

The Methodian Anniversary in Eastern Europe

In RCL Vol. 13, No. 2 we reported on events preceding and surrounding the celebrations to mark the 1100th anniversary of the death of St Methodius. The following reports compiled by Keston College staff provide an update on developments in connection with these celebrations in honour of Methodius and his brother Cyril, the "Apostles to the Slavs", in Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. Although there have been no organised celebrations of the anniversary in the USSR, the occasion has not gone entirely unnoticed in the Soviet press: a summary of comments made by one Soviet correspondent in Bulgaria follows the reports on the East European events.

The state-sponsored Czech Orthodox celebrations, which provided an officially-sanctioned alternative to the Catholic Church's semi-official gathering at Velehrad, took place on 22-24 March. A special session held on 23 March involved representatives of theological academies and ecumenical groups, as well as of the civil authorities and the cultural institutions of Czechoslovakia. In his speech at this session, Metropolitan Dorotei of Prague, Primate of the Czech Orthodox Church, drew attention to the fact that if his church is part of the wider community of Orthodox churches, this is due precisely to the influence of St Methodius, sent to Moravia by the church in Constantinople. Speaking on behalf of the Comenius theological faculty in Prague, Professor Pavel Aleš maintained that the mission carried out for three years by St Methodius in Moravia was a genuine cultural and spiritual revolution, whose fruits were the foundation of an autonomous local church and a new civilisation. The representative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Metropolitan Emiliano of Silivri, outlined the missionary vision of the Byzantine Church, while the representative of the Greek Church, Bishop Anastasios of Androussa, emphasised the example given to future missionaries by the theology and practice of Sts Cyril and Methodius.

Messages were read from the Russian Orthodox Church by Metropolitan Antoni of Leningrad, from the Serbian Church by Bishop

Sava of Souřmadia and from the Bulgarian Church by Bishop Gregor of Lovech. The next day, Sunday 24 March, a solemn liturgy was celebrated in the Orthodox cathedral in Prague with all the official guests, the clergy and the theological students of the Czech Orthodox Church.

The Czech Catholic celebrations, held at Velehrad on 6-7 July, were attended by 200,000 to 250,000 believers.* This is believed to be the largest religious gathering in the history of Czechoslovakia. Pope John Paul II, who was unable to attend as the Czech authorities had indicated strongly that such a visit would be “undesirable”, stated that he would be at the celebrations “in spirit”; Cardinal Casaroli attended as his legate, and concelebrated a mass with Cardinal Tomášek, the Czech Primate. In connection with the Cardinal’s impending visit, several Catholics were interrogated in Prague on 29 and 30 June, including Fr Otto Mádr. (Fr Mádr was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1952 for “spying for the Vatican”; he spent 15 years in labour camps before being released and is reported to be in very poor health.) The police interrogations, it was reported by observers in Prague, were aimed at disrupting unofficial Catholic life in the country, and at preventing Cardinal Casaroli from meeting any other than officially approved Catholics.

According to a *samizdat* report on the event (*Informace o cirkvi* [Church Information Bulletin] No. 8 August 1985), although the event was not publicised by the government-controlled media, it caused a considerable stir in the country and particularly among its communist rulers. It provided evidence of an undercurrent of religious revival which had suddenly reached the surface. It was also a “political” demonstration of strength and a clear rejection of the regime’s anti-religious policies. The crowd was very self-restrained since it enjoyed a relative impunity because of its size and a less than prominent police presence. For some time before the commencement of the ceremony the crowd was chanting “We want the Pope”. Scarcely anyone knew at the time that Austria’s Cardinal König, Cardinal Hume from London and Cardinal Lustiger of Paris were denied visas while Cardinal Glemp (who as a Polish citizen did not require a visa) was gently redirected at Prague airport to resume his journey to Djakovo in Yugoslavia where the celebrations continued. When the local communist official opened the celebrations with the statement that it was a “peace festival” the crowd retorted “this is a pilgrimage” and “long live the Holy Father”. At the end he was completely silenced by the people shouting “enough”, “we want the mass”. Then the minister of culture, Milan Klusák, spoke. He was often interrupted during his ideological speech in which he presented the mission of Cyril and Methodius to the Great Moravian kingdom as a cultural event, linking it to the constructing of socialism. People chanted

*For a report on the April celebrations, attended by over 7,000 believers, see the Chronicle item in *RCL* Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 218-20.

