

The Celebration of the Methodian Anniversary in Central and Eastern Europe

The 1100th anniversary of the death of St Methodius is being celebrated in a number of communist countries of central and eastern Europe, since it was there that Methodius and his younger brother, Constantine-Cyril, the "Apostles of the Slavs", carried out their missionary and educational work. This began with the so-called "Moravian mission" of 863, when Prince Rastislav of Moravia asked the Byzantine emperor Michael III to send him missionary-teachers who could instruct his subjects in the Christian faith in their own language. Rastislav ruled a principality in the middle Danube region then inhabited by West Slavs, the ancestors of the modern Czechs and Slovaks. The Moravians were already Christian, thanks to the activity of Frankish missionaries; but the consolidation of the new faith was making slow progress because the services and instruction were in Latin. There was someone in Constantinople at that time who was ideally suited to provide what Rastislav required; this was Constantine the Philosopher, a teacher at the university of Constantinople, a native of Thessalonika (where many people were familiar with spoken Slavonic) and a philologist of genius. It is possible that he had already been experimenting with an alphabet for the Slav language; certainly he produced one very quickly when requested. This was the so-called glagolitic alphabet. After translating certain basic Gospel readings into Slavonic, Constantine and his brother Methodius, together with a large band of fellow-workers, set off for Moravia.

Their work there was very successful, and after three and a half years the two brothers felt they could return home. But first they went to Rome where their recently translated Slav liturgy (in both the Byzantine and the Roman rite) was officially approved by Pope Hadrian II and celebrated in St Peter's. Constantine died in Rome in 869; just before his death he assumed the monastic name of Cyril. Methodius returned to central Europe with the title of Archbishop of Pannonia, entrusted by the Pope with the task of building up a church in that missionary area, using the Slav liturgy, and under Roman jurisdiction.

This task proved to be full of difficulties.

Methodius faced relentless opposition from the Frankish Bavarian clergy (who regarded him and his disciples as interlopers), and in time he had less and less support from local rulers. But he continued his pastoral activity, and his work of teaching and translating, with remarkable energy and steadfastness until his death on 6 April 885. However, shortly after this his disciples were arrested and deported. Some of them probably settled in Croatia, where the Slav liturgy (Roman rite) was already quite widely used. Here, with the support of Prince Boris and his son and successor Tsar Symeon, the Slav liturgy (Byzantine rite) was firmly established, native priests were trained and the corpus of translated literature greatly extended; it was in Bulgaria too that the first original works in Old Church Slavonic were written. Another important change, made official in 893, was the replacement of the glagolitic alphabet by the Cyrillic (called after Constantine's monastic name though he was not responsible for it). This alphabet was much closer to Greek, with which some Bulgarians were already familiar. In the course of time this literary and liturgical heritage passed to the Serbs and the Russians, and also to the Romanians who, although not Slavs, used Church Slavonic as both a liturgical and a chancery language up to the seventeenth century.

Varied Forms of Celebration

It is natural that the anniversary of the death of Methodius should be celebrated in Czechoslovakia, since that is where the work of the two brothers began. The celebrations were beset with difficulties from the beginning. The new generation of Catholics in Czechoslovakia (many of whom are converts) is not easily thwarted either by state repressions or by the fact that their demands for greater religious freedom are not likely to be heeded. Early last year they began spontaneously to collect signatures on an invitation to the Pope to visit Velehrad, the village bearing the same name as the capital of the Great Moravian Empire where St Methodius was invited to spread the Gospel in Slavonic and where the celebrations were to begin. It is reported that as many as 20,000 names were col-

lected, but the harassment of the organisers grew so intense that the Primate, Cardinal Tomášek, decided to ease the pressure on believers by himself issuing an official invitation to the Pope on 8 February. The invitation could be printed only in unofficial Catholic bulletins. On 1 May, amidst a furious anti-papal campaign in the official media in Czechoslovakia, John Paul II replied personally, saying that he would be happy to visit Velehrad, even if only for one day. He emphasised his Slav affinity with the Czechs and Slovaks. (St Methodius preached at a time when they had not yet been separated into different nations.) The regime viewed this as subversive, and the party professional atheist propagandists began their ideological counter-offensive. According to the line taken by one of them, Dr Jiří Nosterský, St Methodius and Czechoslovakia have become key strategic points in a new Vatican *Ostpolitik* which by misusing historical figures such as Sts Cyril and Methodius, feeds on bourgeois anti-communism, attempting thereby to wrest Czechoslovakia from the socialist bloc. Moreover, the Pope's appeals for evangelisation of the world are misusing the feelings of believers, linked with the new political ambitions of the Vatican.

