Congregational Singing in the Rus’ Liturgical Traditions: An Evaluation of Its History

Melita Mudri-Zubacź

Abstract

By means of original research into various liturgical and musical manuscripts, especially those pertaining to the East-Slavic Churches as found in the Hilandar Research Library and Resource Centre for Medieval Slavic Studies, the author demonstrates that the eclipse which congregational singing suffered among the East-Slavic Churches during the latter part of the second millennium was an inorganic development of an earlier tradition in which the lay people, aided by various “musical ministers” and led by the clergy, retained pride of place in singing the responses and participating actively in the eucharistic liturgies as well as the other services such as matins, vespers, and compline. This eclipse of lay congregational participation was brought about in part by the rise of

1 I would like to acknowledge my family for their support throughout the research and writing of this article. My research advisor, the Rev. Professor Peter Galadza, must also be acknowledged for his invaluable guidance and insights; without his inspiration and help this project could never have occurred. Further, I would like to acknowledge Hilandar Research Library and Resource Centre for Medieval Slavic Studies at the Ohio State University. I am especially indebted to the monks of Hilandar Monastery and to Dr. Predrag Matejić and his staff for their financial assistance and help in locating the appropriate East- and South-Slavic manuscripts preserved on microfilm. Finally, I must also acknowledge the generous financial and moral support of the Ukrainian Catholic Redemptorist Fathers, the School Sisters of Notre Dame, Sisters of the Holy Cross, Sisters of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, Sisters of St. Joseph of London, les Soeurs de la Congrégation de Notre-Dame, Missionary Oblates of St. Boniface, and Sisters of Charity of St. Louis.
choral ensembles, polyphonic arrangements, and increasingly vastly – and in some cases needlessly – complicated settings of liturgical chant, all of which required trained “specialists” whose role came, in most Churches, to supplant entirely the role of the laity, who were thus rendered passive, mute spectators, deprived of the spiritual benefits which attend fuller participation in the liturgy.

Introduction

Many aspects of the study of liturgy have been extensively explored over the centuries. One thing taken for granted by many liturgical scholars, particularly of the liturgical traditions of the Christian East, is liturgical singing. Yet the study of congregational singing is unfortunately one of the more neglected aspects of Eastern Christian liturgics.

Individual studies of particular issues concerning liturgical singing as a whole have been done, but none of them have offered detailed analyses of congregational participation. The complete lack of congregational singing in some East-Slavic, especially Orthodox, Churches may suggest that this practice
is foreign to the Orthodox tradition in general. Without a history of this question, it is hard to accept such a conclusion. On the one hand, congregational singing has been preserved among the Subcarpathians and Galicians, while, on the other, is almost non-existent in the current practice of other East-Slavic Churches. It is the hypothesis to be advanced here that the former communities have in fact preserved an older and more genuine tradition of liturgical worship. Mystagogically and allegorically speaking, in liturgy, the medium is the message, and a crucial part of that medium is singing. Much of what we communicate is remembered due to the way in which we express it. Expression of the text through proper liturgical music enables liturgy to fulfil its epiphanic function.

In order to demonstrate this hypothesis, we will employ primarily an historical method. Thus, after summarizing whatever findings do exist in the literature, we will review chronologically a variety of East-Slavic sources and manuscripts for evidence of congregational singing. More specifically, one of the highlights of this thesis will be the analysis of ancient leitourgica (sluzhebnyky) consulted on microfilm at the Hilandar Research Library (Ohio State University) for the purpose of studying the evolution of liturgical singing from the late fourteenth to the late nineteenth century. Finally, we will synthesize and offer an evaluation of the discoveries stemming from the aforementioned literature and sources.

We begin with a contextual analysis of two crucial Byzantine liturgical sources, namely the Codex Barberini gr. 336, and the Typicon of the Great Church, in order to establish the characteristics of liturgical singing near the end of the first millennium. Following this, we next delve into the primary sources and liturgical manuscripts containing key data regarding liturgical singing in general, and congregational participation in particular. These crucial texts will offer insight into the traits of liturgical singing of Rus from its inception to the late nineteenth century.

Our final section will explore the polyphonic era and the rise of the choral tradition, as well as the survival of congregational singing in more isolated areas of Rus’, leading eventually to the awakening and gradual restoration of congregational
singing in some territories of East-Slavdom. This will conclude with the Decree Regarding Church Singing of the archeparchial Synod of Lviv, whose prescriptions not only encapsulate the thrust of our study very succinctly, but also illustrate the concern to maintain and disseminate congregational singing in western Rus’.

I. Late Byzantine Antecedents

a) Codex Barberini gr. 336, and the Typicon of the Great Church

Codex Barberini gr. 336 is the oldest extant Byzantine euchologion, dating from the middle of the eighth century. Significant parts of it reflect usage that also entered euchologia used in other Churches of the Byzantine tradition, such as the Church of Kiev. The Codex is composed of the manuscripts containing the texts of eucharistic prayers, presidential prayers of the liturgy of the hours, numerous sacraments, and a wide collection of prayers and blessings for various needs.

Similarly, the Typicon of the Great Church, which was compiled in the tenth century, provided the necessary framework for the various liturgies inherited by the Slavic Churches. It consists mostly of concise outlines directing numerous services prescribed for both the immovable and the moveable liturgical cycles, as well as various prayers prescribed for those services.

The following will explore the patterns of liturgical singing inscribed in the texts of the services contained in these two documents. More specifically, the study of Barberini gr. 336 and the Typicon will be directed by the overarching question of who is given the responsibility of singing various chants and responses at the divine services.

Due to the ample references to those who sing the responses at liturgical gatherings, the texts of the three eucharistic liturgies found in the Codex prove to be of special interest. These texts are permeated with references to the people, who appear to be the principal respondents. More specifically, in the texts for the Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great and