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KEYNOTE ADDRESS

MUSIC, BEAUTY AND PRAYER

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I should like to open with four points for discussion which have, at first sight, nothing specifically to do with the English language, though they certainly do with prayer.

The first point is the acknowledgement that, while modern languages are here to stay, and being used all the time, in the Orthodox world, the question of what kind of translation to use is omnipresent and, as things stand, unresolvable. This is not news to anyone present in this room, naturally, but I want to make the point because it does not affect liturgical texts in the English language exclusively. Similar arguments are taking place concerning translations into Dutch, Finnish, French, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese and Spanish, to take merely six examples. To this I will add that I have absolutely no intention of discussing translational quality at this Symposium. We simply do not have the requisite forty years.

The second point is that, in spite of my avoidance of the subject of translational quality, not only the quality but the style of the translation employed will have an effect on the music to which it is set.

The third point is that – and I have said this quite forcefully elsewhere because it seems to me absolutely fundamental – we ignore the question of taste at our peril. I mean by this that the way different cultures deal with the musical expression of a given text over the course of human history teaches us that what constitutes music by which to pray has varied hugely over the existence of Christendom. This may seem extraordinarily obvious, but it is remarkable just how little attention is given to this reality in literature both erudite and popular.

Conveniently leaving aside these three inconvenient points for the present, for the fourth I will return to the title of this Symposium, “Orthodox Liturgical Music: Finding Beauty and Prayer in the English-Speaking World”. I return to it because somebody has to point out that it is actually redundant. Before you reach for the nearest water cannon or stash of smouldering incense to throw at me, let me explain what I mean. It is redundant because it is obvious that the English-speaking world is chock full of beauty and prayer. It should suffice to mention, in no particular order, Chaucer, the King James Bible, W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot to make the point – as the late Professor Peter Levi wrote in his introduction to *The Penguin Book of Christian Verse*, “... in fact there are many decent ways of talking about God. (...) The problems of Christian style

are only a part of the problem of all poetry.”¹ And this is not a point I make merely in order to shock, though sometimes a shock is precisely what we could use. It is a point that carries within it a profound truth, and I do not by this mean a truth related to linguistic style: no, I mean that beauty and prayer are as likely to be found in the English-speaking world as they are in the Greek-speaking one, the Serbian-speaking one or the Vietnamese-speaking one. No culture is devoid of either beauty or prayer, and it is to our own loss that so often we – probably largely subconsciously – consider the English language to be fundamentally a language of translation. Except, of course, for the King James Bible, which, as we know from many reliable sources, is written in the language of God...

But the question is, how does our experience of English as a language capable of conveying and expressing beauty and prayer connect with our experience of liturgical music as something initially composed to another language? Where, in other words, is our English-language chant? That question has received a number of answers over the years, as many of you here know, and not only in the Orthodox Church. The Anglican Church had to deal with this problem after the publication of the 1549 Book of Common Prayer; John Merbecke (c. 1510-c. 1585) set the new English liturgical texts to his own, simplified, version of the Roman chant, *The booke of Common praier noted*, in 1550. His work was rendered obsolete, however, by the 1552 revision of the Book of Common Prayer, and chant largely vanished from the English Church until it was revived under the inspiration of the Oxford Movement in the 19th century. The first widely-used Psalter in English-language chant, *The Psalter Noted*, was published by Thomas Helmore in 1849, and gave rise to *A Manual of Plainsong*, originally published after 1850, and again in 1902 in a revised version by H.B. Briggs and W.H. Frere. The work of Frere (1863-1938) is instructive in this regard: he was deeply involved in the adaptation of the chant of the Use of Salisbury, or Sarum. He became Anglican Bishop of Truro, and was involved, incidentally, in ecumenical relations with the Russian Church. He was in the great English tradition of wealthy clergymen who undertook scholarly work in their spare time, and did so supremely well. One of his triumphs was the volume entitled *Hymn Melodies for the Whole Year from the Sarum Antiphonal and other ancient English sources together with sequences for the principal seasons and festivals*, an adaptation of chant melodies from the Salisbury Use first published in 1896, but it was a triumph that was short-lived. Subsequent developments in both the Anglican and the Roman Catholic communions meant that this extremely well-prepared and thoroughly researched work, and other, similar projects, never achieved a lasting place in the celebration of the liturgy.

Much more recently, the Benedictine musician and scholar, Fr Basil Foote, has discussed these problems within the Roman Catholic context. In a provocative article entitled “Chanting in the Vernacular”, he wrote the following:

Among the musical questions raised by the promulgation of the Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium) in 1963 was the possibility of combining the existing Gregorian Chant of the Latin Church with vernacular texts. Three attitudes became apparent:

- 1) It was out of the question – Latin is integral to the chant melodies, which would be inconceivable in a vernacular version;
- 2) The thing could be done, but the incomparable lines of the chants must remain virtually intact;
- 3) The thing could be done, but if it was going to be convincing in English (the vernacular tongue under consideration here), the melodies could not be left intact, but would have to be tampered with.

