



Saint Russian Prince Vladimir

Each of us feels that our earthly life, full of complexities, pains and passions, puzzles and ambiguities is a mystery, which can hardly be solved by the human mind. Why? Because the drama of the temporal existence in this world becomes transparent and understandable only “sub specie aeternitatis” — that is in the framework of eternity. Saint Providence, God’s will combined with the undetermined and free impulse of the human heart form the Mystery of the earthly history of mankind and the miracle of every soul’s life. If history is your devotion, if you are eager to resurrect the spiritual portrait of an ancient hero, if, moreover, you have a bold desire to penetrate into the realms of his high and noble soul, you are to take care of your own heart; surely, you are to pray, because it is only the pure in heart, who can see God and cognize the gist of historical events.



Vladimir, the Red Sun-Prince of the epic poems of the Russian people, was canonized two centuries after his death which occurred in 1015. But pondering over the bright and enigmatic life of the royal saint long before his glorification, Hilarion, the first Russian to be elected metropolitan of Kiev, wrote this in his treatise on law and grace devoted to the praise of the reposed prince:

“What inflamed you with the love of Christ? How did you let yourself be imbued with the highest wisdom of the wise to begin to love what is unseen and to tend towards the things of Heaven? How did you give yourself to Christ? You did not see Him with your eyes, you did not see the apostles appearing in your land



to capture your heart. You were the object of a miracle... You came to Christ, guided by good sense and intelligence; you understood that there is only one God the Creator of heaven and earth and that He sent His beloved Son for the salvation of man. What was foolish to others was the God's will to you."

Anyway, the Russian writer of the olden times asks more questions than gives answers, if he gets astonished he does not necessarily provide an explanation; for him the conversion of Vladimir to the Christian faith is rather a miracle than an ordinary political or diplomatic act as some historians taking a superficial stand are prone to think. So we are not wiser than metropolitan Hilarion whose hymn to Saint Vladimir still remains the pearl of Russian spiritual literature. It was not the father of Vladimir who fostered the conversion of his son. Though Svyatoslav, without doubt, was a remarkable man. The Chronicler praises his endurance, sobriety chivalrous spirit and rapidity in making decisions.

At the beginning of a campaign he would always warn his enemies: "I am coming to attack you." On the eve of a decisive battle he gathered his warriors and uttered these famous words which were destined to live through the centuries: "Let us show ourselves worthy of the land of Russia, let us die if necessary, for death is better than shame." But this fearless earthy warrior refused baptism; he would not want to become a warrior of the Heavenly King who preaches forgiveness of the wrongs suffered. Evidently, his heart, unlike the heart of Constantine, was unable to see the divine cross in the sky with the conqueror's scripture: "This will give you victory."

The dark veil of paganism covered the Russian land at the times of Svyatoslav. The religious beliefs of the Russian tribes were confined to veneration of the forces of nature and ancestor worship. None of the pagan divinities possessed temples; it was in open places, mostly on hills, that their ugly images, roughly carved in wood were set up to perform before them certain rites, sometimes even sacrificing humans; magicians, very much like the druids of Gaul, fulfilled the priestly functions.

Vladimir's reign certainly reflected (prior to his baptism) the characteristic features of that dark epoch. In order to seize the throne in Kiev, to which his eldest brother Yaropolk had succeeded, Vladimir did not hesitate to hurriedly cross the Baltic and collected under his colours a group of warriors who helped him to carry out his ambitious plans. Yaropolk was defeated and met his death at the hands of a traitor; his widow went to swell the number of Vladimir's numerous wives. But Vladimir, chosen by God as a precious vessel of His grace, the vessel first unclean but then sacred, was not only the son of his father. The man who Christianized Russia and belonged to that famous race which claimed descent from the legendary Rurik, Prince of Novgorod, was born of Malusha (in Scandinavian Malfreda) who was a Christian. But perhaps even more important was that until he became six years old the little royal offspring was brought up by his saint grandmother, the wise Princess Olga, whose noble soul was filled with the heavenly milk — the grace of the Holy Spirit. Olga remained his confident till her demise. Her lot was to wait and hope. The Byzantine Patriarch's prophecy that he uttered while she was baptized was always alive in her sagacious heart:

"You will be blessed in your descendants for abandoning the darkness and turning your loving heart to the light."

Princess Olga died having given herself up the divine will which was "to show mercy on her house and on the Russian people and kindle in their hearts the faith that was given to her". That's why Vladimir's reign was no darkness at all. It seems to me, that the dawn of his spiritual rebirth as well as Olga's invisible



prayers, filled his reign with light, and it compared favourably with the reign of his predecessors. Obviously, this reign was hallmarked with greatness from the outset. The young prince did not confine himself to holding sumptuous banquets with his warriors at the Round Table. Alive to his duties of a sovereign, Vladimir sought to establish order in his territories and bring together the scattered tribes under one central government so as to be able to defend them all against the incessant incursions by jealous neighbours. The Russian people held him in ever higher repute. Even Basil II, Emperor of Byzantium, threatened by the advance of the Bulgarian armies and an uprising in Asia Minor, turned, by God's will, to the powerful prince of Kiev for help. Of course, it was not the tangle of political and social circumstances of the time that determined the religious choice of the prince. These circumstances (being part of God's Providence) could only encourage it, but the cause for final decision was a meeting, which historians can not describe: I mean the meeting with Our Lord Jesus Christ that the Russian prince had in the vast realm of his own heart. Tertullian, a Latin Church Father asserts that every human soul is fundamentally Christian by its very nature. These words apply to Vladimir admirably.

