

Made Perfect in Faith: A Second Volume

More Sermons on the Lives and Works of the Holy Church Fathers

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Saints Cyril and Methodios Equals-to-the Apostles and Evangelizers of the Slavs

In the whole of the history of the Orthodox Church, only a few events loom as large as the ninth-century mission to bring Christianity to the Slavic peoples. That effort “opened up a new world,”¹ a truly vast world, to the Church and set in motion a series of events that would have enormous consequences for the future.

Saints Cyril² and Methodios were the sons of a noble family of Thessalonike. Their father, whose name was Leo, served as a *Droungarios* (a high-ranking officer, in command of a thousand men) in the Byzantine military. Saint Methodios, the elder of the two, was born in the year 815, while his brother, Saint Cyril, was born in 826. The two brothers, the scions of a distinguished and wealthy family, “grew up in a social environment characterized by intellectual cultivation and learning.”³

Saint Methodios was gifted in the study of law, languages, and administration. Upon completing his education, and since he had mastered many of the Slavic dialects, he was appointed *Archon* (a viceroy or

¹ *History of the Byzantine State*, by George Ostrogorsky, Translated from the German by Joan Hussey (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press), P. 218.

² The Saint’s Baptismal name was Constantine. He was given the name Cyril at his monastic tonsure just prior to his death.

³ Anthony-Emil N. Tachiaos, *Cyril and Methodios of Thessalonica: The Acculturation of the Slavs* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), P. 4.

governor) of a Slavic district in Macedonia that was under Byzantine rule. However, he soon resigned his position to enter into the monastic state, at a monastery on Mount Olympos in Bithynia. In time he became *Hegoumenos* of the monastery.

Saint Cyril traveled to Constantinople where he completed his education. Among his teachers were Leo the Mathematician,⁴ “a scholar of encyclopaedic attainments,”⁵ and Saint Photios the Great, “the greatest theologian and philosopher of his age.”⁶ Upon the completion of his education, he was ordained to the Priesthood and appointed *Chartophylax* (principal assistant) to the Patriarch. Soon thereafter, he was appointed teacher of philosophy at the great school of the Magnaura Palace.⁷ Quickly tiring of life in the world, he left Constantinople to join his brother at his monastery on Mount Olympos. Yet, despite his wishes, his many gifts impelled the Emperor to recall him.

In 851 Saint Cyril was sent by the Emperor to Samarra (in modern-day Iraq) on a diplomatic mission to Muslim Caliph al-Mutawakkil. While there, a discussion of religion arose wherein the Saint argued so convincingly in favor of Christianity that a plot was launched in the court to poison him. Thanks be to God, he escaped unscathed.

In 860, Saints Cyril and Methodios were again recalled from their monastic seclusion on a mission to the Khaganate of the Khazars⁸ whose Khan requested an “educated man to discuss religious matters with the Jews and Arabs.”⁹ The brothers succeeded in converting some of the nobility to Orthodox Christianity and were also successful in obtaining the Khan’s signature on a treaty of friendship, which bound the Khazars and Byzantines

⁴ Also called “Leo the Philosopher.” Leo, not only renowned in philosophy but truly a polymath, is credited with the invention of an optical telegraph, composed of a series of beacons that stretched across Asia Minor from the frontiers of the Arab domains to the Capital, to signal approaching danger. He also invented automata—mechanical birds and animals—that were a wonder of his time. Leo served a short time as Metropolitan of Thessalonike, but, inasmuch as he had Iconoclast sympathies (albeit quite moderate), was deposed in 843. Leo’s cousin was John VII Grammatikos, Iconoclast Patriarch of Constantinople, also deposed in 843.

⁵ George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, p. 224.

⁶ Dimitri Obolenski, *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe, 500-1453* (London, Sphere Books, 1974) p. 103

⁷ The Saint is often given the appellation “the Philosopher.”

⁸ The Khazars were a Turkic people, living in the Caucasus, roughly the region between the Caspian and Black Seas north of Georgia. They had adopted Judaism as their national religion sometime in the eighth century.

⁹ Hieromonk Makarios of Simonos Petra, *The Synaxarion*, Vol. V, p. 118.

in a defensive alliance. During their homeward journey the two recovered the relics of the Saint and Martyr, Clement of Rome, which they brought back with them to Constantinople and later presented to Pope Hadrian II.

