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CHURCH CHOIR AS A SOCIO-CULTURAL SYSTEM

Summary

The article substantiates the possibility of studying the modern Orthodox Church choir as a socio-cultural system, which is due to two projections of its being – social and culture-creating. The main determinants and factors of formation of the church choir as a socio-cultural system are revealed, the functional roles of singers in the team are typologised. The principles of interaction of the individual and collective consciousness within the church choir are considered, the role of unity (conciliarity) in its liturgical activity is defined. The main characteristics of the life cycle of the church choir as a socio-cultural system are given, its typical stages and potential crises are characterized. The fundamentals of team management, including the method of controlled crisis, are formulated.

Key words: Orthodox Church choir, socio-cultural system, the life cycle of the church choir, the method of controlled crisis.

The definition of the church choir as a socio-cultural system is not traditional for modern art criticism. The concept of „socio-cultural environment“ is more usual for the definition of teams. In some cases, this definition is correct, if we are talking about a rather amorphous union of people. However, if we are talking about a structured team with a certain hierarchical structure, well-thought-out relationships and functions of people whose activities have a purpose, then clearly such a team cannot be called an environment. The environment has certain characteristics and can „share“ its characteristics with the person who gets into this environment. In this case the relationship of man and the social environment can be built quite differently. A person can „dissolve“ in the team, to a certain extent losing his or her individuality and taking the quality of the social environment. He or she can resist the environment or distance themselves from it. But in some cases, to use a Gospel image, a man can act as „leaven“, which, on the contrary, impose upon the environment the qualities, rules, values, etc. Under the influence of human the environment can be transformed into a system, it highlights the hierarchical elements, build relationships aimed at achieving a specific result.

Practice shows that those teams work effectively, which formed the properties of the system. Moreover, in the case of creative teams, such a system is not purely social, since it is not aimed at solving social problems (ensuring survival, for example), but at achieving an artistically and spiritually valuable result, which lies in the field of culture creation. Thus, we are talking about a socio-cultural system.

Why is the efficiency that the team acquires when it becomes a system important for the church choir? Here it is necessary to dive a little into the specificity of the work of the church choir.

First of all, the peculiarities of the organisation of work in the church choir are connected with the specificity of the schedule, according to which both services and rehearsals take place. They depend on the schedule of services in the church.

There are two main variants of the liturgical schedule: monastic and parish. Monastic, as a rule, provides daily services. The participation of the choir in such a

schedule can be organised according to various schemes. The first scheme consists of a brotherly or sisterly chorus that serves constantly. In this case, the singers in the choir may permanently vary, because the monks (singers) have other obediences and from time to time miss services and / or rehearsals. The second scheme is alternate, when two (or more) choirs are formed in the monastery, they serve in turn, most often replacing each other in a week, and are simultaneously involved on major holidays. If we are talking about large monasteries in which more than one liturgy is celebrated per day, there may be other schemes of alternation, which depend on the schedule of services in all churches. If we have a seminary, an academy, precentor courses and other singing structures nearby, specific schemes are also possible. The third scheme provides for a festive choir of a large number of professional singers, which does not participate in weekday services and is invited only to Sunday services and major holidays.

At parishes, as a rule, divine services are performed on Saturdays and Sundays and on significant holidays by the decision of the prior. Large parishes mainly add Saturday workshops to this scheme. One or two choirs (small and large) can sing at the parish, in large cathedrals their number sometimes reaches three (the third can be another small, as well as a youth choir, a Sunday school choir, etc.). Thus, there are two most common schemes of team work. The first one provides for the participation of a professional choir on weekends and holidays, the second one requires a large workload of the small choir with services on Fridays and Saturdays and during the week for both small and large holidays.

Thus, most often the precentor of a professional choir finds himself in a situation where the choir meets only twice a week (on Saturday evenings and Sunday mornings) with one small and one long break: from Sunday to Saturday too much time passes, during which such skills as, for example, the sense of timbre ensemble, blunts. Rehearsals also usually take place on one of these working days for the choir. Thus, both the choir and the precentor find themselves in not the best conditions from a methodological point of view, because the sparse schedule does not contribute to the improvement of skills and significantly complicates the work of the team.