Vladimir, according to the chronicler's accounts, was not one of those men whom the passing fame makes lose their heads. Even less was he interested in drinking spirits or licentiousness. He was by no means blind to the signs of his times; he was well aware of the conversions which were taking place in the neighbouring countries and in the lands of Scandinavia. But his own immortal soul was tortured by the memory of the crimes he had committed. In expiation of his misdeeds, he sacrificed the usual donations to the pagan gods but all this failed to calm down the pangs of remorse. Vladimir continued to seek his way to the Holy Cross because it was only the divine blood of the Son of God that could redeem him from the kingdom of darkness. The mystery of salvation of his soul was tied up with the destiny of his God-given reign as the monk Jacob, author of a Eulogy for Prince Vladimir writes:

“The whole of the land of Russia was then snatched from the devil's claws and brought back to God and the true light.”

A glimpse of Vladimir's hesitancy over and the thoughtful preparation for the baptism whose implications went far beyond merely political considerations are witnessed in a picturesque narration by Saint Nestor the Chronicler who tells us about Vladimir's sending envoys to foreign lands to obtain information about their beliefs. The choice was soon made: the Russians were repelled by the self-confidence of the Jews, by the prohibition of wine (“the joy of Russia”) with the Muslims; they were not impressed by the sober grandeur of the romanesque cathedrals of the West, but they “thought they were in heaven” when they came to Sancta Sofia at Byzantium where, beneath the great domes with their resplendent mosaics, the clergy officiated in gorgeous vestments amid clouds of incense.

The Russian prince made the decisive step towards baptism following a long and awesome contemplation of a Greek icon depicting the Last Judgement. All his sins and faults were brought back to his memory when Vladimir saw His Creator looking at him sternly but mercifully from the image.

When Saint Vladimir finally made up his mind, God manifested His divine help to him because the Lord's mercy was to wipe out the sin of the Russian people's pagan life.

The warriors of the prince gained a decisive victory in Byzantium under the Emperor's personal leadership who fought his enemies down. The Emperor's consent to the marriage of his august sister with his pagan neighbour was given on condition that Vladimir be converted to the Christian faith, thereby blazing the



trail. Prince Vladimir's sore eyes were healed by God's grace during the baptism as a symbol of the inner light that filled his immortal soul, when he returned to Kiev (probably in 990) he gave himself out as a Christian prince and, like Clovis, "burned what he had adored" tearing down the idols and imposing Christianity on all his subjects.

As the idol Perun, the patron of fire, was dragged along in the mud and the blows rained upon it, the evil entered into it shouting out: "Woe is me, my children!" His worshippers shed tears, but cries of joy were uttered by those who hailed the coming of a new era.

Some days later as he was observing from the hill crowds of people who were receiving baptism in the Dnieper river, Saint Vladimir prayed:

"Oh Almighty Lord living in Heaven! Look at this flock and enlighten their hearts with Your grace so as they could glorify the Holy name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen."

A miraculous change came about in the soul of this dissolute giant of man, this savage warrior, the moment he turned Christian. Previously Vladimir's excessive hospitality was offered only to his soldiers and boyars; hence forward his generosity was extended to those who lived in dire need. The chronicler Nestor dwells at length on his charitable endeavors:

"He ordered all the poor and sick to come to his Place for food, drink and money. For those who were unable to come he loaded carts with bread, meat, fish and honey and had them taken to the sick and the needy."

This help, inspired by the precepts of the Gospel, was subsequently extended to all the cities, towns and villages in Russia. For pagans it was an unheard of, an astonishing occurrence.

Vladimir also turned to educating the country and made a point of regularly meeting with the bishops who were making their utmost "to establish the faith among men who had only just come to know the Lord." Vladimir bestowed a tenth of his royal revenues on the first of the newly constructed Kiev churches and soon the same measure was applied in the provinces.

Purified by the grace of baptism Vladimir carried his humility and meekness to the point of refusing to condemn brigands and thieves. He could bring himself to dealing severely with those people only under pressure from his Byzantine counselors who were amazed at such scruples. Saint Vladimir, the Red Sun-Prince of the epic poems of the Russian people, was revered greatly during his earthly life and under his successor Yaroslav, the metropolitan Hilarion (long before Vladimir had been canonized) was calling on his blessed name the following spiritual innovation:

"Arise from the tomb, noble hero! Arise throw off your sleep, for thou art not dead; thou hast fallen asleep only until that day when all shall awake."

"Arise, for thou art not dead, since believing in Christ you can not die for He is the source of life for the whole world. Throw off your sleep, raise thine eyes and see the honours that the Lord has laid up for you in heaven and the fame that He has given you among your children.



“Look also on the city, shining with glory, the flourishing churches, the progress of Christianity, look on this city, sanctified by the holy icons, radiant and fragrant with incense, resounding with praise and hymns to God.”

Source: [The Voice of Russia](#)