

Creators of the Cyrillic Alphabet



May 24, the day of the Saints Cyril and Methodius, is celebrated in many countries in Eastern and Central Europe as well as in Russia and Mongolia. In the ninth century they invented and popularized the alphabet so many people use today. They devised it to suit specific features of the Slavic language at that time. Since then so many Slavic-speaking countries and a few other nations have built their literacy and cultures on the work of these brothers. Even the cultures that have later returned to the Latin letters are still paying tribute to them.

The holy brothers are venerated in the Orthodox Churches as saints with the

title "equal-to-the-apostles". In 1980, Pope John Paul II named them co-patrons of Europe (along with Saint Benedict). Saint Cyril's remains are interred in a shrine-chapel within the Basilica di San Clemente in Rome, Italy. Every year, a high state delegation from Macedonia visits the Vatican and the Pope on May 24. Macedonian Archbishop Stefan leads the liturgy devoted to the holy brothers. According to old chronicles, the day of the holy brothers used to be celebrated ecclesiastically as early as the 11th century.

It all started with a brilliant diplomatic gesture by the Byzantine Emperor Michail III who met the demand of the Moravian prince Rastislav to send preachers who knew the Slavic language. Such people could much more effectively communicate with the formerly pagan Slavs who had already accepted Christianity. Emperor could not find better men for the job than Cyril and Methodius, brothers from Thessaloniki who already were experienced in the missionary work among the Slavs, i.e. Macedonians, who lived down Bregalnica River. Methodius was a bishop there and had already baptized many. Another recommendation was their knowledge of the Slavic language that was widely spoken all around Thessaloniki. The education of Cyril was another decisive argument. Cyril (whose lay name was Constantine) was called Philosopher for his knowledge. His mastery of theology and the knowledge of Arabic and Hebrew had led him already to two missions. Among the Arabs he discussed the principle of the Holy Trinity, while in the Khazar Khaganate he had



been convincing the ruler to accept Christianity instead of Islam or Judaism. A successful Moravian mission would result in a political gain for the Byzantine Emperor: Moravia (in the present-day Czech Republic) would be removed from German political and religious influence.

But the problem of the mission was not only the language but the fact that there was no adequate alphabet. For the purpose of this mission, Constantine had to take on the heavy task of inventing one. So the learned man created 38 letters. Some of them were taken from the Greek alphabet, but some were totally new and corresponded to the sounds of the Slavic language. Then Constantine and Methodius translated the Gospels, the Psalter, Paul's letters and liturgical books into Slavic and composed a Slavic liturgy.

The successful mission of the two brothers in Moravia soon led to an opposition from the German clergy. They were forced to undertake another mission, this time to Rome, to defend the rightfulness of their teaching of Christianity in a new alphabet. As their arguments were unbeatable the new liturgy was approved by Pope Adrian II. Cyril died in Rome 50 days after taking the monastic habit while his brother Methodius continued missionary work for 16 more years. As he faced continuous opposition from the Bavarian bishops, after his death his disciples scattered. But their expulsion had the beneficial effect of spreading the spiritual, liturgical and

cultural work of the brothers to Macedonia, Bulgaria, Bohemia and southern Poland.

The alphabet has been traditionally attributed to Cyril. This fact has been explicitly confirmed in the Papal Bull *Industriae Tuae* (880). The bull approved the use of the language today known as the Old Church Slavonic, the alphabet for which had been "invented by Constantine the Philosopher".

Cyrillic alphabet which we now use is a simplification of the Glagolitic alphabet, or *glagolica*, which more closely resembled the Greek alphabet. It has been attributed to Saint Clement of Ohrid, a disciple of Sts Cyril and Methodius.

The invention of *glagolica* and the appearance of literacy was the turning point in the history of all Slavs. As it is written in hagiographies, before the advent of Slavic literacy our ancestors used lines and stripes for making notes and tried to understand the Gospel in Greek or Latin. The mass conversion of the Slavs to Christianity happened only with the possibility to follow the holy teaching in their own language. As scholars say, this opened the road for the Macedonian Slavs to integrate with the population that already lived on this territory before the arrival of the Slavs and create the basis of what will later be born as the Macedonian Nation.

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