An important aspect of the organisation of the work of the church choir is that in a professional team almost all participants have another main work. According to the survey, more than 16% of choristers are teachers of musical institutions, 11% are employees of theatrical and philharmonic professional choirs, 5% lead professional and amateur choirs, 3% are singers of amateur choirs and soloists of musical institutions, about 60% are students of musical specialties and only 1-2% of singers of church choirs are not engaged in secular musical activity. The main employment of singers is also bad for attendance of services and rehearsals. Skipping one weekend immediately forms a two-week break in the activities of a particular person in the choir, which, of course, violates the principle of consistency of both his personal work and the work of the team. However, these circumstances are insurmountable.

The work of the church choir also has a specificity associated with the continuity of the liturgical process. It deals with methods of organising music material to provide quick and accurate access to it. Requirements for these methods are higher in groups that serve without a second choir, because they actually do not have pauses to settle repertory and organisational issues.

The rehearsal work of the church choir is also very specific. First, the number of services in which the choir participates usually is twice the rehearsal time, which is typical only for church choirs. Rehearsals usually take place once a week

and are dedicated to preparing the repertoire for the next service. The young teams barely have time for the usual Sunday repertoire. The precentors often appoint additional rehearsals before the holidays. As time passes a certain repertory framework of the service is „worked out“, and only then the precentor gets a certain freedom to study works that are not included in the „mandatory programme“ of the church choir. Usually the choir spends from 1 to 3 years to form a stable liturgical repertoire. At the same time, the Sunday repertoire is studied faster, the festive one – much slower, because a number of hymns are performed in the church only once a year.

Such field of the church choir activity as a system of punishments and rewards also has some specific features. In monasteries the usual measures for such structures can be applied, particularly the appointment of bows as punishment. However, such measures cannot be applied to professional singers, who, mostly, are not very deeply church people, and are unlikely to perceive such punishments adequately. Some choirs practice financial penalties for being late for services, but these measures are used in a limited way. In fact, the severity of punishment depends only on one factor: the value of a particular singer for a particular team. Rewards in the church choir also do not have much variety. All these „levers of influence“ are entirely in the hands of the prior, the precentor can only recommend certain fines and bonuses, but the last word is not for him. Thus, in fact, the precentor has no means of influencing the choristers, except his own authority, the authority of the Church and – more – Christ himself.

Such complex conditions of existence of the church choir demand subtle and complex work from the precentor, for which he is usually not ready. To sum up: with high requirements to the church choir, it has a complex schedule, low financial interest and unfavourable organisational specifics. In such circumstances, the question of a conscious development of the church choir as a system is particularly acute.

We should also mention the use of digital technologies in the work of church choirs. The surveys of 182 precentors-respondents have showed that 85 of them constantly use digital technologies in the precentor's activity, 48 – do it infrequently, 14 – do not use them yet, but they are going to master them, 35 – do not use them and they are not going to master them. So, according to the results of the observations and surveys, more than 73% of precentors somehow use them in various activities.

The most popular among precentors are:

- 1) Internet portals for searching musical material, sequence of services, liturgical instructions, texts, audio recordings, etc.;
- 2) mobile applications such as liturgical instructions, troparion, Orthodox calendar, prayer book;
- 3) score-editing applications for typing and editing scores, creating their own adaptations, arrangements, author's compositions;
- 4) social networks for communication of choir members, promotion of their creativity, preservation of audio and video materials, as well as the exchange of scores, information, communication;
- 5) specialized resources adapted for the organisation of Internet broadcasts;
- 6) mobile phones and tablet computers for urgent access to scores or texts during service;
- 7) portable digital equipment for audio and video recording.

This prevalence of digital technology in the church environment is somewhat unexpected. However, it would be interesting to compare the level of „informatisation“ of precentors and conductors of secular choirs. The observations show that

the first ones if not outperform their secular colleagues, then accurately do not lag behind. A certain explanation of this fact is, firstly, the average age of modern precentors who are younger than leaders of secular choirs, secondly, the lack of published music and spiritual repertoire libraries makes precentors surfing on the Internet from the very beginning of their work. So, in this sense, choir leaders are stimulated by several factors and simply have no other options than to quickly assimilate all possible resources.

An important feature of an effective system is its *synergy*. Synergy in religious activity is directly related to the personal prayerful mood of the singers, their desire to be united in Christ and the core of church life which is conciliarity.

