

## SS. CYRIL AND METHODIUS

### Two Planters of the Name of Christ<sup>1</sup>

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**J**ULY is the usual time for articles about SS. Cyril and Methodius, whose feast is kept on July 7th. Most of these are written by Czechs who think of the two brothers as their own and other Slavs' apostles. It is true, of course, that these two Greeks did bring the gospel to the eighth-century Slavs living in central Europe, but excessive concentration on that aspect of their life and work may make us forgetful of their much wider significance. Perhaps it is not a bad thing to think of them, for a change, not primarily as the men who brought Christianity to a particular people nor in connection with their feast and the 'Apostolate of SS. Cyril and Methodius' but as men whose lives contributed to the growth and the unity of the Church. The Church indeed grows and is made one in a particular place among definite people, but the importance of that growth and unity comes from its universality, not from its particularity.

Our information about this life story comes mainly from legends, which, despite their legendary character and annoying reticence, seem to be a reliable source.<sup>2</sup> They tell us that the two future missionaries were sons of a second rank imperial official in the province of Thessalonica. Methodius was born there in 815, and his younger brother Constantine (he took the name 'Cyril' only shortly before his death on being professed as a monk) some eleven years later. After completing his schooling, Methodius joined the civil service, and, if we may trust a liturgical fragment, he was married and had children. Later on, however, he decided to become a monk, and the liturgical *encomium* praises the freedom of his decision. Perhaps this stress on his free choice is meant to be contrasted with the rather forced character of his younger brother's religion vocation. Constantine, after a distinguished

<sup>1</sup> *Duo . . . Christi nominis propagatores*; Leo XIII's encyclical *Grande munus*, September 30th, 1880.

<sup>2</sup> Works consulted include: a study by Jean Decarroux in *La Vie Spirituelle*, Oct, 1957; *Les Légendes de Constantin et de Méthode Vues de Byzance*, Prague 1933, by F. Dvornik; *Les Slaves, Byzance, et Rome, au IXe Siècle*, Paris 1926, by F. Dvornik; and an article by the same writer in *Novy Zivot*, Rome 1958, p. 120.

university career as both student and lecturer, retired to Mount Olympos only when the 'Prime Minister' Theoktistos, his benefactor and friend, was liquidated during a palace revolution; both loyalty to his dead friend and fear for his personal safety may have prompted his decision. However, he was to be reconciled to the new government by his former teacher Photius, now high in the emperor's favour. At his suggestion he was sent together with his elder brother on two diplomatic-religious missions (to the Arabs, and to the judaized Khazars living between the Dnieper and the Volga) which prepared them for what was to be their chief task.

In 862 the ruler of the new but important state of Great Moravia (the core of which corresponded to the territory of present-day Moravia and Slovakia), Rastislav, sent an embassy to Constantinople asking for missionaries who could preach Christianity to his Slav subjects in their own language. Judging by what happened, it seems that Rastislav was also interested in finding men who could translate the Bible into their language. Now Methodius and Constantine happened to be particularly qualified for this task; Thessalonica was one of the provinces inhabited by Slavs, and, when in the civil service, Methodius as an administrator came to know something of their mentality too. Constantine was nicknamed by his contemporaries 'the philosopher' but he might have been equally well dubbed 'the linguist'. Not only did he master difficult languages (e.g. Hebrew), but he also understood the principles of linguistics; this enabled him to solve what seemed to be an almost insuperable obstacle to the success of the new mission: the question of representing in writing the spoken language of the Slavs with its peculiar sounds. Constantine produced a special alphabet to overcome this difficulty. This is the Glagolitic alphabet which is still used today in the liturgical books in Dalmatia. The adjective comes from the verb 'to make sound'. Its basis is the Greek cursive minuscules. The Cyrillic alphabet is closely related to it, but it is not the work of St Cyril himself; its basis is the Greek uncials. Glagolitic is a remote ancestor of the present-day Russian, Serbian and Bulgarian alphabets. The Slavonic legend attributes its invention to a supernatural revelation, but its supposed heavenly origin may well be doubted. What is beyond any doubt is the heavenly character of its purpose; it was conceived as a tool for the spreading of the

message of salvation. As John VIII said in praising the Slavonic letters in his confirmation of the Slavonic liturgy, they were invented so that God might be praised and the deeds of Christ preached through them. Whether they were influenced also by oriental alphabets or not, their perennial importance lies in the witness they bear to the need an apostolate may often have of secular tools and cultural means. Cultural and linguistic studies will always be a necessity for the Church's work, as long as she remains a family of nations speaking divers tongues. Missionary apostles must therefore frequently overcome, among other difficulties, this consequence of the confusion of tongues, itself a bitter fruit of the fall. Constantine-Cyril may be both their model and guide with his professional competence, courage and vision. It was thanks to those qualities that he solved the insoluble problem, and, equipped with a selection of gospel passages in the new writing, the two missionaries reached Moravia with a few helpers in 863.

