Brothers and sisters, I would like to thank Fr. Anthony for inviting me to speak today on a topic that is dear to my heart -- the musical ministry of the Greek Orthodox Church, and why singing is so central to our worship. I open my mouth, and pray the Spirit fill it / Ἀνοίξω τὸ στόμα μου καὶ πληρωθῆσεται πνεύματος.

St. Paul exhorts us “to address one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all [our] heart” (Eph 5:19), but he doesn’t spend much time answering why we should do that. To that end, some years ago, I asked a well-regarded psaltis who is one of my dearest friends and mentors -- “How do you answer the question, ‘Why do we need beautiful music in church?’” And he answered immediately, “Because it isn’t boring that way.” This was a reply I was not expecting to say the least, but he backed it up with a passage from St. John Chrysostom talking about the Psalms:

When God saw that many people were being lazy, and were coming to the reading of spiritual things with ill-temper and not joyfully putting up with the effort of it, He wanted to make the work more desirable and to guard against the perception of it as work, so God mingled prophecy with melody, in order that everybody, being deceived by the form of the melody, might send up the sacred hymns to God with great zeal.

We didn’t like to worship, in other words, because it was too much work, so God tricked us into enjoying it by adding music. St. Basil the Great had said something similar some decades before Chrysostom, writing that God blended the delight of melody with doctrine in order that through the pleasantness and softness of the sound we might unawares receive what was useful in the words, according to the practice of wise physicians, who, when they give the more bitter draughts to the sick, often smear the rim of the cup with honey. For this purpose these harmonious melodies of the Psalms have been designed for us, that those who are of boyish age or wholly youthful in their character, while in appearance they sing, may in reality be educating their souls.

Also, there’s a pun there in Greek -- the melody, µέλος, is the honey, µέλι. So, “It isn’t boring that way” -- God makes worshippers fun and engaging by mixing in music. We sing at sports events, parades, concerts, parties, family gatherings, and so on as part of what makes them; our public worship has involved the same instinct since the earliest days. All right, that’s one reason. What else can we say about why singing is central to our worship?

Another basic reason singing is so central in our worship is that it teaches us our Christian faith, working in coordination with Scripture and icons. When we learn to sing hymns, psalms, and responses, we’re remembering and internalizing our beliefs, practices, and traditions -- what we learn to sing is what we take home and what our children take home. Is there any Orthodox Christian alive who
does NOT know that Christ has risen from the dead, trampling down death upon death? Is there any member of the Dormition family, or at any Dormition church anywhere, who does NOT know that the Panagia did not abandon the world in falling asleep and delivers our souls from death by her prayers?

Singing in our worship, working together with the other senses in our worship -- smell, sight, touch, taste -- also has the power to change the course of human history, too. In the tenth century, when Russian Prince Vladimir wanted to bring his people out of paganism, he sent emissaries to Constantinople to experience the majestic worship of the historic Sung Office of the Cathedral Rite of Hagia Sophia. They reported to Prince Vladimir,

the Greeks led us to the edifices where they worship their God, and we knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth. For on earth there is no such splendor or such beauty, and we are at a loss how to describe it. We know only that God dwells there among men, and their service is fairer than the ceremonies of other nations. For we cannot forget that beauty.

The beauty of the Cathedral Rite Sung Office ultimately had a missionary, that is to say apostolic, impact - it helped make disciples of the Russians.

However, there’s an even more important reason why singing is at the core of our worship: it is one of the ways we participate with the angels in the heavenly Liturgy -- in fact, it is a way that our worship becomes the angelic Liturgy.

Think of the Cherubic Hymn we sing almost every Divine Liturgy, which says that we, the congregation, “mystically represent the Cherubim” — Οἱ τὰ Χερουβιμ μυστικῶς εἰκονίζοντες — and that we “sing the thrice-holy hymn to the life-creating Trinity”. As the service progresses from the proclamation of the Word to the celebration of the Eucharist, the Cherubic Hymn tells us that our role in the service is to be the image, the icon — εἰκονίζοντες — of the angels, and that singing marks how we do that.

Then, when the priest consecrates the bread and wine at the Anaphora, a dialogue between altar and singers brings to life what the Cherubic Hymn describes, and makes the connection explicit. The priest says:

We thank You also for this Liturgy, which You have deigned to receive from our hands, even though thousands of archangels and tens of thousands of angels stand around You, the Cherubim and Seraphim, six-winged, many eyed, soaring aloft upon their wings, singing the triumphal hymn, exclaiming, proclaiming, and saying —

To which the singers respond with the thrice holy hymn as the icon of the angels:

Holy, holy, holy, Lord Sabaoth, heaven and earth are filled with Your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is He Who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.
By singing, we unite ourselves with the heavenly worship of the angels, and in fact assume their image. Heaven and earth are made one in our services.

There is much, much more that I can say about this, but the same friend who told me "It isn’t boring that way" also told me about homilies, "After ten minutes, nobody is saved." So, to sum up the major points today:

We sing in our worship because the melody mingled with prophecy is the honey smeared on the cup of strong medicine; it makes it enjoyable, bearable, and yes, fun.

We sing in our worship because it’s one of the major ways we are taught our Orthodox Christian faith.

And, we sing in our worship because it unites us with the angelic worship in heaven.

In the future, I hope to have a chance to say more about what and how we sing in our worship; until then, I’m always happy to answer questions, and I look forward to the day when I can invite everybody who wants to sing up to the psalterion once again. Thank you.