Conciliarity is one of the four main properties of the Church defined in the Orthodox „Creed“. It is a concept that goes back to the dogma of the Holy Trinity and is related to the understanding of the Church as the Body of Christ. „In the light of the Trinity dogma, conciliarity appears to us as the mysterious identity of unity and multiplicity – unity, which is expressed in diversity, and diversity, which continues to be unity“ (Losky, 2019). It is the conciliarity of the prayerful feeling that is the condition for the synergistic effect of the socio-cultural system, which is the church choir (Voskoboynikova, 2016).

The church choir as a socio-cultural system has its own life cycle of spiral (preferably) or linear type and can be considered in the categories of socio-cultural dynamics.

If we are talking about a professional team, then, as a rule, its creation and the process of work correspond to the following 6 stages:

- 1) planning (formulation of tasks and starting parameters of the team: quantity, quality, gender ratio, level of education);
- 2) formation (search and acquisition of the singing staff);
- 3) training (mastering the repertoire, bringing the sound of the choir to a certain level of compliance with the precentor's requirements);
- 4) stabilization (the stage of complete learning and free use of all the necessary repertoire, the release of rehearsal time for additional tasks);
- 5) crisis (imbalance of the system for different – often personnel – reasons);
- 6) destruction or restructuring (partial change in the structure of the team).

Let us dwell upon the important stages in more detail.

Having become the head of the team, the precentor is not always able to quickly determine the creative capabilities of a person, its value for choral sonority, predict the regularity of participation and other details of the working process. The precentor is often a graduate of a higher musical institution, whose motivation is not so much participation in the service, but the opportunity to create his own choir. The Church provides sufficient conditions for this, but often the ambitions of a young leader prevent him from seeing the true meaning of church service.

The stage of training in the church choir according to the observations of the precentors and the singers themselves, for each member of the team lasts at least a year. Besides, festive chants are the most difficult for singers. They mostly have a higher complexity than the usual Sunday repertoire, but they are used only once a year, so a confident knowledge that does not require additional rehearsal effort comes in at least 2 or 3 years. Consequently, it takes at least two years to master the repertoire, and more than three years to master it confidently. It should be noted that the training stage keeps both the precentor and the singers in maximum tone.

At the stage of stabilization of the team the turnover of the staff is significantly reduced, the choir sings the invariable liturgical hymns almost by heart. This, on the one hand, provides opportunities to devote the free rehearsal time to expan-

ding the repertoire and preparing concert programmes. On the other hand, the psychological comfort of being sure of their own awareness, as a rule, is reflected badly on the activities of singers, who cease to be in strained attention and begin to be distracted during the service, switching to a „semi-automatic“ mode of operation. At this stage, there comes a dilemma that can be conditionally expressed through the concept of „comfortable boredom“, because the choir is in a comfortable, relaxed state, and at the same time begins to get bored from its own awareness in the repertoire.

The stabilization stage is also potentially pre-crisis because the psychological well-being of the singers in the team is changing. If in the first years of service in the choir, each new member of the team tries to strengthen their professional positions, to establish relations with the precentor and colleagues, experienced singers already understand that their skills and knowledge of the repertoire have a significant value, this can lead to a certain imbalance of the precentor's power in the team. Thus, the precentor during this period should find other creative forms of work corresponding to the new level of the choir, raise the bar of professional requirements for the team or look for additional motivation for the singers.

It is known (also from my own 16-year experience of working as a precentor [2]) that precentors and singers of church choirs have several motives for staying in the team: religious, epistemological, aesthetic, social and financial. Religious motives come from personal faith, a desire to serve God with one's talent, need to be at the service etc. Epistemological motives are determined by the need for knowledge of Church life, professional musicians' need for getting acquainted with a new repertoire, mastering the liturgical service, and sometimes with a desire to work with a particular precentor or a precentor's intention to create his own choir. Aesthetic motives are usually associated with repertory policy or the singers of the choir, which one wants to join for aesthetic reasons. Social motivation can be determined by finding like-minded people, interesting things, a platform for communication, etc. Financial motives derive from the possibility of additional earnings.

Obviously, the motives of being in the team can not be the same for everyone. However, in each team it is possible to determine the leading motivation. The most truthful information is acquired not so much by questioning as by observation. Each leading motivation in the team has its own „markers“ through which it manifests itself.

