims: “Let us pray to the Lord.” The choir responds: “Lord, have mercy.” The bishop recites the prayer “For holy art Thou...” and the deacon exclaims: “O Lord, save the pious!” The choir repeats his exclamation on a recitation tone. The deacon continues: “And hear us!”. The choir also repeats, but this time with a cadential ending: “And hear us!”. Do not wait for the deacon to stop singing. He will hold the note on both “pious” and “us” and the choir should come in over him in the same key. The deacon then says as he turns about, pointing with his oration: “And unto ages of ages!”. The choir responds: “Amen” and begins the pontifical “Holy God”.

The pontifical “Holy God” is sung in the following manner:

1. The choir melodically sings: “Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us!”. [The tempo need not be very slow.]
2. The clergy repeat what the choir sang.
3. The choir sings: “Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us!”, but on a reciting tone.
4. The bishop, having gone out to the amvon, recites the prayer: “Look down from heaven, O God...”, and a trio sings, as he blesses to the West, “Holy God,”; to the South, “Holy Mighty”; and to the North, “Holy Immortal, have mercy on us!”.
5. The bishop returns to the altar and the choir sings once more the entire text but in a reciting tone as in number 3.
6. The clergy sing the entire text melodically as in number 2.
7. The choir sings, “Glory...now and ever...Holy Immortal, have mercy on us!” on a reciting tone.
8. The choir then sings, “Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us!” melodically for the final time.

The rest of the liturgy of the catechumens proceeds as normal. But note that when a deacon serves, the second litany of the faithful has extra petitions.

4. The Liturgy of the Faithful.

The choir must sing a very long and slow Cherubic Hymn as, in addition to the regular censing and prayers, the bishop’s hands are washed and the bishop completes the proskomedia. If need be, the Cherubic Hymn or its final phrase may be repeated. The clergy should wait for the choir to finish and not vice versa. “Amen” is sung twice, once after the bishop returns the chalice to the altar table and again when he places the paten on the table. The second portion of the Cherubic Hymn is sung as usual. “Eis polla...” is sung by the choir as the bishop blesses with the dikiri and trikiri at the conclusion of the Cherubic Hymn.

The litany: “Let us complete our prayer...,” the Creed, Anaphora, and Hymn to the Theotokos are as usual.

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At the completion of the Hymn to the Theotokos, the deacon leaves the altar through the open royal doors and exclaims: “And all mankind!”. The choir responds as usual. The bishop then says: “Among the first....” The deacon, already out on the amvon, then begins, “And our lord, the Right Reverend n., bishop of (city)...and for all mankind.” The choir repeats with a cadential formula: “And for all mankind.”

The liturgy proceeds as normal up to the post-Communion sequence. After the bishop says, “O God save Thy people and bless Thine inheritance,” he blesses with the dikiri and trikiri. The choir responds with: “Eis polla....We have seen the true light....”

The bishop offers the dismissal and blesses the faithful with the dikiri and trikiri once more. The choir responds with: “Eis polla....”

Should a Procession and Service of Thanksgiving be served on the parish feast day, it would begin at this point.

If “Many Years” is to be sung, it is done at this point. Usually on a parish feast day there are three sets: 1) “To our lord, the Most-blessed Herman...,” 2) “To the President of the United States...,” and 3) “To the rector, the priest n., the parish council....” Following sets 1 & 2, “God grant them many years” is sung only three times, which is the customary musical setting once through. After the third set, it is sung nine times, which is the customary musical setting three times through.