



A Short Life Story of Saints Cyril and Methodius

THE APOSTLES OF THE SLAVS MINDFUL OF RESPECT FOR DIGNITY

Co-Patrons of Europe

by Mariela Baeva

‘Does not rain fall equally upon all people? And does not the sun shine upon all of us as well? And do we not all breathe in the same way?’ Constantine was staring at his opponents, their eyes narrowed in thought and anger.

Minutes of truculent silence followed.

‘We are aware of only three languages, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin...’ Constantine’s opponents – priests and monks – broke the silence. ‘How is it that you now teach and train using letters created by you and your brother for the Slavs?’ They could hardly curb their torrent of outrage.

The assembled supporters of the trilingual heresy glanced at each other.

The gathering and the dispute happened in Venice. The year was 867AD. A special treaty had provided a form of independence for Venice from the canons of the Western Empire. Yet, the special status did not affirm a dependence on the Byzantine Empire either. That delicate position enhanced the role of Venice in trade. It acted, too, as a fresh impetus to stability in a troubled neighbourhood. So did Venice’s challenging location, between two dominant empires.

Ever building a sense of vulnerability, the dispute proceeded. It inspired a crossfire between Constantine – in the worthy company of his brother Methodius – and the supporters of the trilingual heresy. Vehement hostility dominated towards the Slavs’ endeavour. It also brought home the call of Bulgaria to have its various groups of society integrated, standing up for each other and contributing to the Christian faith. The seeds of a new language were giving rise to hope ...

Constantine glanced at the two opposite rows of glazed faces.

His words echoed in the instantaneous silence: ‘We recognize scores of peoples who avail of their own language and writing: Armenians, Persians, Abkhazians, Iberians, Sogdians, Goths, Avars, Turks, Khazars, Arabs, Egyptians, and many others ...’

His prudence prevailed: ‘Are you not remorseful over touching upon only three languages, and suggesting that all other nations and tribes are to be blind and deaf?’

And this is how the short life story of Saints Cyril and Methodius begins:

1. The city of Thessalonica was the second top-tier military and administrative city of the Byzantine Empire in the ninth century. In the city and its surroundings, the Slav population of the Bulgarian group carried the day. One rich family – that of Leo and Maria, associated with the higher nobility – begot seven children. The youngest was Constantine.

"In your hands we present him ..."

2. Constantine wrote his first piece in his adolescence. It was in Greek. The Emperor's administrator, Theoctistus, acknowledged his skills and passionate zeal in pursuit of knowledge. He sent the youngster to the prestigious School of Magnaura of higher learning.

The School of Magnaura drove the tradition of higher education during the centuries and rose to become a cradle of multidisciplinary science and knowledge.

Before leaving the city of Thessalonica to join the imperial school in Constantinople, Constantine wrote his second work, "Solomon's Prayer". It sent a message:

"... give me Wisdom ..."

3. Within three months, the young man became proficient in grammar. His interest grew, too, in geometry, in the dialectical method, in philosophy, in rhetoric, in music ...

He led a life of chastity.

Upon finishing his studies, Constantine was driven to the priesthood by the Emperor's administrator. The young man declared his strongest wish: 'I am eager to be in quest of the honour of the predecessors ...'

Theoctistus received that message in a favourable spirit. He assigned Constantine as a librarian to St Sophia Church in Constantinople.

Soon after, however, the young man retreated from that role.

He withdrew discreetly to a monastery on the Bosphorus shore and let no one know of his taking refuge.

Bosphorus means "ox crossing". The Greek mythology refers to Io, who is transformed into a white heifer by Zeus. He visits the strait during her wanderings ...

"Preserve and bless ..."

4. Six months slipped away before the Emperor's administrator discovered Constantine's location. He had searched for the young man in vain and desperation.

Theoctistus approached Constantine with a request to go along with holding an academic chair and teaching philosophy in Constantinople. The young man did not refuse.

From that point onwards, "the Philosopher" became an attribute associated with Constantine's name. It stemmed, too, from the excellence of his knowledge.

Theoctistus: 'Philosopher, I wish to learn what philosophy is.'

*Constantine: 'The knowledge of matters divine and human ...'**

5. Around 851AD or slightly later during a rare truce between the Byzantine Empire and the Arabs, Constantine the Philosopher – at the age of or over 24 – embarked on a mission to the Saracens. It

was organized upon the Emperor's orders. The mission held the features of a theological and a political endeavour. It focused on a dispute with Arabic scholars.

The Saracens professed Islam.

They were known for waging a polemical fight against the Holy Trinity, and the visit led to ardent debates.

'How is it that you divide Him into three?'

To this, Constantine the Philosopher said: 'Your prophet Mohammed bore witness when he wrote that the spirit was sent to the Virgin, expressing the consent She gave birth. From this, I apprise you of the Trinity.'

Invested in the mission, Constantine the Philosopher influenced the debate through grasp of the issue and knowledge of the Qur'ān, and through analytical thinking and passion. An attempt was made to poison him with a drink, but this failed.

"Grace and strength in his words ..."

6. Coming back home, Constantine the Philosopher isolated himself in silence.

He distributed his bread and fish to the poor.

Before long, he left for the mountain of Olympus in Asia Minor.

Asia Minor is most of what Turkey comprises in the present day.

His elder brother, Methodius, had secluded himself in a monastery in the mountain, devoting himself to prayers and reading.

"... rendering praise unto Him ..."