The first solution is simple enough, and needs no further comment. The second and third do, because both have been tried; and it is the purpose of this article to comment on both, particularly the last.²

It takes little imagination to realize that if we replace “Latin” with “Greek” or “Slavonic”, we have a fair representation of the situation of the Orthodox Church not only in countries that

1 Peter Levi, Introduction to *The Penguin Book of Christian Verse*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1984, 23

2 Fr Basil Foote, OSB, “Chanting in the Vernacular. A Song both Old and New”, available at <http://www.adoremus.org/0403Chant.html>.

have not traditionally had an Orthodox presence, but also precisely in those countries that have. The discussion concerning the liturgical use of the modern languages of Greece and Russia is far from finished, and there are, for example, a number of musicians working on settings of translations in contemporary Greek and Serbian.

Foote's article goes into some detail, discussing various kinds of chant that might or might not work when adapted: again, we can find equivalents in our own tradition, and all of us know of disastrous attempts to fit texts to music because the music must remain untouched. There are arguments for this, as in the case of prosomia that need to match exactly the rhythms of the Greek text or they in fact cease to be prosomia; there are arguments against it, just as abundant, when the syllable count in Slavonic far exceeds that of the Greek original. And what of those cases in which there is no Greek original? Are we left, then, with an insoluble problem, a head-on collision between the beauty of our liturgical texts and the impossibility of setting them to music?

As both composer and priest, I am bound to answer in the negative. Firstly because there is so much excellent material now readily available in terms of the adaptation of traditional chant – and here I would mention the work of John Boyer, Fr Ephrem of St Anthony's Monastery in Arizona, Archimandrite Kyrill Jenner, and Benedict Sheehan – and secondly because we surely now have more composers active within the Orthodox Church than at any other time in history. To quote the composer James Chater, "We must, in our musical settings, unleash the full energy of the words of our liturgical texts, so that worshippers can be better inspired and edified."³ We can say then, once again obligatorily leaving aside the question of translational style, that English-language chant is becoming available, and that composers, whether of monophony or polyphony, are able to make use of this. And thus I have, surreptitiously, dealt with both my first and my second points.

My third point, concerning taste, seems to me at the same time the most interesting and the most difficult problem with which we have to deal. In fact, it may be a problem that is utterly intractable. Our song may be, as Fr Basil Foote would wish, both "old and new", but who decides when the new may be introduced, and what are the acceptable limits of newness? Might our song be simultaneously old and new if we harmonize a recognizable chant using the vocabulary of minimalism or serialism? Or of free jazz or bluegrass? Or might there be aspects that prevent our consideration of these styles? Might they thought not to be conducive to prayer, or to jar with the prevailing musical style of the service, and might these two reservations in themselves be connected?

In a paper I gave some years ago concerning the question of canonicity in church music, I asked, when we read in the 75th Canon of the Council in Trullo (Quinisext) of 692, what we are nowadays to understand by its prescription that "We wish those who attend church for the purpose of chanting neither to employ disorderly cries and to force nature to cry aloud, not to foist in anything that is not becoming and proper to a church."⁴ What did the authors of the canon consider to be disorderly crying in liturgical worship? Did they mean actual shouting? Did they mean poor voice production? Did they mean bad pronunciation? Did they mean

3 James Chater, "Staying Awake at the Wheel", in Ivan Moody and Maria Takala-Roszczenko, eds., *The Traditions of Orthodox Church Music. Proceedings of the First International Conference on Orthodox Church Music*, Joensuu: University of Joensuu/ISOCM 2007, 53 of 51-69.

4 Ivan Moody, "The Idea of Canonicity in Orthodox Liturgical Art", in Ivan Moody and Maria Takala-Roszczenko, eds., *Composing and Chanting in the Orthodox Church: Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Orthodox Liturgical Music*, Joensuu: ISOCM/University of Joensuu, 2009, 337-342. The Greek text of the full Canon reads as follows:

Κανὼν ΟΕ' (75) τῆς ζ' Οἰκουμενικῆς Συνόδου

Τοὺς ἐπὶ τῷ ψάλλειν ἐν ταῖς Ἐκκλησίαις παραγινόμενους, βουλόμεθα, μήτε βοαῖς ἀτάκτοις κεχρηῆσθαι, καὶ τὴν φύσιν πρὸς κραυγὴν ἐκβιάζεσθαι, μήτε τι ἐπιλέγειν τῶν μὴ ἐκκλησιαστικῶν ἀρμοδίων τε καὶ οἰκείων ἀλλὰ μετὰ πολλῆς προσοχῆς, καὶ κατανύξεως τῶς τοιαύτας ψαλμωδίας προσάγειν τῷ τῶν κρυπτῶν ἐφόρῳ Θεῷ. «Εὐλαβεῖς γὰρ ἔσεσθαι τοὺς υἱοὺς Ἰσραὴλ» (Λευϊτ. ιε', 30), τὸ ἱερὸν ἐδίδαξε λόγιον.

