

# choir notes



## Upcoming Events

Dec. 31–New Year’s Eve  
Vespers Liturgy for the Feast  
of St. Basil and the  
Circumcision of Christ  
Warmup at 5:00 PM  
Liturgy at 5:30 PM

Jan. 5–Feast of Theophany  
Warmup at 5:00 PM  
Liturgy at 5:30 PM

## Rehearsal Schedule

Mondays at 7:00 PM  
Sunday Warmup at 8:15 AM

## Holiday Gift Giving

Throughout Advent and the Christmas season, we find ourselves more focused on gift giving. On one hand, we might find fault with the “commercialization” of Christmas. On the other hand, I’ve always taken heart that, for a few weeks, our society seems to be less selfish and more focused on giving to others.

In this Christmas issue of our newsletter, I’m pleased to present the talk that Chris Farha gave at the East Coast Sacred Music Institute back in September, entitled “Our Perfect Offering”.

Chris has been the choir director at St. George Cathedral in Wichita for the past twenty-five years, is a member of the Archdiocesan Department of Sacred Music and is the coordinator of the DOWAMA Sacred Music Committee.

Chris was recently presented with the Antonian Silver Medal of Merit for her service and dedication to the musical tradition of our Archdiocese.

You, the St. Luke Liturgical Choir are a good example of selfless giving throughout the year. I thank God for your dedication and hard

work. You are a gift from God to me and to all of the St. Luke Community.

May God continue to bless you and your families during the Christmas season and in the coming New Year.

Merry Christmas!  
Christ is Born!  
Glorify Him!

–Andy



Frankincense has been traded on the Arabian Peninsula and in North Africa for more than 5000 years. Frankincense was introduced to Europe by Frankish Crusaders. Although it is better known as “frankincense” to westerners, the resin is also known as olibanum, which is derived from the Arabic “al-luban” (trans. “that which results from milking”), a reference to the milky sap tapped from the Boswellia tree. Some have also postulated that the name comes from the Arabic term for “Oil of Lebanon”, since Lebanon was the place where the resin was sold and traded with Europeans.



(Bp. BASIL with Chris Farha and her husband Warren)

## Our Perfect Offering

(Presented at the 2009 East Coast Sacred Music Institute)

I'd like to get personal with you. Now, don't get nervous. You don't have to say a thing. I'm going to do the talking. It's my confession. You might call this talk "Confessions of a Singer" or "Confessions of a Sinner". You see, there is only one letter that differentiates these two titles. Whatever you call it, I want you to know that I am standing here talking about "Our Perfect Offering" because God divinely inspired someone to ask me to prepare some thoughts on this subject. Why? Perhaps, because I need to hear the words and go through the process as much as or more than you do. I know that we have all had that moment in church where we felt closer to God than ever before. That moment - when the music brought us to tears, maybe tears of joy, maybe tears of repentance. We've had that moment when people expressed extreme gratitude for our ministry, our gift from God, our musical offering. That's what we want to explore. How do we achieve it? What is **IT**?

How do we go about making our perfect offering to God through our music in the church? I'd

like to propose a combination of things, all of which combine as ingredients, if you will, to achieve our offering, only made perfect in Christ.

What are those things, those ingredients? Education and knowledge are certainly key ingredients, but let's consider them to be the spice, key to the overall outcome, but secondary to the main ingredients. The main ingredients in our mix for the perfect offering are Prayer, Love, Liturgy, Scriptures and the Saints.

Obviously, you understand that music education is necessary or you would not be here. Every time we come together to study and grow, we are sharpening our skills. Without the technical ability, understanding why we do what we do, we will have difficulty singing as one voice in a way that will draw people into the prayer that we are leading. I will leave the music education to those on the schedule, the experts. My aim today is to give some examples that might fan the flame that you already possess.

I'm sure that many of you are familiar with the life of St. Romanos the Melodist. Let's look at his devotion to the Mother of God and see how that intimate relationship might draw each of us closer to a perfect offering. St. Romanos was a humble deacon who had a rather mediocre voice. His pure and simple heart was filled with love for God and to assist in the services of the church gave him great joy. He had a special love for the Mother of God and would pray to Her each night. He was paid the same wage as the more talented and educated singers, which angered those singers. One night, Romanos prayed to the Mother of God to help him, as he was to lead the singing and also write texts for the All Night Vigil before the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord. The Virgin appeared to Romanos in the

middle of the night and told him to eat the scroll that she handed him. When he awoke, he was filled with joy at the lingering presence of his night visitor. When it came time to sing, everyone listened in wonder at the profound theology and the beauty of his voice - a gift from God. It was prayer, faith and love that revealed the perfect offering to and through Romanos. Let's review the simple but poignant words of the Troparion and Kontakion of St. Romanos:

### Troparion

You gladdened Christ's Church by your melodies like an inspired heavenly trumpet.  
You were enlightened by the Mother of God and shone on the world as God's poet.  
We lovingly honor you, righteous Romanos.