“religious freedom” and “construction of churches”, correcting the minister whenever he referred to the apostles without the adjective “saints”.

Among the speakers it was, perhaps surprisingly, the Russian Orthodox Metropolitan, Filaret of Minsk, who attracted particular attention. He emphasised the unity of the western and eastern Christendom and praised the actions of the various popes who initiated and popularised the cult of the apostles. His speech was free of obligatory references to “peace propaganda” or “achievements of socialism” and it was forgotten that he represented the delegation of the Prague Christian Peace Conference, organised by the regime to coincide with the Velehrad festivities. The longest ovation however was reserved for the aged Cardinal Tomášek (86) who read the Pope’s address and announced that the Pope had sent a golden rose to the basilica as a token of his appreciation for the work of the missionaries and for the church in Czechoslovakia. John Paul II, although prevented from coming, emphasised in his letter the missionary task of the Church, a particularly poignant reference to the situation in Czechoslovakia. The Pope referred also to his encyclical *Slavorum Apostoli*, in which the example of the two saints is held up to the whole Church: as Slavs and patrons of Europe they should be of “particular encouragement for the believers in the Slavonic countries”.

One of the editors of an underground Catholic journal commented when leaving: “Well, we have just experienced a few hours of freedom, now back to the struggle.” The Czech and Slovak Catholics will not forget this event for many years to come.

The delegation from the Vatican also met the government for talks but it is believed that no agreement on any church-state issues was reached. The time for concessions on the part of the regime has not yet come. The Vatican clearly believes that it may depend upon the renewed strength and resistance of believers in Czechoslovakia.

The report on the Velehrad celebrations in *Informace o církvi* is prefaced by a saying of St Methodius: “Not by silence or hiding but by proclamation is the glory of Jesus Christ known to the whole world.”

Further details about the events at Velehrad have been provided by a priest (and Charter 77 signatory) who was present. They appeared in an interview with a visiting American journalist, from which we have taken the following excerpts:*

What for you is most significant about the St Methodius celebrations held in Velehrad last weekend (6-7 July)?

St Methodius withstood fierce opposition from the German rulers of Moravia in performing his mission. His work, for us, symbolises courage

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and the strength of the individual when faced with brute force. It inspires us just as the work of our cardinal (Cardinal František Tomášek) does. He too is a symbol of resistance and faith against an official policy which calls for the eradication of religion.

Were you surprised at the turnout for the event?

I'd never seen anything like it. More than 100,000 people on a religious pilgrimage! Thirty years ago it would have been impossible.

Do you mean the government wouldn't have permitted it or the people wouldn't have felt such religious fervour?

Both. But that's not to say that the authorities are any more lenient today than they were thirty years ago. It's part of the paradox of the last 15 years: as the government tries to take over more and more of the church, people's faith gets stronger and stronger. The celebration at Velehrad was possible because the church and the people demanded it in spite of the consequences. That's also why more people are attending church today even though it could bring them trouble. And then there are the underground church services which are getting more common. A group of people get together in someone's home and there they can worship as they please:

Were you surprised at the people's reaction to the Minister of Culture's speech at Velehrad?

Not very. People had travelled from all over the country for a religious celebration. They wouldn't settle for the watered-down "peace" manifestation that Mr Klusák had in store for them. When (according to a secret party directive warning of "clericalism" at Velehrad) he tried to emphasise only the cultural contributions of St Methodius, the crowd hissed and booed. They shouted, "Faith!", "Belief!" and "We want the Pope!". Klusák was furious!

I think this reveals the most important change in believers' attitudes. They used to tell themselves, "We must endure and exist". Now they are saying, "We must have more than mere tolerance and second-class citizenship. We deserve to be appreciated as a significant part of the community."

How did the authorities react to this mass expression of religious sentiment at Velehrad?

There were many police — often with dogs. They blocked the traffic for five kilometres around the area so people had to walk unnecessarily far to get to the meeting area. Identity checks were common and there were several instances of provocation. One of the most frustrating things was the isolation of the Vatican delegation; the members were forbidden to meet Czech and Slovak priests and believers except in the presence of government officials.