The Pope was not permitted to come to Czechoslovakia. Instead the Slovak party secretary, Vasil Bilak, suggested that Patriarch Pimen of the Russian Orthodox Church should come and that it would not be a bad idea if the Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia joined the Orthodox Church. To create an alternative to the Catholic celebrations a state-sponsored three-day celebration by the Orthodox of Czechoslovakia took place on 22-24 March. Speakers at this celebration included Vladimír Janků, director of the religious affairs department of the Ministry of Cults, and a representative of the World Council of Churches. The campaign against the Catholic celebrations reached a peak early this year when the party weekly *Tribuna* referred to the apostles as "altar boys". On 18 March Cardinal Tomášek wrote two letters, one to *Tribuna* and the other to the government, in which he protested strongly against such misinformation and political misinterpretation of religious history. "The impression given", he wrote, "was that the Republic was under siege." He stressed the apolitical nature of the anniversary and defended the believers' rights by references to

the Constitution and to the Declaration of Human Rights. It may have been this resolute action by the 85-year-old Primate that enabled him to meet Catholic clergy on 9 April to mark the anniversary. It has been reported (the *Times* 23 April) that nearly 1,000 priests assembled at Velehrad (this number represents one third of all Czechoslovak Catholic clergy), without any advertising of the event in the official media. Even members of religious orders (banned since 13 April 1950) attended in their vestments and over 7,000 believers gathered in and outside the church to hear Cardinal Tomášek read the letter from the Pope. "We want the Pope," chanted the people in the street, in a clear show of defiance reminiscent of scenes in Poland. "Methodius," said the Cardinal, "would have urged the priests to steer clear of politics." And the 11-page letter from the Pope urged the priests, in the spirit of Methodius, to "continue intrepidly on the path of evangelisation and testimony, even if the situation at this moment in history makes it arduous, difficult and often even bitter."

The Bulgarians are understandably proud of the contribution made by their ancestors to what is called "Slav Letters", and the work of Cyril and Methodius is commemorated every year on 24 May, which is officially described as the Day of Bulgarian Enlightenment and Culture. This year there are to be additional Methodian celebrations in the form of a nation-wide programme of lectures, meetings and cultural activities. This was inaugurated at a meeting held in Sofia on 5 April, attended by a distinguished gathering of state officials and representatives of cultural and academic institutions. These Methodian celebrations are under the personal patronage of Todor Zhivkov (General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party), and are described as "an essential part and continuation of the varied activities connected with the celebration of the 1,300th anniversary of the Bulgarian state". In this official commemoration the emphasis is on the work of Cyril and Methodius as teachers, on their championship of the "national" language of the Slavs and on the part played by "the Bulgarian people" in developing and disseminating the literary heritage of the Moravian mission. The anniversary has been given wide coverage in the press, and the April issue of

the popular illustrated monthly Cyrillo-Methodian journal *Za bukvite* (The Alphabet) is almost entirely devoted to the work of Cyril and Methodius, including articles by foreign scholars. The Bulgarian Academy of Sciences has marked the occasion by publishing the first part of a three-volume *Cyrillo-Methodian Encyclopedia* which is intended to be a comprehensive and definitive reference work on the lives and influence of the "Apostles of the Slavs". Numerous other works have appeared or are due to appear, ranging from *oeuvres de popularisation* to specialist studies.

The Bulgarian Orthodox Church is celebrating the anniversary with special commemorative services throughout the country. On 6 April there was a solemn service of thanksgiving for the work of Methodius in the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Sofia, at which Patriarch Maksim and all Bulgaria's ten metropolitans concelebrated the liturgy.

In Yugoslavia it is the Catholic Croats who have made the most enthusiastic response to the Methodian anniversary. For over a hundred years after the death of Methodius the glagolitic Slav version of the Roman rite was widely used among the Croats, and though it was later largely superseded by the Latin mass, it never entirely died out; hence the Croats feel that they have a continuous link with the work of Cyril and Methodius. There have already been talks and lectures on the work and influence of Cyril and Methodius in a number of places, including Ljubljana, Rijeka and Sarajevo, and the Yugoslav Academy of Arts and Science in Zagreb is planning to hold an international symposium in the autumn on the theme: "1100 Years since the Death of Methodius: the Literary and Cultural Heritage of Cyril and Methodius among the Croats". The popular response to these activities can be gauged from the fact that there was not enough room in the main hall of the archbishop's palace in

Rijeka for all the people who wished to hear a lecture by a visiting scholar from Vienna.

By contrast the Orthodox Serbs, who still use the Cyrillic alphabet and the Slav liturgy (Eastern rite), seem strangely silent. *Pravoslavlje*, the fortnightly official journal of the Serbian Orthodox Church, hardly mentions the Methodian anniversary; and on one of the few occasions when it does, it is to say that it forms part of a three-fold commemoration, shared with two Belgrade proto-martyrs and with the patron saint of the Serbs, St Sava (who died in 1236). (*Pravoslavlje*, 15 February 1985, p. 1.) Not surprisingly, it is St Sava who is given the extensive coverage. It should be remembered that the Serbs, unlike the Croats and the Bulgarians, had no direct contact with either Cyril or Methodius or their immediate disciples, and also that in honouring St Sava they are paying tribute to the Cyrillo-Methodian tradition. However, another indication of the Serbian "silence" emerges in an article in the national daily *Politika*, which criticises the Serbian lack of interest on the grounds that Cyril and Methodius have been "taken over by the Bulgarians". "We should celebrate their anniversary without looking at our neighbours," says the writer, "we hardly need even mention them." (*Politika*, 26 February 1985.)

One church leader in Yugoslavia has stressed the ecumenical significance of the Methodian anniversary: Archbishop Alojzije Turk, Roman Catholic archbishop of Belgrade, speaking at a service held during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (which was also attended by representatives of the Anglican and Serbian Orthodox Churches) said that the Methodian anniversary should stimulate ecumenical activity, since Methodius and his brother were "harbingers of the unity of Christendom, especially the Christian East and the Christian West". (*AKSA*, 1 February 1985.)

MURIEL HEPPELL