### Kontakion

You were adorned from childhood with the godly virtues of the Spirit;  
you were a precious adornment of the Church of Christ, all-wise Romanos,  
for you made it lovely with beautiful hymnody.  
Therefore, we entreat you, grant your divine gift to those who desire it,  
that we may cry out to you:  
"Rejoice, all-blessed Father, beauty of the Church."

We, too, have been gladdened, enlightened, adorned:

- \*Gladdened - made joyful, exhilarated
- \*Enlightened - given spiritual or intellectual insight
- \*Adorned - increased in beauty

Vocally, on its own, the voice of St. Romanos was nothing

special. But he invested time, thought and diligence. For that he was given something so beautiful that it was dazzling, even to the experts. His pure heart, his desire to offer the absolute best, his entreaty to the Theotokos yielded him joy, spiritual insight and increased beauty! These are gifts from God. They are gifts that take seed in our hearts, but just as the seeds planted in a garden, they need care, nurture and attention.

We must continually nurture the gift of music that God planted in our heart. Just as any craft or vocation, we are called to devote much preparation to our music; like a teacher prepares to teach students, like an attorney prepares to defend clients, like a chef prepares for a banquet. Each of these examples involves preparation for a task. Each time the task is completed, preparation begins for the next task. So often, we view our role as church musicians as one-time preparation that carries us through for weeks, months, maybe years. What we need realize is that our process is ongoing. It is a major part of our journey.

Each of us can put ourselves in the shoes, or sandals, of St. Romanos. You who are new in your leadership role can relate to how he felt, having to lead people in singing that first time, to offer one voice to the Lord. If you are anything like me, you were trembling, perspiring, making the sign of the cross repeatedly, doing relaxation breathing. Those of us who have been in our positions for many years, who might be offering something rather mediocre - be it our own voice, our choir sound, our organization or lack thereof, or our personal preparation to teach more than black and white notes on a page to our choir, can be inspired by the power of prayer and see the importance of that ingredient in the

mix to attain a higher level of offering.

This SMI is centered around the Cherubic Hymn and the Anaphora. These two hymns are a huge part of the Divine Liturgy. The Cherubic Hymn is the sacrificial offering to God, the offering of Jesus Christ who offers himself to God for the sins of the world. Let's look at some phrases in those prayers. In the Cherubic Hymn we sing to the Life-giving Trinity the Thrice Holy Hymn. In the Anaphora, our offering, we lift up our hearts and give thanks unto the Lord. Our expression of Thanksgiving is the thrice Holy Hymn, "Holy, holy, holy, Lord of Sabbaoth, heaven and earth are full of Thy Glory..." If we execute perfect notes but don't let the text lead us to sincere thanksgiving, our offering is less perfect to our perfect God.

The Cherubic Hymn is the only hymn of the liturgy that is not addressed to God, but it is addressed to one another. "We who mystically represent the Cherubim, and sing to the Life-giving Trinity, the thrice Holy Hymn, let us now lay aside all earthly care: that we may receive the King of all, who comes invisibly upborne by the Angelic Host. Alleluia! We recall that the Angels of God are present in countless numbers before His throne in heaven - and on earth. The Cherubic hymn reminds us of the awesome presence of God, the accompanying armies of angels who are worshipping here and now with us, and the tremendous Mystery that is unfolding in our midst - the sacrifice of bread and wine changed into the very Body and Blood of Christ. "Let us lay aside all earthly cares." In other words, we are called now to our utmost concentration and respect, ignoring all of our other concerns, thinking only of our dear Lord who is coming into our midst, and soon to enter into our body and soul, in the Sacrament of the

Eucharist. If we are listening, how can we possibly be anything but humbled, awestruck and exhilarated???

In the Anaphora, we hear "A Mercy of Peace! A Sacrifice of Praise!" Understand that Christ is the "sacrifice of praise", the perfect offering sent to us for reconciliation and forgiveness; for supplication, thanksgiving and praise. He gives us grace contained in the fullness of the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit. Our thanksgiving lifts us up to God, in the very presence of the Kingdom to the Throne of the Father, singing with the angelic choir: "Holy! Holy! Holy! Lord of Sabbaoth! Heaven and Earth are full of Thy Glory! Hosanna in the Highest!" We desire nothing more than to join our singing with the angelic choir, to enter into the perpetual song of the Kingdom, if only for a brief snippet of time.

