
(Self-)Administration of Prague Parishes in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

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In placing the prefix “self-” in parentheses in the title of this article, I have meant to indicate the ambiguity of the term self-administration with which this study is concerned. It is impossible to separate strictly the respective competence of the lay parishioners and the town governments that exercised an official supervision.

Also it may be problematic to use the term layperson without a more precise definition. It is important to avoid a sharp juxtaposition of the term “layman” to the concept of “the priest,” otherwise we may end up with Boniface VIII labelling the laity as an enemy of the clergy.¹ It is better to use the old-fashioned term *laos* – the people. This concept explicitly includes the priests or the rulers, and does assign to them a superior status.² The concept of equality of the people, implied – on the basis of Christian teaching – by their participation in the church,³ clashed with the deeply rooted inequality, which pre-modern society considered the norm.⁴

Side by side with the unequal social relations, pre-modern times, however, witnessed the existence of horizontal structures of equals. Various voluntary associations, such as the devotional brotherhoods, were especially important in religious life; while the guilds and the parish communities [*farní osady*] constituted other examples. My interest focuses on the parishes of Prague during the Utraquist period. At first, however, it is useful to consider their existential setting by depicting the general character of ecclesiastical administration in towns during the Middle Ages.

The influence of the unordained on the administration of the local church, such as the nomination of clergy, the management of church property, and matters pertaining to pastoral activity, was reduced to a system of proprietary churches and later to patronal rights during the early Middle Ages. In the High Middle Ages the influence of the laity was on the rise again, largely thanks to the exact utilization of the rights of patronage. Sometimes, a municipality had already received the right to nominate the local priest at the time of its foundation.⁵ Elsewhere, the townspeople tried to control their priest by obtaining the patronage from the nobles, the patricians, or the monasteries. At times, the burghers realized their ambition

¹ Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity* (London, 1976) 191; Josef Gelmi, *Die Päpste in Lebensbildern*, (Graz, Vienna, Cologne, 1989). [The reference is to the bull *Clericos laicos* of 1296 – Ed.]

² Entry “Laie,” *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* (Freiburg i. Br., 1993-2001) 6:col. 589-597; entry “Laie,” *Lexikon des Mittelalters* (Stuttgart, 1999) [1978-1980] 5:col. 1616-1619.

³ Christopher Dawson, *Zrození Evropy*, transl. Miroslav Kratochvíl (Prague, 1994) [*The Making of Europe*, (London, 1932)] 36-37.

⁴ Paul Münch, *Lebensformen in der Frühneuzeit, 1500-1800* (Frankfurt a. M., 1996) 65-70.

⁵ For examples from Prague, see Václav Ledvinka and Jiří Pešek, *Praha* (Prague, 2000) 81-82.

through their own foundation of a church or chapel, like the Praguers in the case of the Bethlehem Chapel.⁶ The gradual process of obtaining patronage meant that “democratic” control in parishes was retarded in comparison with the municipal self-government.

Starting with the thirteenth century, a separation of the funds for maintenance of buildings and liturgical services (known as *fabrica ecclesiae*, *záduší*, *Kirchengut*) from the funds for the priest’s salary (*beneficium*, *obročí*) allowed patrons and the ecclesiastical hierarchy better control over property administration.⁷ The *fabricae ecclesiae* and other pious foundations, protected to some extent by their sacred character, were the first institutions to acquire the status of legal persons; secular institutions acquired a comparable status only much later. In Bohemia, the division between the *fabricae* and *beneficia* might have started as early as the fourteenth century, but it is documented only from the period of the Bohemian Reformation which, ironically, did not favour a separate existence of the *beneficium*.⁸

From the start, the patrons tended to appoint special officials for the administration of the *fabricae ecclesiae*. The towns followed suit. Taking a foreign example, for instance, in Braunschweig, such officials were appointed to churches over which the town exercised the right of patronage, as well as to other local churches so as to control the funds of the foundations that were established by the burghers.⁹ If the *fabricae ecclesiae* were subject to a municipality, their administration was fully integrated with other town affairs and their records were inserted into the general municipal registers rather than special record books.¹⁰

The town’s power over the churches was summarily established in Prague during the wars of the Bohemian Reformation when the consistory *sub una* (exiled in Zittau) appointed to the individual parishes priests *sub una*, who were utterly unacceptable to the parishioners *sub utraque*. The latter then retaliated and became accustomed to select their own Utraquist parsons. This led to a new form of burghers’ representation – the parish community [*farní osada*], in which every townsperson belonging to a given parish acquired a part in decision making. The community members thus assume the right of clerical nominations, hitherto held by the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the Royal Chamber, or by distinguished nobles and patricians.¹¹

The administration of the *fabrica ecclesiae* also changed significantly during the turbulent years of the Bohemian Reformation. The application of the Fourth Article of Prague (against the worldly dominion of priests) transferred this administration in Bohemia from the parsons to the patrons, who then appointed

⁶ Concerning foundations in rural municipalities see, for instance, Rosi Fuhrmann, *Kirche und Dorf. Religiöse Bedürfnisse und Kirchliche Stiftungen auf dem Lande vor der Reformation* (Stuttgart, 1995) especially 423-429.