7. Methodius was a man of intellect and solid education. His ethos was equal to his younger brother. Before moving to the St Polychron Monastery in the mountain of Olympus, Methodius was a military archon**. He had been appointed to govern a region of the Byzantine Empire, a Slavic province, before his monastic life. Ten years later, he succumbed to the ascetic venture.

... and he prayed relentlessly ...

8. Shortly after Constantine's journey to the Saracens, the two brothers – joining together – intervened in a mission; that time – to the Khazars.

The early history of the Khazars is unclear; their original location, however, was the Caucasus region.

The Khazars, who embraced Judaism, were tolerant of various religions. Before confronting them, Constantine the Philosopher learnt their language, Hebrew.

The mission's utmost outcome was to boost the liberation of thousands of Christians, held captive, to go back to their places of origin.

"O guest, you speak worthily and rightly."

9. It was in the monastery, in 855AD, where the two brothers devotedly studied books for their own spiritual enlivening and inspiration.

They also launched the creation of the first Slavonic script, specifically the Glagolitic alphabet. It was adapted to the phonetic peculiarities of the Slavonic language of the Bulgarian community.

The books crucial for worship were translated from Greek into Slavonic. A group of St Polychron monks assisted the two brothers.

“... the parchments were filled with mysterious characters ...”

10. A trip to Greater Moravia – regarded nowadays as one of the most crucial assignments of the two brothers – followed the mission to the Khazars. Upon the request of Rostislav –who reigned in Greater Moravia at the time– the educators were to be sent there. The demand was tabled before Emperor Michael III of the Byzantine Empire. The mission focused on throwing light on the “true Christian faith”. Delivered in the Slavonic language, it would pursue the needs of the people of Greater Moravia.

The two brothers brought the new alphabet to Greater Moravia. The missionaries were received with honour. They gathered students and launched translations of the liturgical books. It was the autumn of 863AD.

“In the beginning was the Word ...”

11. In Velehrad, the capital of Greater Moravia, the two brothers established a school. The Slavonic language was introduced into the services of the church. The mission lasted for over three years.

“... a great liking for the Slavic letters was taken ...”

12. In 867AD, the Pope summoned the two brothers to Rome.

The dispute in Venice with the supporters of the trilingual heresy happened on the way to Rome.

The inhabitants of Rome carried candles when they welcomed the two brothers and their disciples. The light of the candles blessed the spirit of enlightenment of the brothers’ acts. A holy liturgy followed to celebrate them. The pupils and followers were consecrated. A service in Slavonic was held in the Church of the Apostle Peter.

The visit to Rome crowned the endeavours of the two brothers to present to the Pope the relics of the martyr Clement (also known as Saint Clement of Rome). They had recovered them during their stay in the Crimea, in Kherson, just before the Greater Moravian mission.

Clement lived in exile in Crimea, and was ordered, as a martyr, to excavate stones from the ground. That happened during the reign of the Roman Emperor Trajan.

“... I place my hope in St. Clement ...”

13. Holy orders were conferred on the pupils of the two brothers, and they became priests and deacons. Many of them, like Gorazd, Naum, Angelarius, Clement (later, the Bulgarian Archbishop and the founder of the Ohrid school), started to train other disciples.

Everything comes, but at a cost ...

14. Shortly after the success, Constantine the Philosopher fell severely ill. He spent fifty days in a canonical dress and called himself Cyril. As the hour of his demise advanced, he addressed Methodius with an ardent appeal: *‘Behold, my brother, we have shared the same destiny, ploughing the same furrow. I have now fallen in the field at the end of my day. I know that you greatly love your Mountain, but do not for the sake of the Mountain give up your work of teaching. For where better can you find salvation?’****

Today, Constantine the Philosopher-Cyril’s relics are preserved in the Basilica of St Clement in Rome.

15. Faithful to his brother’s plea, Methodius worked his heart out in pursuit of his missionary activities. He was consecrated archbishop of the diocese of Pannonia, the second important centre of Slavonic writing.

Over a 15-year period, the Pastor strove to steer towards a unity between the new Eastern Orthodox creed and the ancient one.

He faced many challenges, however, including an imprisonment for two years and hostility to his activities.

Methodius kept on translating books, scriptures and a collection of laws, Corpus Methodiana Juridica. The translation established the Slavonic literary language system.

Tears and songs from the rich and slaves, strangers and natives, men, women and children accompanied the Pastor on his final way in 884AD. The service proceeded in Greek, Latin, and Slavonic.

*“... our Teacher, the holy Methodius, whose virtues and struggles ...”*****

16. After his death, the disciples of the two brothers were hugely persecuted. Then, the Bulgarian Tsar Boris Mikhail I asked Rome to send the disciples to Bulgaria. The rise of Slavonic education and literature marked his long reign. A period of enlightenment started. The achievements were not the preserve of the elite only - they were made accessible to the people. Before long, the process spilled over and beyond territories ... The Cyrillic alphabet was developed, stemming from the “mysterious characters” of the two brothers. The ethnic unity of the country prevailed. It served as a model of excellence throughout Europe ...

The bridge between the Western and Eastern heritage came to the fore ... The spirit of openness sustained both new and ancient creeds ...

Sparks of hope ...

Traces of patrimony ...

Into your hands and your hearts ...

Two brothers, one vision; anguish, and a plethora of triumphs for the sake of humanity ...

Mariela Baeva

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*ST. CYRIL, OLD CHURCH SLAVONIC, AND THE CREATION OF THE GLAGOLITIC ALPHABET

**from Greek “ruler” (Oxford dictionary)

***Vita Methodii VI, 2-3; ed. cit., p. 225.

****Slavorum Apostoli by Pope John Paul II