the kind of accidental harmony that appears in the singing of primitive societies and is every ethnomusicologist's joy? In 692 they certainly did not mean organum, consistent parallel fifths or thirds or added ninths. Our conceptions of consonance and dissonance have changed over the course of history, as have our notions of what constitutes simplicity and complexity even in monophonic chant. In other words, our own experience, our own set of signifiers, to put it another way, cannot be applied to such a canon as though it had been written in the 21st century.

This has obvious consequences for the way we approach music written in the past; how can we incorporate such music into our services today if the context in which it was written is alien to us? How many of us, for example, would be able to pray at a service sung entirely in mediaeval Russian Demestvenny polyphony? I would venture to suggest that most of us would be so intrigued, distracted or irritated by the music that our attempts at prayer would be largely frustrated. But of course one could simply attribute that to lack of familiarity; I am not sure that thirty years ago anyone would have anticipated the current huge explosion of interest in Georgian chant, but the reality is that the more familiar it has become, through scholarly work, recordings and the appearance of numerous groups both amateur and professional, the more natural it has come to seem. Were the Russian mediaeval repertoire to enjoy the same level of exposure, it too might come to seem part of the landscape. Such a venture could, and probably would, be criticized as "liturgical archaeology", but in response to such a criticism one should ask, in that case, who and what determines the chronological limits of our sung repertoire? The question is not valid only for polyphonic traditions, of course. What happens when we replace Byzantine melodies of the received tradition with long-unused mediaeval versions, or decide to use Serbian chant melodies from Cvejić instead of Mokranjac?

The question may also be posed looking down the other end of the telescope, as it were: what happens when we replace liturgical music with which we are all familiar with something new – not just an alternative setting in a similar style, but something newly composed? How does it fit within the established context? Are we in danger of destroying that context by making such changes? The answers must inevitably depend on our motivation, and that motivation, in the first of these cases, can never be "liturgical archaeology" for its own sake. A desire to improve and deepen the prayer life of a parish is another matter, however, and the undertaking of such a thing may indeed involve "liturgical archaeology". Similarly, the motivation cannot be innovation for its own sake. Tradition must meet innovation and they must be in agreement.

We can find an obvious parallel here in the way liturgical reform has historically been undertaken in the Orthodox Church (much though we like to think that nothing changes in Orthodoxy). On this subject, Professor Fr Thomas Pott says the following:

Newness is one of the essential themes of the Christian message. (...) Nevertheless, rather than speaking of 'newness', it is more appropriate to speak of 'renewal'. For the newness of the Gospel did not fall from heaven like a *Deus ex machina*, but descended to the depths of the earth in order to surge up like a water spring that renews everything and everyone it quenches. (...) It does not abolish the old, but rather transforms it by renewing it from its very depths, not in order to make it last a bit longer, but to make it well up to eternal life.⁵

And there it is. If we accept Christ's assurance that "whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life" (John 4:14), we are responsible for ensuring that we are indeed drinking of that water, and not that of the well of Jacob, whose water will slake our thirst only for a short time.

The way to ensure this is twofold. Firstly, we need to test ourselves, by measuring what we do – whether as composers, chanters or conductors – against this dictum of Christ. This is, of course, a terrifying prospect, but when we also consider that Christ calls us to be perfect,

⁵ Thomas Pott, *Byzantine Liturgical Reform*, Crestwood, New York: SVS 2010, 13.

and when we know that however often we fall we can get up once more and continue trying to be perfect, it becomes perhaps a little less terrifying. Nobody would (or, rather, nobody should) expect an icon painter to measure himself against any lower a standard, and church musicians are not exempt from the obligation to attempt to respond to this call. Secondly, and as a logical continuation of the first point, we need to be tested by the Church. Now the Church is notoriously slow at making decisions, as we all know, and as the length of time it has taken to call and organize the Pan-Orthodox Council meeting this month in Crete well demonstrates, but that does not obviate the obligation to *seek* renewal. If we do not create, we cannot be in dialogue with tradition, cannot renew it, and it thereby becomes a museum. The mind of the Church is that of a collective that cuts across time and place, and is inspired by the Holy Spirit. That is the measure to which we have to subject ourselves, but amazing though such a notion is, if we do nothing, we merely preserve in aspic something that means tradition to *us*, and that means, in the end, that we replace the Holy Spirit with our own ego.