⁷ Christopher Friedrichs, *The Early Modern City 1450-1750* (London, 1995) 67-68.

⁸ Rostislav Nový, “K sociálnímu postavení farského kléru v době předhusitské,” *Sborník historický* 9 (1962) 154-157; Blanka Zilynská, “Záduší,” in: *Facta probant homines - Sborník příspěvků k životnímu jubileu prof. dr. Zdeňky Hledíkové*, ed. Ivan Hlaváček and Jan Hrdina (Prague, 1998) 538-539.

⁹ Friedrichs, *The Early Modern City* 67-68.

¹⁰ Nový, “K sociálnímu postavení farského kléru,” 156.

¹¹ Václav V. Tomek, *Dějepis* 9: 97-106.

appropriate officials for that purpose.¹² In Prague the administration of the *fabrica ecclesiae* was not taken over by the town council, but by the parishioners or the parish community [osada].¹³ Yet, the parishioners usually let the city council take care of the most important matters, and could hardly afford to act in opposition to the city councillors. Interestingly enough, the parishioners of the Bethlehem Chapel had special difficulties in sharing the administration of the church because the patronage over the Chapel belonged to particularly powerful institutions – to the University of Prague and to the mayor of the Old Town of Prague. Nevertheless, even there the parishioners were gaining a louder voice in the administration, as they financed the completion of the Chapel's construction during the sixteenth century.¹⁴

In its general outlines, the acquisition of the patronage of churches by the town council was not a uniquely Bohemian phenomenon. The process was also occurring in Germany during the fifteenth century, as the towns increasingly shared in the administration of ecclesiastical property and in the nominations to clerical posts. The extinction of families who held the gift of a parish or the economic weakness of monasteries provided the towns with opportunities for the purchases of patronage.¹⁵ Parish self-administration sprang up also in the rural areas of the Swiss canton of Graubünden in the course of the Middle Ages¹⁶ and, more remotely, this function became the basis of autonomous municipal governments in England in the early seventeenth century.

The Protestant Reformation opened up the possibility of choosing a particular religious denomination. In most jurisdictions this decision belonged to the sovereign, but the city councils usually wielded this authority in the Imperial Towns of Germany and in the Royal Towns of Bohemia. Thus the advance of municipal self-determination received a special boost in this new function.¹⁷ In the city of Ulm, the burghers could decide between Rome and the Reformation even by plebiscite.¹⁸ In the free cities, the town councils could of course exercise pressure to shape the decisions of the parishioners – “people of God” – with respect to religious affairs and management. Thus a process, that was seemingly democratic, was not necessarily so.

The administration of the *fabrica ecclesiae* did not substantially differ in the sixteenth century from the previous one, but the procedure is better documented in

¹² Zilynská, “Záduší,” 539-540; Zikmund Winter, *Život církevní – kulturně-historický obraz z XV. a XVI. století*, 2 vv. (Prague, 1896) 2:532; on laicization of higher church administration and lay influence on confessional orientation of parishes see also Noemi Rejchrtová, *Studie k českému utrakvistu zejména doby jagellonské*, habil. KEBF Prague, 1984 Library of ETF UK Prague, sign. DIS 80, pp. 6, 34-35.

¹³ On the term “osada,” see Josef Macek, “Osada: Z terminologii średnowiecznego osadnictwa,” *Kwartalnik historii kultury materialnej* 25 (1977) 359-373.

¹⁴ On the parishioners' contract to complete the Chapel's construction, see Josef Teige, *Základy starého místopisu pražského, 1437-1620*, 2 vv. (Prague, 1910) 2:819.

¹⁵ Eberhard Isermann, *Die deutsche Stadt im Spätmittelalter* (Stuttgart, 1988) 217-218.

¹⁶ Immacolata Saulle Hippenmeyer, “Der Weg zur Gemeindekirche. Graubünden 1400-1600,” in: *Colloquia mediaevalia Pragensia I. – Geist, Gesellschaft, Kirche im 13.-16. Jahrhundert*, ed. František Šmahel (Prague, 1999) 279-288.

¹⁷ See, for instance, Werner Trossbach, “Unterschiede und Gemeinsamkeiten bei der Durchsetzung der Reformation in den Hansestädten Wismar, Rostock und Stralsund,” *AR* 88 (1997) 118-165.

