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BETWEEN BABYLON AND PENTECOST:

WHY THE ABSENCE OF A COMMON TRANSLATION SHOULD NOT BE ALLOWED TO IMPEDE COMPOSITIONAL CREATIVITY

Translation of the service books into the languages of countries without a long tradition of Orthodoxy is such a recent phenomenon, and the subject of such sharply contrasted opinions, that we cannot afford to take it for granted. Parishes all over western Europe and the Americas have at one time or another had to face the issue of whether or not to introduce the local language into their services, and, if so, in what form and to what extent. It is difficult to envisage a more promising topic for lively discussion, or one more likely to cause division if badly handled. At the basis of the issue is the question: how do we reconcile the biblical injunction to “sing with understanding”¹ with the church’s mission to overcome national and ethnic divisions, so that there is “neither Greek nor Jew” (Colossians 3:11)?

In this paper I will explore an issue which has emerged during recent discussions in the Netherlands about the future of music in non-traditionally-Orthodox countries. I will ask how important it is to have a uniform or universally accepted language in any one territory or jurisdiction. I will argue that, while composers should always pay heed to the best and most authoritative translations, a commonly accepted translation should not necessarily be regarded as the indispensable basis for the preparation of new compositions. I will also touch on what, from a composer’s point of view, translators should be aiming for when working on liturgical texts.

First, a few words about the Orthodox Church in the Netherlands and the role of translations. According to the Dutch pan-Orthodox website², there are 34 parishes in the Netherlands (including monasteries and hermitages), of which 15, including the largest, hold some at least of their services in Dutch.³

1 Psalm 47:7: “sing ye praises with understanding”. Cf. St Paul’s Letter to the 1 Corinthians, 14:15: “I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also.”

2 Figures based on the listing on the website of the Fellowship of St Nicholas of Myra, www.orthodoxekerk.org. Not all the parishes listed have services every Sunday.

3 See www.orthodoxekerk.org. (An alternative listing is given at www.orthodoxekerk.nl, with information that is slightly at variance with the first-named website.) Of the 34 parishes in the Netherlands, nine fall directly under the jurisdiction of Constantinople (11, according to www.orthodoxekerk.nl); five under the Diocese

One of the first parishes to use the Dutch language was the Church of St John the Baptist in The Hague, from 1961. A great many of the translations in use today derive, directly or indirectly, from Archimandrite Adriaan Korporaal, who translated large parts of the liturgical books into Dutch. These translations were carried out with the blessing of Archbishop Jacob Akkersdijk. However, the need for a new translation based directly on the original Greek is widely felt.

Use of Dutch language in services received a significant boost when a translation commission was set up with the blessing of three bishops to produce a translation of the texts sung in the Divine Liturgy on most Sundays. These translations were then fitted to simple four-part harmonisations of Russian melodies and tried out in a series of seminars held over a period of ten years (1988–98) under the aegis of Father Michael Fortounatto, then choirmaster of the Cathedral of the Russian Orthodox Church in London. In 2000 this activity bore fruit in a ring binder containing typeset music for the Divine Liturgy. This collection is the nearest thing to an “official” translation that exists in the Netherlands, and it is used widely, though not universally.

In the Netherlands the amount of Greek church music available in translation is very small compared with that of Russian, but Abbess Maria (Hulsker) of the Monastery of the Mother of God near Asten has made several musical adaptations of her own translations from Greek into Dutch, and these have also been introduced into Dutch weekday services in a Greek parish. Among her notable contributions is a translation of the Easter Canon.

Summing up, one may say that, although Dutch translation is widely available in parishes in the Netherlands, no universally accepted, let alone compulsory of the liturgical services exists, though a collection of texts from the Liturgy prepared by a translation commission and adapted to music from the Russian tradition is in wide use. Relations between the various jurisdic-

of Rue Daru, Paris, therefore indirectly under the jurisdiction of Constantinople; seven under the Moscow Patriarchate (six, according to www.orthodoxekerk.nl); four under the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia; six under Serbia, two under Romania (one, according to www.orthodoxekerk.nl) and one under Bulgaria. According to www.orthodoxekerk.org, eight parishes hold services using mostly or exclusively the Dutch language, four use Dutch and one other language, and two use Dutch and two other languages. The other 20 use a language or languages other than Dutch. In addition to the parishes discussed, there are 21 parishes that belong to pre-Chalcedonian churches: see www.orthodoxekerk.nl.

As one would expect, the jurisdictions with the most parishes, adherents and converts are also those most likely to hold services in Dutch: Rue Daru, Constantinople and Moscow. Four out of five of the Rue Daru churches offer services exclusively or mostly in Dutch, with one offering combined Dutch and Friesian, a language spoken in the north of the country. Among the Moscow churches there is a greater tendency to combine Dutch with the mother language, i.e. Church Slavonic: only one parish uses exclusively Dutch, whereas three use Dutch and Church Slavonic and one uses Dutch, Church Slavonic and Friesian. Of the Constantinople churches, five have services in Greek, three in Dutch, and one combines Greek and Dutch.