The Stoglav Council and Parish Priests

In 1551 a major church council was convened in Moscow with the stated purpose of “reforming the Church and confirming the Orthodox faith.” In the course of responding to sixty-nine questions submitted in the name of Tsar Ivan IV, the Council attempted to clarify the duties and responsibilities of all churchmen and to eliminate various abuses and malpractices in the Church. In addition, all laymen were affected by the Council’s decisions, because the Council addressed such matters as baptisms, marriages, last wills and testaments, family quarrels, drunkenness, behavior in public, offences against the faith, crimes against church people, and assorted sins of the flesh.

The lengthy record of the Council’s proceedings—called the Stoglav, or “Hundred Chapters”—not only reports the rulings of the Council, but also describes the alleged conditions that prompted the rulings. In regard to parish priests and their parishioners, for example, the Stoglav both tells them how to behave and relates in interesting detail how they have been misbehaving. As a result, the Stoglav is a fascinating compendium of information on the state of the Church and of society in mid-sixteenth-century Muscovy.

This article summarizes and analyzes what the Stoglav says about parish priests, which involves the following issues: the education and training of priests, their marital status, their ordination and appointment, their income and support, their duties and required standards of behavior, and their supervision. The goals implicit in this study are to discover what the Stoglav reveals about the life of parish priests, the role they played in their communities, their relationships with their parishioners and superiors, and in general what the Stoglav rulings on priests reveal about the Church in mid-sixteenth-century Muscovy.

Previous attempts to exploit the Stoglav as an historical source have been hampered by its unwieldy length (from two to four hundred pages in published editions) and the fact that the original document has apparently not survived. Added to that is the circumstance that the Stoglav has been at the center of religious controversy since the Church Schism of the 1660s, and the objectivity of Stoglav copyists and scholars has not been unimpeachable. On the
basis of textological and watermark analysis of *Stoglav* manuscript copies which can only be summarized here, this author has concluded that the *Stoglav* “long” redaction is primary, that other redactions derive from it, and that there is strong evidence that one manuscript in particular appears to reproduce the original *Stoglav* text.²

These conclusions were reached in part by comparing *Stoglav* copies with other documents of the 1550s which quote extensively from the *Stoglav*—the *Stoglav* long redaction, as it turns out. In addition, close analysis of the *Stoglav* text and of post-1551 references to the *Stoglav* demonstrates that the *Stoglav* long redaction is in fact the authentic, canonical text of the proceedings and decisions of the 1551 Council.³ This analysis allows us to turn to *Stoglav* rulings on parish priests with some confidence that we are citing comments and decisions actually attributable to the 1551 Council.

*Education and Training*

Given the circumstance that approximately 90 percent of all Muscovites lived in villages, it should be stressed that the great majority of priests were village priests, that they earned their livelihoods in part by farming, and that they were, in effect, clerical peasants, serving in remote and for all practical purposes self-governing villages of a few households. By its own admission, the 1551 Council faced a problem of alarming dimensions: the village priest, potentially the Church’s most effective representative at the local level, was ignorant, poorly trained for his job, and in many cases even illiterate. The Church, in its need to fill parish posts, confronted a dilemma which the *Stoglav* expresses rather straightforwardly: if bishops ordained untrained candidates to the priesthood and appointed them to a parish, that would be in violation of canon law; but if bishops did not appoint them, many parishes would be without a priest, churches would become abandoned, and people would die without benefit of the sacraments.⁴

The *Stoglav* asserts that schooling used to be better: “And prior to this, in

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2. See Jack Kollmann, “The Moscow *Stoglav* (‘Hundred Chapters’) Church Council of 1551,” unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1978, especially ch. 1. The preferred manuscript is GBL Trinity-St. Sergii Lavra No. 215. Its text is published in N. I. Subbotin, ed., *Tsrskiia voprosy i sobornyia otvety o mnonozhitnych tserkovnykh chinekh (stoglav)* (Moscow: Tip. E. Lissnera i Iu. Romana, 1890), but it is difficult to read, because it is given only as footnoted variants to another, inferior text. For the convenience of the reader the more readable Kazan’ edition will be cited here, the main text of which is quite close to that of MS. Lavra No. 215. Minor differences between MS. Lavra No. 215 and the second Kazan’ edition, such as spelling and word order, will not be indicated, but any differences that affect meaning will be given. It should be noted that the first (1863) and third (1911) Kazan’ editions differ from the second edition in both pagination and minor points of the text.