Financially motivated teams are characterized by instability of the singers under the conditions of the economic crisis, their attention to payments is increased. Indirectly this motivation is manifested in the low attendance of services that require additional time or transport costs (for example, a festive service on Sunday evening, when after the morning liturgy you need to spend an extra few hours waiting or extra money for the way home and back).

Socially motivated groups must have joint leisure time, make trips and pilgrimages, visit each other, etc.

Aesthetic motivation of the group begins from the precentor and is expressed through the search for extraordinary musical material, the introduction of the latest choral works into the service (usually works written by the precentor himself, someone from the choristers or a familiar composer). The dominance of aesthetic motivation is quite steadily associated with the performance of non-canonical works at the service.

Epistemological motivation in church and choral work, as a rule, is manifested through the restoration of ancient chants. The study of canonical singing by the

choir is necessarily associated with an active process of cognition in the field of the history of choral singing, the study of certain forms of notation, the implementation of transcripts, the learning of vocal specificity.

Religious motivation is externally manifested, first of all, in the behaviour of the choir in church. Singers in such groups always have the befitting worship appearance, know how to react to certain phrases of a priest, participate in the rites and sacraments of the Church. Attendance in such choirs can grow at festive services, as important not only for the Church, but also for each member of the choir personally. In such teams, as a rule, singing in the choir is perceived as obedience, payments are not a leading value, there are almost no conflicts for this reason, economic crises affect the singers of the choir insignificantly.

The choir as an effective system is characterized by the presence of common values and a common leading motivation for all its participants. Thus, working on the formation of the choir, it is necessary to give paramount importance to these items, since it is the commonality of goals and their high moral level that is the key to the synergistic effect of joint activities.

An important component of the church choir as a system is its internal hierarchy and the functions of each member of the team. The roles of team members in the overall process can be assessed from different perspectives. There is a traditional classification according to the socio-psychological properties of the individual that secures the presence in the team of the following types: collectivists, individualists, precisionist, conformists, etc. Classification by function in the creative process reveals the following functional roles: „generators of ideas“ (creative specialists, ideologists), performers, experts, critics, „favourites“. Such classifications to a certain extent relate to church choirs, but their small size and the specificity of the activities make us use other classification features. It is important that the functional roles defined by us not only relate to the socio-psychological sphere, but also reflect the creative priorities and strengths of certain performers.

„Leader“. Usually it is the leader of the group, determining its repertoire and rehearsal policy, he is also a full-fledged singer, and sometimes the author or arranger of songs. Ideally, the leader should be the most experienced of all team members, have certain professional preferences, be a respected person. This allows maintaining the hierarchy of governance inherent in Church structures based on the authority of the leader.

„Counter-leader“. He or she tries to compete with the head at the level of professional skills and creative charisma. In the context of the general motivation of singers, the presence of a counter-leader is not destructive. From the position of synergy, the counter-leader brings the team as a system out of equilibrium, which is though comfortable, but has no potential for development.

„Dispatcher“. It is a singer with not very flamboyant, but multifunctional abilities. His or her role is to control the creative process from within the team and „patching“ various „holes“. The dispatcher „hedges“ the precentor and singers, picking up the „failure“ places, prompting a note in case of error. During the service these people are also indispensable in the matters related to the knowledge of the Church Statutes, specificity, etc. In small groups the function of dispatcher is often performed by the precentor.

„Generalist“. It is a diligent performer with a fairly large voice capabilities and small ambitions. Such people are completely necessary in small teams, because

thanks to them the problems arising with the availability of the singers „here and now“ are always solved. This role is mostly performed by women who are fluent in two or three choral parts (including tenor) and qualitatively read music at sight.

„Basic chorister“. This can be considered any singer who confidently knows his part. Typically, they have a choral voice, a certain mobility, but require governance.

„Timbre chorister“. This is a singer whose voice determines the timbre of the part. The theoretical idea that voices should „merge“ into one timbre works better in large groups. In small groups, which are often church choirs, among the 3-4 singers of the part one is sure to dominate. The selection and training of the timbre choristers in the part should be treated very carefully.