Despite all this everybody was very well-behaved and I noticed yesterday, on the day after the pilgrimage, that hardly any litter was left on the ground. Only a small thing but it proves that, given the group's peacefulness and strict respect for the law, any action taken against it is itself an act of violence.

Celebrations in Yugoslavia

As well as representing the Pope at the Czech Catholic celebrations, Cardinal Casaroli also attended the Yugoslav celebrations of the Methodian anniversary. These were held in Djakovo on 4 and 5 June. While in Yugoslavia the Cardinal also met the Yugoslav Prime Minister, Mrs Planinc. Articles which appeared in the Yugoslav press commenting on his visit remarked upon "the sound relationship between the Vatican and Yugoslavia, and their partnership in the struggle for peace in the world" (*Vjesnik* 3 July 1985) and on the Cardinal's own "readiness for dialogue rather than anathema" (*Danas* 2 July 1985). The celebrations were held in the Church of Sts Cyril and Methodius in Moribor (Slovenia) which was built to commemorate the anniversary. Sixty priests and representatives of all the deaneries were assembled, and the special mass had to be celebrated outside because of the large numbers.

Before the Cardinal's arrival in Yugoslavia, a festival marking the anniversary had taken place in the Macedonian National Theatre in Skopje on 24 May. The highlight of this occasion was the première of the "Cyril and Methodius Oratorio" by the contemporary Macedonian composer, Riste Avramovsky.

Events in Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, Methodian anniversary celebrations continued to receive special attention in both church and state circles. This was evident in the Orthodox publications *Duhovna kultura* (Spiritual Culture) and *Tsurkoven vestnik* (Church Herald) (although these frequently contain articles devoted to Cyril and Methodius) and in the secular press, which gave considerable space in honour of "the great Slav preceptor, Methodius".

organised by the Cyrillo-Méthodian Scholarly Centre, the Bulgarian Studies Centre and the Presidium of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, was held at Sofia University. It was attended by sixty scholars from 22 countries and by 32 Bulgarian specialists. Among those present were literary scholars, historians, archaeologists, art critics, philosophers and musicologists. Also in May, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church hosted an official visit from Emilio Castro, General Secretary of the World Council

of Churches. He was awarded the Church's Order of Cyril and Methodius (First Class) "in recognition of his work for world mission and evangelism and his commitment to justice and peace". A documentary art exhibition was presented at the National Museum of History in Sofia to mark the anniversary. This traced the life-work of Cyril and Methodius in all its aspects, with special emphasis on the development of the mediaeval literary centres of Ohrid, Preslav and Turnovo and the spread of the Slavonic script across Europe.

In June, a six-day international symposium on Cyril and Methodius was held in the Bulgarian capital. It was sponsored by the Orthodox Patriarchate, the Church Historical and Archival Institute and the St Clement of Ohrid Theological Academy, with the help of the "Department for Inter-Church Relations and Peace-making Cooperation" of the Bulgarian Patriarchate. Held under the patronage of Patriarch Maksim, the opening was attended by a number of state dignitaries, including the Vice-President of the State Council, a Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, a Deputy Chairman of the Committee for Culture and a Vice-President of the Academy of Sciences. Present at the symposium were 120 prominent Bulgarian and world scholars and clerics from some 15 countries. In his speech of welcome, Patriarch Maksim observed that the Moravian mission of "the first two Slavonic teachers" had awakened Slavdom to new life and given impetus to its progress, but, he said, "it was the land of Bulgaria that saw the extraordinary spiritual advancement of the Slavs. Thus Bulgaria emerged as the cradle of Slavonic education in the spirit and in the traditions bequeathed by the two Slavonic saints." Subjects discussed included history, literature, homiletics, liturgics, theology, philosophy and culture. One topic debated was "the rôle and significance of Cyril and Methodius in promoting spiritual and cultural cooperation among the Balkan peoples in the ninth and tenth centuries." *Sofia News* (English edition) reported that a round-table session was devoted to "the tradition and humanism of the methods of Cyril and Methodius in rendering psychiatric aid (*sic*) in the Bulgarian lands". The symposium opened with a prayer for Methodius and ended with a service at the Alexander Nevsky Memorial Cathedral.

