The Second Life of Jan Hus: Liturgy, Commemoration, and Music

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Jan Hus and the Liturgy

Rather than anything he said or did while alive in Bohemia, it was the imprisonment, trial, and death of Jan Hus – the most popular and high-profile of the pre-revolutionary reformers – that served as the catalyst for the radical liturgical reforms that saw, in turn, the introduction of the chalice, the general communion of all the baptized, and the whole-scale vernacularization of the liturgy.¹ Hus’s negotiations over the daily celebration of the Eucharist in the Bethlehem Chapel played an important role in bringing together the chapel’s tradition of vernacular preaching (a fundamental point in its foundation in 1391) and the broader Bohemian movement for frequent communion, thus

re-enforcing the latter by giving it a place of high visibility as well as Hus's personal support and approbation. Nevertheless, the detailed agreement on when the sermon was to be preached (either before or after the Eucharist, but not in its 'historic' position after the reading of the Gospel) leaves us with the sense that Hus did not completely understand the integral relationship between preaching and the proclamation of the word in Scripture. This can especially be seen in the notary's agreement between Hus and the Rector of the church of Saints Philip and James, in whose territorial parish the Bethlehem Chapel belonged and which had legal right over the celebration of the sacraments within its parish bounds.

While Hus did, on occasion, inveigh against the imposition of Latin on those who could not understand it,² and was once particularly acerbic in denouncing the decision of 1412 to limit the singing of vernacular hymnody;³ as far as we know, his efforts in promoting the vernacular were limited to preaching and the promotion of hymns. This apparent lack of enthusiasm in promoting a vernacular liturgy can be seen as a significant indication of the general lack of momentum behind the movement towards the vernacularization of the liturgy in his time. As preacher at the Bethlehem Chapel, however, he was addressing a 'popular' audience, where the emphasis was on vernacular preaching. Such an environment would have been ideal for also promoting the

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² Hus disputed the requirement that members of women's religious communities should have to recite the office in Latin when it was a language which they did not understand, noting that "A nun who repeats a prayer mechanically, without inward feeling, is like a magpie that is taught to say the words of a prayer." “Výklad modlitby Páně [Exposition on the Lord's Prayer],” in Mistra Jana Husi Sebrané spisy české i [Collected Czech writings of M. Jan Hus], ed. Karel Jaromír Erben (Prague, 1865), 307–308. There is no reason to see a direct relationship with Hus's ideas, but the Office for the Veneration of the Cross on Good Friday used by the Claritians of Olomouc (ms. Olomouc, Státní vědecká knihovna, III E 7) from 1421 is in Czech.

³ "And they who met Christ on the road carpeted it with their cloaks and praised Him…They praised him because he saved them from their sins…Who would be so hard-hearted today that s/he would refuse to praise God for his mercies?…Yet the devil takes note of this praise and so tempts the masters, priests and lawyers to condemn those who sing praises to God… and Jesus; they command the worshipers to be silent….; and in his name they say: 'We curse in the Name of Jesus all those who go to hear sermons at Bethlehem [Chapel] and all those who sing [here Hus lists the Czech incipits of three hymns].’ But our Lord Jesus will answer such objectors and say: 'Truly I say to you, if these remain silent, the very stones will cry out! [Luke 19:40] so that those who are unlearned and meek will sing [my] praises despite your objections; Thus the humble will sing joyful praise to our merciful Savior Jesus Christ." "Postil Na květní neděli [On Palm Sunday],” in Jiří Daňhelka, ed., Mistř Jan Hus: Česka nedělní postila [MIHO II – Postilla de Tempore Bohemica] (Prague, 1992), 183–184.