That brings us to the mission for which the brothers are most famed, a mission that historian Warren Treadgold calls “[t]he period’s outstanding religious achievement.”¹⁰ In 863, Saint Rastislav, Prince of Moravia, sent representatives to Constantinople requesting that the Emperor dispatch missionaries to his land to convert the people to Christianity. Frankish missionaries had already been active in Rastislav’s domain, but the Prince was dissatisfied since the Franks insisted on preaching and liturgizing in Latin, which was incomprehensible to the Prince’s people. Furthermore, the Latin Church missionaries used their mission to attempt to extend Frankish political influence in the region, which the Slavs naturally resented.

Both Saints possessed some knowledge of Slavic tongues, Saint Methodios who had become familiar with this family of languages before and during the time he served as *Archon* to the Slavs of Macedonia and Saint Cyril who had earlier become fluent in Bulgarian. Saint Cyril set to work to devise an alphabet by which the sounds of the Slavic languages could be accurately written. That alphabet allowed the translation of the Holy Gospel, the Acts of the Apostles, the Psalter, the *Octoechos*, and the Divine Liturgy into the Slavonic language, a liturgical and literary language into which the complexities and subtleties of the original Greek could be more accurately translated, and yet a language that the various Slavic peoples could, with effort, comprehend.

Arriving at the Moravian court, the brothers set about their missionary work, which was crowned with great success. However, that success ignited immediate opposition from the Franks who were furious at the use of a vernacular tongue in the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. They adhered to the theory of the *tres linguae sacrae* (three sacred languages), which theory held that it was impermissible to conduct the Divine Liturgy or any Liturgical service in any language but Hebrew, Greek, or Latin, since these were the languages used on the *Titulus*, the placard decreed by Pontius Pilate to be affixed to the Cross above Christ during the Crucifixion. Other languages were forbidden in sacred services, according to this theory.

The Saints took their case to the Pope of Rome, Nicholas I, who asked them to come to Rome. When they arrived, however, it was discovered that Nicholas had died. His successor, Hadrian II, warmly greeted them and

¹⁰ Warren Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 556.

gave his unqualified approval to their efforts, while “condemning their accusers, the *Triglossites* (three-language-users).”¹¹ The Pope ordained Saint Methodios to the Holy Priesthood and invited him to celebrate the Divine Liturgy in Slavonic, which he did in several Churches in Rome.

During this visit to Rome, Saint Cyril took seriously ill and reposed on February 14, 869. He was buried in the Basilica of Saint Clement. Saint Methodios was then sent to do missionary work among the peoples of the Kingdom of Pannonia, a region at that time predominantly Slavic, that encompassed portions of modern Hungary, Austria, Serbia, and Croatia. After achieving considerable success there, the Saint returned to Rome where he was Consecrated Bishop of Sirmium, “with jurisdiction not only over Pannonia but all the Slav peoples of central Europe, with whose conversion he was entrusted.”¹² Yet sadly, despite his successes in converting great numbers of people to Christianity and despite also his authorization from the Pope, the Frankish missionaries looked very much askance at the Saint’s activities.

At the time of a visit to Moravia in 873, he discovered that Saint Rastislav had been overthrown by his nephew, Svatopluk, who then seized the throne. Svatopluk had Saint Rastislav blinded, and then turned him over to the Franks, who imprisoned him. He died shortly thereafter. In addition, Svatopluk allied himself to the Franks and favored the proponents of Latin Christianity. Saint Methodios was promptly arrested and imprisoned, and his followers driven from Moravia. He languished in prison for nearly three years before Pope John VIII ordered him set free.

The Saint then returned to his pastoral and missionary duties, fending off the continuous intrigues of the Franks, especially those of his archenemy, Bishop Wiching of Neira, a fanatical Latin prelate and a champion of the *Filioque* heresy. In 811, he visited Constantinople, where the Emperor, Basil I, and the Patriarch, Saint Photios the Great, assured him of their continuing support. Returning to Moravia, Saint Methodios began the gigantic work of translating the whole of the Holy Bible, numerous Patristic works, and the Book of Holy Canons into Slavonic. Saint Methodios reposed in the Lord on April 6, 885.