„Soloist“. His or her vocal talent and functions give rise to overestimation of self-esteem, which leads to a reluctance to adapt to the singing of other singers, meet the precentor's requirements, etc. Therefore, in church choirs that do not have, as mentioned above, free time for the re-education of such a person, there is a trend to „grow“ soloists from the ordinary choristers, and not to seek for the choir those who have already mastered this role.

„Improviser“. Such people are rare. As a rule, they are talented, interesting and creative. It is from them that the choir can get good arrangements and fresh ideas. One significant drawback of the improviser is that he or she is almost completely uncontrollable. It is almost impossible to impose on them a certain course of action, or to foresee what can be expected of them. In addition, disciplinary measures do not have much influence on them, because the degree of their talents gives them reason to hope for a lenient attitude.

Now when the functional roles of the singers are defined, it is important to identify how they interact in the structure of the team, and what the balance of creative forces should be. From the timbre positions, the formation of the singing group resembles the setting of light for artistic photography. There are three main groups of light: drawing, filling and contouring. This is how the sound of the choir is formed. There are three functional groups of voices: voices that „draw“, that is, give the sound a specific bright timbre colour, voices that „fill“ this sound, adding volume and saturation, increasing the amplitude of its dynamic capabilities. There are voices that, if necessary, set off the main timbres of the choir. The last group is formed at the request of the precentor and may be absent. The second group of voices is the most important, let's call them the main ones. They provide the basic functionality of the choir, even if they do not give it a bright timbre, which in the liturgical sense is secondary. The voices that define the main timbre of the choir contribute to its recognition by ear, give specific features to its timbre „face“, so let's call them identifying. Among the main voices, in small teams the greatest demand is for dispatchers and generalists – mainly because of their multifunctionality. Of course, it is better to accept into the choir a person who may not have a big voice, but can, if necessary, „wander“ from part to part without harming his voice and the quality of the sound of the choir. Among the identifying voices, the presence of timbre singers must be ensured first of all. The presence of soloists is not obligatory. And broadly, since the whole identifying functional group is less important than the main one, it is possible not to complete it when recruiting a small choir.

There are singers who, by their professional qualities, can meet the requirements of several functions. For example, a soloist with a certain talent and experience can perform both the functions of a dispatcher and a generalist, can almost always

perform the functions of a timbre singer, but on the contrary it is not always the case. Therefore, even the proposed method of definition and modelling the functional structure of the choir leaves a lot of space for the precentor's guiding creativity.

The aforementioned functional structure of the choir significantly complicates the process of its staffing and directly vocal and choral work. However, the effectiveness of the correct modelling proves its worth in practice. A clear understanding of the tasks of each singer in a small choir, which is the church choir, significantly increases not only the quality of the choir, but also its „working reliability“ in the face of such factors of instability of the choir as attendance, experience, as well as the complexities of church service conditions.

Speaking about the construction and functioning of the church choir as a socio-cultural system, we have already mentioned that the precentor actually has no leverage over the singers, except his own authority and their internal motivation.

The idea that the creation of financial and other conditions can fundamentally solve this problem is illusive. Relatively speaking, the „product of the activity“ of the church singer lies in the field of spiritual categories, so the incentives are there as well. People who pray sincerely will not be able to sing worse than they can, regardless of the payment. Yes, they may not have the best organisational conditions, because they will be forced to earn their living by something else. The experience of European countries, where it is not common to financially reward for church singing, shows that religiously motivated singers form the basis of choirs, finding opportunities both for their own participation in the service and for attracting (and sometimes training) new singers.

Discussions around the financial issue have recently escalated among the precentors in Ukraine, reaching offers to sabotage the service until the payment of singing is not set at the desired level. At the same time, the precentors in temples with high pay for singing face the same problems – they are familiar with low attendance, dissatisfaction among singers, and the possibility of losing them because they can look for higher-paying places. This expansion of the methods of inter-class struggle into the „territory“ of the Church is a signal that singing in the church has become a work, and it is high time the precentors (and the priesthood, too) proceeded to solving other problems. Can we offer the singers anything besides money? Do we have a truly Christian spirit in us? Do we help our singers to develop and improve spiritually? Can we create an atmosphere in the choir in which you want to stay NOT for money? Unfortunately, few of the precentors regard this as their task. So, until the situation changes, church singers will remain mercenaries, and church singing will depend on the prior's ability to pay.

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