

Once Upon a

SAINT

Rebecca O'Loughlin

SS. Cyril and Methodius, Equal to the Apostles



Dearest children, a long time ago, when the Church was less than a thousand years old, a devout Christian Thessalonian (Greek) Byzantine officer named Leo and his wife Maria had seven fine sons. This area of Greece had lots of Slavs living there, and the boys grew up learning multiple languages. One of the seven brothers was named Michael, and about ten years younger than him was the baby of the family, Constantine. The boys went to school at the Imperial School of Constantinople

(now Istanbul, Turkey), a school known for educating the children of high-ranking Byzantine officers. When he finished schooling, Michael became governor of Macedonia (Greece). Meanwhile, Constantine became a teacher at the University, being called by his peers “the Philosopher.”

After a while, Governor Michael became disenchanted with the corruption of politics.

“I’m going to be a monk,” he told Constantine. “I want to serve God.”

“That sounds very nice,” Constantine responded, “and actually, I’m a little jealous, in a holy way. I mean, not the bad kind of jealousy. I want to be a monk too, and I’m happy you get to be one.” “Join me, then!” Michael grinned at his little brother. “Maybe I will! Pray for me, won’t you, Michael?” “I pray for you every day, silly!”

Michael became a monk at the Polychron Monastery at Mysian Olympus (present-day Turkey). He took the religious name of Methodius, which means “in pursuit or journey.” He wanted to remember that his entire life was on a journey pursuing God. After some time, Methodius became a priest and the superior of the monastery.

Meanwhile, Constantine became a deacon, still teaching at the school. He was sent on various diplomatic missions by Patriarch Photios. After a few assignments, Constantine decided it was time to join Methodius at the monastery. He was about ready to take the habit when the Patriarch told him he was needed on a new mission: he wanted holy men who were good with different languages. Constantine would be obedient to this new call. Methodius and

Constantine were sent as missionaries to the Khazars in modern-day Turkey and Russia. The conversions were many, and when Churches were built and bishops set up, the brothers returned home.

Methodius and Constantine's second big mission was to the Bulgarians. The territory of the Bulgarian Empire extended to modern-day Romania and Hungary through Slovakia and Ukraine. The brothers called the land Rhos. "Rusi syny" means "children of Rhos," which, influenced by Latin, became the word "Ruthenians" that we use today. Boris I, Emperor of the Bulgarians, had been told about the Faith by his sister but was only mildly interested. Hearing of Methodius' ability to draw realistically, however, now *that was exciting!* *The king asked Methodius to make a masterpiece for his newest castle. He especially requested a piece that would terrify its beholders.*

Methodius: "Well, Constantine, what do you think of my painting? Will it terrify the emperor?"

Constantine: "Yikes! I would think your painting would terrify anyone! I see Christ as the judge, separating the bad people from the good people...but look at the demons waiting for the people who don't love God! I'm going to have nightmares, brother!"

Emperor Boris was so scared by the scene that he asked to be instructed in the Faith immediately to avoid the fate of those on Christ's left. Christianity was established in Bulgaria, and the brothers returned home. Methodius and Constantine had barely returned to Greece when the Moravian Prince, Rastislav, requested that the Byzantine Emperor Michael III send Byzantine missionaries to Moravia: "Please send missionaries to explain the Christian truths in our own language. I want all my people to know God."

Patriarch Photios thought that Methodius and Constantine were the obvious choices: They were experienced missionaries and scholars and knew the language and customs of the Slavs. Off they went to Moravia (now the Czech Republic), passing through what is now Slovakia on the way and telling the Good News to everyone they saw. Constantine devised the Glagolitic alphabet (which we call Cyrillic) so that the Slavs could read, and together the brothers painstakingly translated the Gospels and liturgical books. Not everyone liked these efforts, however.

"This is our territory," the local German missionaries told them, "and we have full intention of teaching them

Christianity according to our own church. Liturgy should be in Latin, not in the language of slaves."

"We are only doing what we were asked to do," Constantine responded, "but I will see what Pope Nicolas I in Rome thinks."

On the way to Rome, Constantine told people about Christ in modern-day Austria, Bavaria, Slovenia, and Italy.

Pope Nicholas was welcoming: "Of course, you must celebrate Eucharistia according to the traditions and languages of the people!" The Pope responded, "there is room for everyone in the Universal Church of Christ! No people or language is greater than another, and all things point toward God, our Lord and King. God bless your work, Constantine! Not only that, but I think you'd better be the Moravian Bishop. I will tell Patriarch Photios. What a good idea! Please fetch your brother, so you can both be bishops and serve the people."

Upon returning to Rome with Methodius, the brothers discovered Pope Nicholas had died. Pope Adrian II was every bit as welcoming, but Constantine realized he was also dying. As he prepared for his last days, he finally took on the monk's habit and became Cyril. "Cyril" is devised from the Greek word Kyrios, or "Lord." Cyril wanted his name to pray to the Lord unto his very last breath. He died with his eyes alight with happiness as he saw our Lord coming to take him away. Cyril was buried in Rome, and people began to flock to his tomb, lighting candles and decorating it. Many miracles began to take place. Pope Adrian II appointed Methodius Bishop of Moravia (some traditions say that Cyril was also appointed bishop before he died).

Some years later, Bishop Methodius - now quite an old man - realized that he too was dying. Surrounded by his priests they prayed together for three days in the Church, until he was finally Home with the Lord. Some of those priests continued the missionary work of Methodius and Cyril over the eastern lands, spreading Byzantine Christianity and strengthening our Church.

We celebrate the feast of Ss. Cyril and Methodius on May 11th or in some Churches on May 24th. On their feast day this month, you can chop fruits that begin with the first three letters of our alphabet, put them into a bowl, and top them with yogurt. For instance, you could chop up an Apple, Banana, and some kind of Citrus or Cherries for an ABC yogurt treat. Happy feasting!