¹⁸ Friedrichs, *The Early Modern City* 74.

the sources. The earliest church register [*zádušní kniha*] in Prague was established at the Church of St. Nicholas in the Old Town in 1497. Other churches followed suit in mid-sixteenth century. The primary authority in the *fabrica ecclesiae* belonged to the members of the parish community [*osadníci*]. During their annual gatherings, the *osadníci* compiled financial reports and elected officials who managed the finances of the *fabrica ecclesiae*. The annual meetings also arranged for the services of a priest if their church lacked a permanent parson; they hired a verger who maintained the church building; and made other major decisions.

After the unsuccessful Bohemian uprising against the Habsburgs in 1547, Ferdinand I punished the towns by also confiscating their rural manors from which much of the income of the *fabrica ecclesiae* had been derived. Inasmuch as the churches lacked other sources of funding, the monarch was gradually forced to restore (under the guise of privileges) the income of these properties to the towns.¹⁹ It is significant to note that these “privileges” were granted without any denominational distinction, and enabled all churches, whether *sub una* or *sub utraque*, to perpetuate their services. Primarily interested in asserting his power over the towns, Ferdinand evidently abstained from manipulating the situation in favour of the *sub una*. In fact, he willingly supported Utraquist churches, such as those in Prague, seeing in them a reliable barrier against the spread of the Protestant Reformation, which he abominated above all.

Important changes occurred during the last decade of the sixteenth century. In Prague, in particular, carelessness in the administration of the *fabrica ecclesiae* (sloppiness in the recording of receipts and expenditures) induced Rudolf II to request corrective measures from the city council of the Old Town.²⁰ In 1593, the councillors rescinded the parishioners’ [*osadníky*] right to elect officials/administrators, and permitted to the *osadníky* only the choice of vergers.²¹ At this time (around 1600) many other churches established their registers of *fabrica ecclesiae* [*zádušní knihy*] so that the administration of the *fabrica ecclesiae* is more amply documented for the next twenty years than during the subsequent Thirty Years’ War.

A remarkable document, shedding light on the administration of the *fabrica ecclesiae*, applied to the church of St. Valentine in the Old Town. Issued in 1599, it bore the title, *Artikulové někteří přináležející pánům literátům starším i mladším i všem osadcům záduší kostela svatého Valentýna v Starém Městě pražském*.²² The church was small and poor with lower than average income and had lacked a priest of its own since the 1540s.²³ The document exemplified the reorganization and

¹⁹ Privileges of 30 September 1547, May 1549 and from 1562 in *Codex Iuris Municipalis Regni Bohemiae* I., ed. Jaromír Čelakovský (Prague, 1886) 400, 404-405, 427.

²⁰ Winter, *Život církevní* 2:536-538

²¹ Memorial registers of *fabrica ecclesiae* of Our Lady before Týn, 1586–1643, Prague AHMP Ms. 1640 f. 15^r; see also Ladislav Žilka, *Hospodaření týnské farnosti na Starém Městě pražském koncem 16. a začátkem 17. století*, dipl. thesis, FF UK Prague 1988, Historical Seminar Library FF UK Prague, sign. 109/2156, p. 82.

²² AHMP, I-451/21, published in Teige, *Základy* II., čp. 56, no. 36, p. 277–281. Concerning the text, see also Pavel B. Kůrka, *„Kostel starožitný v smrdutých místech a blatech ležící“ – Kostel, farnost a záduší svatého Valentína na Starém Městě pražském v raném novověku*, dipl. thesis, FF UK Prague 2002, especially 66–69, 75–86.

²³ *Ibid.* 29-98.

written codification of the *fabrica ecclesiae* administration exactly at the turn of the sixteenth century. The articles covered comprehensively the various aspects of parish life. Aside from organizational matters, personal discipline was stressed, involving piety and orderly living. The articles specified the rules for parish assemblies and the functions of the officials, the vergers, and the cantor. Detailed regulations applied to household contributions, and to the fees for funeral services and for the tolling of bells. References to matters of fire safety in the parish represented an overlap with the concerns of municipal administration.

The most notable rules applied to the assembly of the parish community [*farní osada*]. As elsewhere, it was the duty of every member of the community to attend, and an absentee was liable to a fine of one to two pounds of wax.²⁴ The procedures were comparable with those specified in the oldest church register of 1536 at St. Nicholas in the Old Town.²⁵ The latter established the fine at five to twenty groschen, and a refusal to pay could result in the loss of residential rights in the city. The parish assembly was convoked in order to elect the vergers, or to arbitrate conflicts among the vergers.²⁶ The articles of St. Valentine's Church also obligated the "elders" [*starší*] to comment on every issue before the assembly, but the enforceability of this provision is doubtful.²⁷