Their preaching and liturgical celebration in Slavonic met with 'keen desire and unparalleled joy' (Leo XIII in *Grande Munus*) on the part of the people but with hostility from the Frankish missionaries who resented the intrusion of these Eastern newcomers on what they considered their own field of activity. (Recent archaeological excavations in Czechoslovakia, however, suggest that there had been Celtic missionaries at work there even before the Germans.) The opposition of the German priests hindered the work of the two Greeks in one vital respect. The neighbouring bishops refused to ordain new priests for the Slavonic rite. That is why in 867 Constantine and Methodius set out on a journey abroad to have some of their converts ordained. We do not know their intended destination, but the fact is that they finished their journey in Rome, summoned there from Venice by Pope Nicholas I. But it was left to his successor Adrian II to give the two Eastern missionaries a tremendous welcome, although this was the time of the Photian schism. This welcome was partly due to the supposed relics of St Clement, which the two brothers had been treasuring since their mission to the Crimea (they were hardly the relics of Clement I bishop of Rome, even though they were the mortal remains of a Clement Martyr), but the pope also showed a genuine appreciation of their work: they were to receive episcopal ordination, their disciples were to

be ordained priests in Rome, and the use of Slavonic in liturgy and in preaching was officially approved. In actual fact, only Methodius received the episcopal dignity, for his brother Constantine, now called Cyril, was summoned in February 869 to receive greater honour in heaven. Before leaving Rome, Methodius was first sent on a mission to Pannonia, a country through which both brothers passed on their way to Rome. Its ruler, Kocel, seeing an opportune moment for gaining freedom from the politically minded German episcopate, asked for permission to introduce the Slavonic liturgy into his territory and for the dispatch of Slav missionaries; he also petitioned the pope to restore the ancient see of Sirmium (now Mitrovica). Pope Adrian II granted his request and made Methodius archbishop with jurisdiction over Moravia and Pannonia.

Yet neither papal approval of the Slavonic liturgy nor the new dignity of Methodius could placate the hostility of the German bishops. On his return from Rome Methodius was arrested on the charge of having violated their rights; he was beaten, condemned and imprisoned in a monastery. It was three years before his fate was discovered in Rome and the new pope John VIII could send a legate to secure the archbishop's release. To win Frankish acquiescence in the detachment of Pannonia from the jurisdiction of the archbishop of Salzburg, John VIII thought it necessary to placate the Germans by ordering the cessation of the liturgy in Slavonic. He did not realize how deeply rooted it was already and how necessary for the immediate survival of Christianity in Moravia. Methodius had to go to Rome in person to explain the situation and to prevent the disastrous suppression of the liturgy in the people's own language. Thanks to his intervention, John VIII sanctioned the use of Slavonic again both in the celebration of mass and in preaching, but he ordered that both the epistle and the gospel should be read in Latin first.

Methodius's conviction of the need for the use of the people's language in liturgy, coupled with his utter submission to the Vicar of Christ, is of particular interest to us today. The reason why Methodius in the ninth century (as well as many people today) wanted to see *some* use of the vernacular in the worship of the Church was pastoral; the people are to hear a language they can understand, for 'how can it be known what your message (the first half of the mass is *instruction*) is if you speak a language

whose accents cannot be understood?' (I Cor. xiv, 9.) But there is more to this matter than the needs of the people. St Paul, who urged in those words the need for intelligibility of utterance in the church, also states another and even more important principle in this matter: 'Only let us have everything done suitably and in the right order' (ibid., 40). It is the great merit of St Methodius to have done justice to both these principles: he saw both the need for the vernacular in some form for the people's liturgical worship and the need for introducing it in an orderly way—with the approval of the supreme authority in the Church. He was not put to the ultimate test of being asked to abandon completely a venture dear to his heart. Nevertheless, we can see in his ready acceptance of the order to use Latin first a clear sign of his belief that the unity of the Church (which is possible only through submission to the lawful authority in it) is a more important objective than the needs of the people. To think otherwise might well mean destroying the mystical body of Christ instead of building it up.

