

Pope: Cyril and Methodius are examples of inculturation
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CYRIL AND METHODIUS: PERENNIAL EXAMPLE OF INCULTURATION

VATICAN CITY, 17 JUN 2009 (VIS)

Sts. Cyril and Methodius, apostles of the Slavs and co-patrons of Europe, were the subject of the Holy Father's catechesis during his general audience, which was held this morning in St. Peter's Square.

The Pope sketched a brief biography of the saints explaining how Cyril, born in Salonika around the year 826, received a careful education and was ordained a priest at an early age. Soon afterwards his older brother Methodius, born about the year 815, abandoned his own administrative career and retired to a monastery on Mount Olympus in Bithynia where he was subsequently joined by Cyril.

Some years later the imperial government entrusted Cyril with a mission to the peoples living around the Sea of Azov who had asked to be sent "a man of letters capable of discussing with Jews and Saracens". On his return to Constantinople, the emperor Michael III, who had been a school friend of Cyril, sent the two brothers to Moravia where Prince Ratislav had requested "a teacher capable of explaining the true faith to us in our own language."

"Their mission", the Pope added, "soon met with unexpected success. By translating the liturgy into Slavic the two brothers earned great affection among the people. This, however, also aroused the hostility of the Frankish clergy who had arrived in Moravia earlier and considered the territory as part of their own ecclesial jurisdiction". Travelling to Rome to justify their actions, the brothers stopped in Venice where they opposed the "so-called trilingual heresy, ... which sustained that there were only three languages in which God could legitimately be praised: Hebrew, Greek and Latin".

The brothers eventually reached Rome to request the support of Pope Hadrian II. That Pontiff "understood the great importance of their exceptional mission" because he thought "the Slavic peoples could act as a bridge between East and West, helping to maintain the unity of Christians on both sides of the empire. Thus he did not hesitate to approve the brothers' mission in Great Moravia, accepting the use of the Slavic Language in the liturgy".

While in Rome Cyril fell seriously ill and died on 14 February 869. Methodius returned to Moravia and Pannonia in 870 "where he worked actively in organising the Church and in forming a group of disciples". He died on 6 April 885.

"To give a brief spiritual profile of the two brothers", the Holy Father continued, "we must first note the passion with which Cyril studied the writings of St. Gregory of Nazianzus from whom he learnt the importance of language in transmitting the Revelation". In this context, Benedict XVI recalled how, even before their mission to Moravia, Cyril and Methodius "were working on a plan to gather Christian dogmas into books written in Slavic. This entailed the need for new graphic symbols, closer to the spoken language, and from here arose the Glagolitic alphabet which, subsequently modified, became known as 'Cyrillic' in honour of the person who inspired it".

"Cyril and Methodius were convinced that individual peoples could not claim to have fully received the Revelation until they had heard it in their own language and read it in the letters of their own alphabet". Thus they are, he went on, "a classic example of what today we call 'inculturation': each people must integrate the revealed message into their own culture and express the truths of salvation with their own language".

In this context, the Pope concluded, "the brother saints have left a testimony ... from which the Church today continues to draw inspiration and guidance".