The Prague church of St. Martin's in the Wall in particular demonstrated the high degree of parishioners' participation in church affairs in 1619. In addition to the sixteen honorary functionaries, the elders (many of whom, however, appeared in the list of active functionaries as well), there were four officials, four vergers, five *inspectores scholae*, two sacristans, two keepers of vestments and books, two cemetery administrators, and four choir directors.²⁸ Thus altogether more than twenty parishioners took part in the management of the church, while the parish probably contained no more than 130 households.²⁹

The intrusions into the administration of the *fabrica ecclesiae* also reflected an intensification of the municipal bureaucratization at the turn of the sixteenth century.³⁰ The town governments could use this influence to maintain a unity of Utraquism, and shield the traditional Czech religion against Protestant influences during an intensified confrontation with Lutheranism.³¹ Paradoxically, the effort to support Utraquism thus led to the loss of one of its early characteristics – the control of the *fabrica ecclesiae* directly by the parish members. Utraquism, of

²⁴ AHMP, I-451/21, Article no. 17.

²⁵ AHMP, Ms. 1665, ff. 13^b-15^a.

²⁶ At that early time, the vergers still performed functions that were later assigned to the administrative officials. See Kúrka, *Kostel starožitný* 84-85.

²⁷ AHMP, I-451/21, Article no. 5: "A na kohožby ze starších osadních obecních podáno bylo, aby svou sentencí oznámil, tak potom jiní všichni po pořádku až do posledního jeden každý bude povinnen své zdání oznámiti, a což by platnější a lepší bylo, vedle toho tak budou moci učiniti."

²⁸ Central State Archives Prague (SUA Praha), Archives of Prague Archbishopric (APA), book B 43/1, ff. 161-162.

²⁹ The estimate is based on the contributions to the construction of a cemetery wall in 1602 and of an ossuary building a year later. The pertinent report noted not only the contributing but also the noncontributing parishioners. *Ibid.*, f. 23^r-25^v and 40^v-42^v.

³⁰ *On bureaucratization of the municipal government of Prague*, see Václav Vojtíšek, *O vývoji samosprávy pražských měst* (Prague, 1927) 61-62.

³¹ See Zdeněk V. David, "Utraquists, Lutherans and the Bohemian Confession of 1575," *Church History*, 68 (1999) 294-336, esp. 308.

course, was not spared the effects of advancing confessionalisation and, like other denomination, welcomed the insertion of political protection. In the end, the self-administration of *fabrica ecclesiae* may be viewed more as an accidental early feature of Utraquism than as a fundamental attribute that would have required defending to the bitter end.

The disarrayed conditions due to the Thirty Years' War brought on fluctuation and irregularities in the administration of the *fabrica ecclesiae*. On occasions, the responsibility of the laypeople for the operation of churches was, in fact, temporarily strengthened. For instance in Živohošť, the patrons of the local church, the Prague Knights of the Cross with the Red Star, lost control over their domain for almost a quarter of a century. To fill the vacuum, local inhabitants took charge of running the church, and undertook the task of inviting priests to perform liturgical services.³²

The Counter Reformation did not restructure the administration of the *fabrica ecclesiae*,³³ except that the newly dominant hierarchy of the Roman Church tended to encroach on the exercise of the rights of control by the urban municipal governments.³⁴ The second half of the seventeenth century witnessed a shift in the appointments of the vergers and in the control of church properties. As the role of the parish community gradually decreased, there was a corresponding increase in the role of the patrons. There also appeared the global trend of a relative decrease in the value of the *fabrica ecclesiae* with the new funding applied to the endowments for saying masses, and those new foundations were maintained outside the purview of the *fabrica ecclesiae* officials.³⁵

[Translation from the Czech by Zdeněk V. David]

³² Václav Bělohávek, "‘Ututlaný’ kostel," *Od Karlova mostu* 3 (1930) 34-36.

³³ Blanka Zilynská, *Záduší*, 540. The post-White Mountain continuity and discontinuity of control over *fabricae ecclesiae* by the municipal governments of Prague are discussed in Pavel B. Kůrka, *Kostel starožitný* 81.

³⁴ Cardinal Arnošt of Harrach's interventions in defense of *fabricae ecclesiae* control against municipal patrons are described in Johann Schlenz, *Das Kirchenpatronat in Böhmen* (Prague, 1928) 278-281. Examples, gathered by Antonín Podlaha, *Dějiny arcidiecéze pražské od konce století XVII. do počátku století XIX.* (Prague, 1917) 1:484-528, illustrate the great differences among individual localities, as to the role of patrons, parsons, and the ecclesiastical hierarchy in the *fabricae ecclesiae* administration.

³⁵ See Marie Wasková, *Záduší kostela Panny Marie na Louži na Starém Městě pražském v letech 1635–1644*, a seminar paper for Dr. Zdeněk Hojda, FFUK, Department of PVHAS, Prague 2000/2001, p. 21-22.