Saint Methodios had appointed Saint Gorazd, a native Moravian, his successor as Bishop. Wiching appealed to Pope Stephen V, who refused to recognize Saint Gorazd and appointed Wiching in his place. Wiching, having been given sweeping powers by the Pope, forbade the Slavonic

¹¹ Hieromonk Makarios of Simonos Petra, *The Synaxarion*, Vol. V, p. 121.

¹² *Ibid.*

Liturgy and commenced a terrible persecution of the followers of Saints Cyril and Methodios. Many were ruthlessly beaten and others, especially the young, sold into slavery. Others were driven into exile. Several made their way to Bulgaria, where they found refuge, and transplanted the works of Saint Cyril and Methodios to that great country. And although little was left of the two brother's undertakings in Moravia, "it became the seed of a rich Byzantine tradition that found its apogee in Kievan Russia after the conversion of Saint Vladimir."¹³ As historian George Ostrogorsky writes, the work of the two brothers "rooted Byzantine culture so deeply in Slav soil that the fruits it bore were all the richer for it. For the southern and eastern Slavs this achievement was of undying significance."¹⁴

Now, let us briefly consider what we learn from the mighty Apostolic endeavors of the two Saints. The great lesson here has to do with the use of language in the conversion of non-Christian peoples to Orthodox Christianity.

It has been the age-old practice of Orthodox Christianity to preach the Christian Faith in a language understood by the people to whom one preaches. Greek was the first language of the Church and, in the early centuries of the Christian Era, Greek prevailed even among the Faithful in Western Europe, though it was later supplanted gradually by Latin. Saints Cyril and Methodios grasped perfectly that if the Slavic peoples were to be successfully illuminated by the Light of Christ, it would be necessary to present the Faith in a language they could understand. Some refer to these endeavors as translating into "the language of the people." That is only partially correct, however. Insofar as translations of Sacred Scripture and the Divine Services are concerned, the efforts of Saintly men aimed not at translating these texts into "the language of the people," but in translating them into an highly elevated version of "the language of the people."

In Anglo-Saxon England in the ninth century, Saint Alfred the Great, King of England, personally translated many holy texts into Anglo-Saxon (or Old English, which is the basis of Modern English). However, in doing that he refined his language, developing an elevated variant of his native tongue, one may say a literary language, suitable for rendering the exalted thoughts and teachings of Christ and of His Apostles and Saints. That is precisely what Saints Cyril and Methodios did with their written Slavonic.

Even the Greek of the Holy Bible and of the Divine Liturgy is not a "street language," but is a refined dialect of the language, based on the *Koine*

¹³ Hieromonk Makarios of Simonos Petra, *The Synaxarion*, Vol. V, p. 123.

¹⁴ George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, p. 230.

Greek used throughout the known world of the early Apostolic Age, in other words, the language of the Holy Evangelists and of Saint Paul.

Our wonderful English translation of the Holy Bible, the Authorized or King James Version, was translated from the Greek by the greatest linguists and scholars of that time. They sought to devise a variant of the English language of their time that could convey both the beauty of the original tongues and at the same time convey the textual meaning accurately. These linguists and ecclesiastical scholars did not employ the “street language” of the time, but refined the common language to reflect the grandeur of the texts. The attainments of those linguists and scholars we maintain in traditional Orthodox Churches that use English in services. We use not “street English” (God forbid) but an elevated style of English, one that takes cognizance of the fact that Divine Services are not ordinary events, but are truly *Divine*, and so must reflect that truth through the employment of a refined, one might say “divinized” tongue.

And so, while it is vital that Orthodoxy be presented, wherever it is preached, in a language understood by the great mass of people, it is also vital that the spirit, that is the essence, be preserved. That is done by maintaining the beauty, sophistication, and elevated style of the older languages when translations are made.

That is one of the great lessons we learn from the imperishable efforts of Saints Cyril and Methodios. It is a lesson that we, who live in a non-Orthodox country, must take to heart so that we too may be inspired to repeat their efforts, and bring others to the saving Faith of Christ, the saving Faith of Orthodox Christianity.