But let me return to the question of English chant. Chant can, and should be adapted, of course. This is the natural process by which the Church has absorbed, adapted and renewed (that word again!) chant across traditions, cultures and centuries. When we adapt chant, what do we think we are doing? I venture to suggest that we are composing. But we are composing within our own cultural context, and according to the conventions of taste of our own time and place.

Taste as a sociological phenomenon is formed precisely by culture and context, and it is culture and context that shape the expression of the traditions of sacred art. As Deacon Alexander Musin has put it, "The function of Orthodox theology is known to be not a logical regulation of the amount of theological knowledge, but a rhetorical development of Tradition and Revelation for the purpose of 'inculturing'"⁶. Here, Musin has accurately described a fundamental truth. Tradition and Revelation are developed rhetorically in liturgical art – the "symbolic language" – for the purpose of "inculturing", in other words, communication, and this is precisely why no single tradition can ever be considered *the* tradition. The observation by Fr John Meyendorff, that "any collective identity is inseparable from tradition"⁷, in its affirmation of cultural plurality, underlines this reality.

How, then, can chant exist outside an early tradition such as that of Byzantium or mediaeval Russia? Further, what does it mean, spiritually, that the Church has accepted variations of this legacy, changes to these early traditions formed before the idea of art, or art music, existed? The anonymity of these developments (and this phrase must necessarily cover a vast chronological range, from the Demestvenny repertoire to Serbian *pojanje* and, theoretically, any parochial variation on, or adaptation of, an "early" chant) means that any blame for not following such early traditions cannot easily be apportioned. The reality is that we have no "chant not made by hands", no musical equivalent of *acheiropoeta* images; and though there is the traditional angelic inspiration for the nonsense syllables of the *teterismata*, there is no attribution of any early chant to an Apostle, for example.

It would theoretically be possible to regard the "canon", the extant corpus of chant written for the liturgical cycle, as already complete, to argue that there is music to cover everything except perhaps newly canonized saints, for whom extant material may be adapted. But in fact, the "archaeological" quest for earlier layers of chant proves that there is, at the very least, an appetite for different material. The widespread return to Znamenny and other early repertoires in Russia argues the same thing. The rediscovery of "early music" as a cultural phenomenon, absorbing much of the creative potential of musicians who in previous centuries would certainly have been engaged in original creation, whether as composers or performers, is paralleled in

⁶ Alexander Musin, "Theology of the Image and the Evolution of Style", *Iconofile* 7 (2005), 4-25.

⁷ John Meyendorff, *Catholicity and the Church*, Crestwood, New York: SVS 1983, 84.

many ways by this quintessentially postmodern “rediscovery” of ancient layers of chant. Like the living composer of concert music, the living composer of liturgical music is viewed with suspicion by those who believe that the essential purity of early traditions (often equated with Holy Tradition) has been compromised.

If one views the corpus of liturgical chant as complete and inviolable, however, one has effectively killed tradition: it becomes, as I said earlier, a museum rather than a response to the creative imperative by which we reflect God’s own act of Creation. It is necessary, as Musin, says, to “inculture”, and this requires that one be aware that mankind’s own image of the past has always fluctuated. We no longer live in hermetic societies with no awareness of other cultures, or of art, and just as that is no excuse for deliberately altering (in the sense of damaging, or consigning to oblivion) a musical heritage such as a body of liturgical chant, it is similarly no excuse for assuming that it will remain eternally static.

I will close with a quotation from the Greek iconographer Fr Stamatios Skliris, who says the following:

The appropriate means of expression had to be searched for, along with the appropriate artistic mannerisms; old, pre-Christian solutions were given up and new ones were proposed, some of which were adopted, and so on and so forth. Thus, in a dynamic and gradual way, what was formed is what we have afterwards called tradition, and which we run the danger of taking for something complete from its very beginning, something that has... fallen from heaven. We only tend to do this because of an erroneous, mechanistic understanding of Divine inspiration, which of course cancels history.⁸

In other words, history cannot be cancelled: it is the only means by which what we may afterwards call tradition can arise and continue, by continuous creative investment, to thrive.

Now, should this address seem to you a ragbag of hypotheses, speculations and unanswered questions, I could hardly disagree. However, the purpose of a gathering such as this is not, and could never be, to provide definitive answers, but to make those present think, in this case about prayer. I hope at the very least to have done that.

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Stamatis Skliris, *In the Mirror*, Alhambra: Western American Diocese of the Serbian Orthodox Church 2007.

8 Stamatis Skliris, *In the Mirror*, Alhambra: Western American Diocese of the Serbian Orthodox Church 2007, 32.