



**NATIONAL FORUM
OF GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH MUSICIANS**
*The musical arm of the Archdiocese that strengthens and perpetuates
Greek Orthodox liturgical music in America*



Position Statement Regarding

THE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF CHOIR MEMBERS

Participating in divine worship services as a choir member is a sacred responsibility, not to be taken lightly. Choir members, as other church musicians, offer their God-given talents to the faith for a variety of reasons. For most, it is a part of their stewardship – the giving of their “time and talents.” For others, it is something that is enjoyed and for still others, it is a social outlet. In our services, however, choir members represent the laity, responding to the liturgical dialogue set by the priest. This places a sacred responsibility on them during our worship services. They are called to be knowledgeable not only of the hymns and responses, but also about the correct order of the worship services. The choir is entrusted to be a participating part of the worship service and its members must respond to that trust accordingly.

As St. John Chrysostom writes, *“When we sing church hymns, we must be careful that we do not pronounce only the words with our tongues while our hearts wander elsewhere.”* Every hymn, every phrase, every verse of the church service must be rendered clearly and fittingly. This requires singers who are inwardly committed not just to the music, but also, and primarily, to the Faith.

There are various aspects of being a choir member – most importantly, there is a liturgical role, and of course there is a musical role. But also, there are outreach and educational roles that are important to the work of being in a choir. With dedication, choir members, even though volunteers, should be able to commit to the following roles and accompanying responsibilities.

A. Liturgical Role

The music of the Orthodox Church is an integral part of worship services. Choral music must add to the liturgy, not distract from the prayerful environment of worship. The Bishops and priests stand in the place of Christ in creating the Liturgy as “heaven on earth.” They are the leaders and the ones who are celebrants of the mysteries of God, who is their Author. Those who sing represent the angels, who stand around His throne offering Him hymns of praise. St. Paul, writing to the Corinthians in his first letter suggests the Orthodox “phronema” for choir members in their role during divine services: *“I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the mind also. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the mind also.”* [1 Corinthians 14:15, RSV]. First and foremost, then, choir members must evaluate themselves according to the following guidelines:

- Take the time to be spiritually focused before beginning a worship service.

- Be on time and ready to sing when the service begins.
- Concentrate on the worship service, actively participating by making the sign of the Cross, standing, reverencing, and praying whenever appropriate.
- Learn about the structure and meaning of the various services and the changing cycles of the ecclesiastical year.
- Understand the meaning of the hymns and their significance in the service.
- Search for spiritual meaning in everything you sing. Remember, singing or chanting is not simply a performance but an act of worship – “singing is believing.”
- Participate in the sacramental life of the church, such as receiving frequent communion.
- Refrain from creating distractions, thus separating yourself and others from the worship experience (e.g., milling around, passing notes, talking).

B. Musical Role

Not all choir members are trained musicians, able to read music and experienced in singing with a group. However, even with “amateurs” and “volunteers,” choir members can grow in their knowledge of music and creating a sound that matches the beauty of our services and their surroundings – the music, the chanting, the icons, the vestments all strive to be as perfect and beautiful as possible as we offer up worship to God. Choir members can enhance their church musicianship by attending to the following:

- Attend rehearsals. A choir is not a group of individuals wearing the same robe; it is a unit, a team, each supporting the other. This teamwork is learned through participating in rehearsals.
- Be punctual for rehearsals and all church services.
- Be respectful of each other, the priest, and the director. Even though singers may have good suggestions to offer during rehearsals, the director has the final word and works with the priest to plan and coordinate the music for the worship services of the parish. If you do have a suggestion, it’s best to offer it before or after the rehearsal so rehearsal time doesn’t get bogged down with discussion.
- Be open-minded to learning new music and not complain that “we have always done it this way.”
- Keep your eyes on the director for direction and cues.
- Mark your music with the director’s instructions and keep your music in proper order.
- Be sensitive to tempo, balance, dynamics, articulation, and phrasing when singing, according to your director’s instruction.
- Warm-up your voice before rehearsals and services, and use your singing voice at other times during the week.

C. Outreach Role

Choir members offer significant amounts of their time and talents to the church, and thus serve as examples to others. The choir member’s role does not end on Sunday

when the Divine Liturgy ends – rather, there are opportunities to encourage others to participate in the parish’s music programs.

- Encourage others to join your choir.
- Be supportive of those in the process of joining the choir – make them feel welcome and comfortable.
- Be a “mentor” to newcomers by assisting them with the music, robes, line-up, and the like.
- Be especially generous with your help and support of young people who come to sing with you.

D. Educational Role

Again, because choir members are not always trained musicians, they should take advantage of as many opportunities as possible to improve as church musicians. Choir members should take advantage of learning experiences that offer opportunities for them to grow in the use of vocal techniques, introduce them to new repertoire, and help them learn more about the services, music, and tenets of our faith. Choir directors, priests, and parishes should support their choir members’ quest for additional knowledge.

- Work to improve your music knowledge even if you are not a trained musician. Continue to improve your music reading skills and vocal techniques, through the help of your director and/or by attending local, regional, or national church music events.
- Work to improve your knowledge of the Liturgy, worship services, and the changing cycles of the year, through the help of your priest, your director, and/or by attending local, regional, or national religious education events.
- Participate in Church Music Institutes and workshops offered by the Church Music Federation of your Metropolis and national events sponsored by the National Forum of Greek Orthodox Church Musicians.
- Attend the annual conference of the Church Music Federation of your Metropolis. These will help improve your musicianship, introduce you to new music, connect you with other church musicians, and inspire you to return to your home parish with renewed dedication.
- Look for opportunities to enroll in music and/or Orthodox coursework. Several of the Church Music Federations have scholarships to support your participation.

St. Athanasios the Great, in the 4th Century said, *“When chanters chant with the tongue and also with the mind, they greatly benefit not only themselves but also those who want to hear them. To recite the psalms with melody is not done from a desire for pleasing sound, but it is a manifestation of harmony among the thoughts of the soul.”*

(Adopted July 2007)