The reason for this successful combination of revolutionary daring with a conservative obedience is surely to be found in the two brothers' grasp of the position of the bishop of Rome. Although they were Byzantines, like most eastern monks at the time they felt reverence for the occupants of the see of Peter who had been on their side during the struggle with the iconoclasts, while the patriarchs of Constantinople were swaying rather easily with the imperial winds. Yet it was not a mere feeling but an intellectual recognition that we must posit as the explanation of the two brothers' behaviour. We have no verbal statement from the legends about their belief in papal primacy (although the frequent use of the word *apostolikos* is an eloquent testimony), but perhaps deeds here speak more clearly than words. It seems that it was only because they recognized the papal authority for what it is that Constantine and Methodius had recourse to Rome for guidance on the many important issues before them. Surely Methodius would not have submitted his dispute with the Frankish missionaries about the *Filioque* clause to Rome unless he considered the pope the ultimate court of appeal in matters of faith. As for matters of discipline: although it might seem a little surprising that two Greeks from Byzantium accepted the offer of an episcopal consecration from the patriarch

of the west, one cannot see any other explanation for Methodius' acceptance of hard decisions from Rome except his faith that the see of Peter is the rock on which the Church is to be built. Thus he accepted the imposed modification of the use of the vernacular, and he went to Rome again at the end of his life to establish his own orthodoxy when one of his own suffragans, Wiching of Nitra, accused him to the pope of teaching errors.

Wiching made the aged archbishop's declining years (spent mainly in trying to complete the translation of the Bible into Slavonic and in organizing the south-eastern regions of his Pannonian archdiocese) particularly trying by his constant machinations which included even the forgery of papal documents. Yet peace was to be Methodius' before long, and on April 6th, 884, the archbishop, mourned by his people even though perhaps not by the new ruler of Moravia, Svatoopluk, left this world to taste at last the perfection of the contemplative life for which he had been longing throughout the long years of his missionary activities. (The Slavonic legend tells us that the dying Cyril, well aware of his brother's desire for the contemplative life, charged him not to desert their joint missionary enterprise because of his beloved Mount Olympos.) After Methodius' death and contrary to his wishes, Wiching eventually manoeuvred himself into Methodius' place and obtained the prohibition of the Slavonic liturgy in Moravia. The remaining disciples were imprisoned, then exiled. They went to Bulgaria and Croatia, thus assuring the survival of the work of SS. Cyril and Methodius at least in regions other than the one in which it was begun.<sup>3</sup>

When following the story of these intertwined lives, one cannot fail to notice their continual shaping by God's providence. The two brothers were born in the right setting which provided them with a suitable education and experience for their future task, they were given the right sort of opportunities and acquaintance with influential people. Perhaps their achievements now seem rather easy because of that providential guidance, but that is because we see them as achievements, not as yet unfulfilled tasks.

<sup>3</sup> The lives of SS. Cyril and Methodius were a part of a very complex but fascinating texture of problems, political and religious, which had to be left out in a brief essay. The justification for doing so is provided by these words from Butler's *Lives*: 'The political and ecclesiastical rivalries behind these events have a long and complex history, and, in spite of all the recent work on the conflicting evidence, it is difficult to disentangle the details'.

To recognize God's will for oneself may be easy, but only if one lives—as Cyril and Methodius did—by faith, in humility, with a pure heart. It is only by God's guidance that an apostle is made, for to be an apostle means being a man of God used by him for his work. Cyril and Methodius were apostles, but only because they were, first and foremost, men of God. Their greatness is perhaps best expressed in the words used of one of them but surely applicable to the other, too: 'he became everything to all so as to bring all to salvation' (*The Life of Methodius*, ch. 17).



## THE LETTER OF ST IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH TO THE ROMANS

*St Ignatius was martyred in the arena at Rome about A.D. 110. He was afraid that the Roman Church would bring influence to bear to secure him a reprieve, and on his journey there as a prisoner he wrote them this letter.*

**I**GNATIUS, also known as Theophorus the God-bearer, to the church on which the majesty of the Father most high and of Jesus Christ his only Son has had mercy, the church loved and enlightened in the measure of its faith and love of Jesus Christ our God by the will of him who has willed all that is, the church which takes first place in the land of the Romans, worthy of God, worthy of renown, worthy of blessing, deservedly praised, deservedly visited, deservedly pure, taking first place in love, marked by the law of Christ and by the name of the Father, which I also greet in the name of Jesus Christ the Son of the Father; to those who are in accord with every one of his commandments in flesh and spirit, filled unmistakably with God's grace, filtered clean of all foreign colourings, I wish every blameless joy in Jesus Christ our God.

Since in answer to my prayers I have come to receive more even than I asked for in seeing your august persons face to face—for as a prisoner in Christ Jesus I hope to greet you, if it is God's will that I should be thought worthy of reaching the end—the