Certainly, our technical execution is important and an essential ingredient. I certainly focus on the technical aspect of my music ministry at every rehearsal and during every service. I just know that if I let it be the end in itself, I feel the less-than-perfect result. If all the chords match up, the tempo is as it should be, the dynamics are brought out to portray the text, it might still lack. But our music, coupled with love, prayer, thanksgiving, open eyes, a soft heart, a relationship with our Lord, the Theotokos and all the Saints, allows our ability to draw others into the prayer of the Church to become more attainable, leading us to a more perfect offering. Not one of those elements or ingredients comes to us without effort on our part. And none can go un-nurtured. In Ephesians 4:1-2, we read, "I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing one

another in love." Realize what has been given to you and practice what you are in Christ.

And then Chapter 5:1-2 "Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma." Walk worthy of the calling, walk in love, in light, in wisdom. This implies a slow walk, a steady pace, a daily effort, a marathon, not a sprint.

Of course, we know that music is the natural accompaniment of our lives. We have known music from before our own birth, breathing in rhythm with our mother's heartbeat. How much more in tune with our heartbeat, our internal rhythm, is our Heavenly Father to us? Our joy, as Christians, is found in communion with the Holy Trinity, the Eucharist, giving thanks for everything. Reading from Ephesians 5:18-21, we hear "...be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another in the fear of God."

It is such a gift to leave church on Sunday and allow beautiful hymns to ring in our mind and heart all day long, to wake up in the morning with a hymn playing in our mind, to hear our child singing a Psalm while playing with their toys, to flee to hymns from the Psalter to draw our life back to the center when life's problems or challenges lead us to darkness.

Sacred music, as it rings in our mind and heart, is a gift. Right now, if you sit very still, close your eyes, breath slowly giving the same number of beats to your inhale as you do to your exhale, you can eventually turn off everything around you. You have been here

long enough not to have an annoying song still looping in your mind from the radio. You might have tuned out the song you last heard on your i-pod. (Ooops, you just slipped into another song, didn't you?) It's hard to set aside time for meditation and prayer. Some of us avoid the silence, let's be honest.

Our lives are full and busy, very busy. When we sit down to read, we fall dead asleep after the third paragraph. The good news is that even as we go through our crazy busy lives, we have such a gift in sacred music.

The earliest Christians, who we view as the greatest thinkers, heard music as they traveled, not from an i-pod, not while driving in a luxury vehicle, but they sang Psalms as they journeyed and allowed them to invade their thoughts. Psalms were their soundtrack. The saints of the early church came to see Christ at the center of the Psalms. The psalms were the prayers of Christ. They were prayers to Christ. And they were prayers about Christ.

St. Athanasius sees in the Psalms a little bit of everything that is in all the other books of Scripture: history, law, prophecy and even the gospel. He says that to those who really study it, the Psalter yields a special treasure. No matter what you seek, whether it be repentance or confession, help in trouble and temptation or under persecution, if you want to praise, thank and bless the Lord, you can find each of these situations in the Psalms. They are made to be sung and they are there to shape our life.

So you see, total immersion in the Divine Services of the Church is a key ingredient in your perfect offering. You can practice and practice a song, but without prayer and the peace that comes from prayer, you might not be enlightened.

As a continuation of my confession, I can tell you that just

when I think that a service is flawless, when the thought infiltrates my mind and I get a little cocky, that's when the bottom falls out. Why? I let the music become an end in itself or I lost all humility and started to think that I was pretty awesome! Have you been there? Many of you have been there with me, as witnesses to my demise. We are called to much more than to sing beautifully for the praise and glory. We are called to a higher level - much higher - we are called to enter in to the heavenly realm with the Angelic Hosts, singing the Triumphal Hymn!

God's works are wonderful. He has inspired you, a creative artist, a musician, to use that gift of music to reveal beauty to the world. You were created to praise God. Be the change necessary to enliven the hearts and minds of everyone who hears the hymns of the church, the hymns that you lead. Whether someone hears for the first time or they are the faithful whom you have know all your life, at every encounter you have a responsibility to offer your absolute best, with your whole being, to offer perfect praise to your perfect God. The bottom line is that your goal is to inspire, exhilarate and uplift the prayers of the people to the heavenly realms, with love, just as St. Romanos did. And remember, he didn't do it alone.

What is the perfect offering? When the envoys of Prince Vladimir of Kiev had attended their first Divine Liturgy in Hagia Sophia Cathedral in Constantinople, late in the tenth century, they reported:

**"We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth, for surely there is no such splendor or beauty anywhere on earth. We cannot describe it to you; only this we know, that God dwells there among humans, and that their service surpasses the worship of all other places. For we cannot forget that beauty"**