Soviet comment

In an article entitled "Cyril, Methodius and the campaign of the Cross", the Bulgarian special correspondent of the Soviet weekly *Literaturnaya gazeta* (29 May 1985) comments on the significance of the events surrounding the Methodian anniversary, mainly in terms of the present-day East-West relations. He notes that the occasion coincides appropriately with the 1985 "Bulgarian day of enlightenment and

culture”, which falls on 24 May each year, but, apart from this observation he makes little reference to the work of Cyril and Methodius.* He limits his comment on their contribution to Slavic history to quotations from two Bulgarian scholars, Petr Dinekov, who claims that “the Soluni brothers (Soluni, now Thessaloniki, was their birthplace — *Ed.*) live on in the memory of many as equally worthy apostles of enlightenment”, and Hristo Botev, who adds that their work is “part of European history and culture”.

The primary concern of the *Literaturnaya gazeta* correspondent is to show that in the West, “Church leaders and media have used [the occasion] as a pretext to speak of ‘overcoming the unbridgeable political gulf which lies across the heart of Europe’ . . . But they are not referring to better relations and cooperation — behind their talk is their dream of swallowing up the socialist countries.” As evidence for this interpretation, the author quotes Cardinal Hume as opening the international celebrations of the anniversary with the words, “We dream of one Europe . . . upholding one faith and unity.” The writer continues: “The Roman Catholic Church persecuted Methodius. He was imprisoned, beaten . . . Cyril died in Rome before he was an old man, in unknown circumstances — was he killed? Even now Rome uses Cyril and Methodius in the struggle against the socialist countries.” However, such exploitation of the Methodian anniversary (an “ancient festival in the name of man and of peace”) will not, asserts the author, be allowed to prevail. “It will not be used in the service of those who steadfastly refuse to recognise the political realities of modern-day Europe.”

The correspondent claims further support for his views of the events surrounding the anniversary from an interview which he conducted with Metropolitan Pankratii of Stara Zagora: “He stressed that the discussions taking place in various countries, and including East European representatives, helped clarify the historical role of Cyril and Methodius. Also, admittedly, some western elements were using the occasion to heighten confrontation with the socialist countries:

Their conception of a united Europe differs from ours . . . we cannot accept it . . . the Great Victory over fascism in the Second World War enabled the establishment of the wonderful world of socialism in one part of our continent. This is a fact that all must recognise. So we are part of the Europe where the spirit

*Discussion by Soviet scholars of the work of Cyril and Methodius has centred less around their missionary religious role, which has received little attention, than around their linguistic achievements and contribution, and particularly around the issue of whether the language into which they translated (and which was the basis of Old Slavonic) was Macedonian or Old Bulgarian. This issue has political significance within Eastern Europe, since it is linked with rival claims to primacy in terms of cultural enlightenment and as such has been the basis of a dispute between Bulgarian and Yugoslav theorists.

of Helsinki reigns, the spirit of contact and goodwill, the spirit of coexistence between states with different social systems, united against any manifestations of the "cold war".

Vatican pronouncement on the Methodian anniversary

On 2 July the Pope issued his fourth Encyclical *Slavorum Apostoli* (Apostles of the Slavs), dedicated to the life and works of Saints Cyril and Methodius. In his encyclical the Pope describes the brothers as "true forefathers of ecumenism, a bridge between the eastern and western traditions".

Commending to God all those whose ancestors had been converted to Christianity as a result of the labours of the two saints, the Pope prays that today's Christians will be able to profess their faith without hindrance and spread the Word of God for the spiritual growth of mankind; that their dedication to the Kingdom of God should not be seen wrongly as contradicting the interests of their earthly countries; and that they be able to praise God not only privately, but publicly.

The Pope appealed to all European countries to overcome their ideological conflicts on the basis of Europe's common Christian roots, thereby setting an example for the rest of the world of just and peaceful coexistence, where mutual respect and freedom prevail in accordance with Christian teaching; "There is no other way," writes the Pope, "of overcoming existing tensions, divisions and antagonisms which are threatening the destruction of human values and life."