CHAPTER V

EVANGELIZATION OF THE SLAVS, MAGYARS AND RUSSIANS

At the beginning of the ninth century in the Frankish states, the bishoprics nearest the eastern frontier were Ratisbon, Passau and Salzburg. To the East stretched the Slav countries in which organized Christian communities were non-existent. Frankish priests and monks had visited them for many years previously, yet the first missions did not come from the Frankish empire.

In 862, Ratislav, prince of the Moravians, turned to Constantinople for help in countering a *rapprochement* between the Franks and the Bulgars which was causing him anxiety and he asked the Emperor Michael III (842–67) to send him missionaries who knew the Slavonic language. The civil and religious powers, the Emperor and the Patriarch, delighted to steal a march on Rome in the interests of the Byzantine Church, appointed Constantine and Methodius, two brothers whose learning and virtue were of the highest order. These two apostles, of course, remained outside these rivalries and played a decisive part in the establishment of Christianity among the Slavs.

They were Greeks by birth, sons of a high-grade civil servant of Thessalonica and had themselves held important civil offices. Constantine, known as the Philosopher, had taught

philosophy at the imperial university. He had translated into Slavonic a collection of passages from the Gospels before they set out on their journey. Methodius also knew Slavonic. Their hearers were therefore pleasantly surprised to be instructed in Christianity through the medium of their own language and by apostles thoroughly informed about their culture and national spirit. After mature reflection, Constantine gave them a liturgy they could understand in the Slavonic tongue. This was a new departure and made his work distinctly easier.

The Holy See approved and a little later confirmed it when the Roman clergy tried to have it condemned. Adrian II gave a very favourable welcome to the two brothers in Rome. He supported them and in order to give more prominence to his decision, arranged for their disciples to be ordained by a distinguished member of the Roman party well known for his opposition to the two apostles. The latter had the joy of seeing the Slavonic liturgical books placed on the altar of *Sancta Maria ad Praesepe*[1] and the Slavonic liturgy celebrated in the basilicas of St Peter, St Petronilla, St Andrew and St Paul.

Constantine, feeling that his end was near, withdrew to a monastery and took the monastic habit under the name of Cyril. On February 14th, 869, he died charging his brother and his disciples to continue the work that had been begun.

Methodius became bishop of Sirmium, archbishop of Pannonia and, finally, papal legate to the Slav peoples. This did not prevent the Frankish bishops from waging fierce war against him. They refused to recognize his authority, imprisoned him and only set him free when ordered to do so by John VIII, who commanded the archbishop of Salzburg personally to conduct him back to Moravia and to re-establish him in his see.

Methodius died on April 6th, 885. His death did not put an end to the opposition of the Frankish bishops, who succeeded in having the Slavonic liturgy banned and in driving several of Methodius' disciples from Moravia. These exiles

[1] St Mary Major.

went to Bulgaria and took with them the sacred books in Slavonic. Thus the work of the two brothers Cyril and Methodius came under the domination of the Byzantine Church and shared its subsequent fate.

Meanwhile, the Magyars from the East had invaded Hungary. Their initiation into Christianity may have been begun by Byzantine priests during the first stage of their migration. It was continued by Frankish priests depending on the bishoprics of Passau and Ratisbon.

Then the principal evangelist of the Hungarians appeared, St Adalbert, a Slav whose original name was Voytiekh. He was martyred by the Prussians near Danzig in 997. Adalbert had the good fortune to administer confirmation to the son of the Hungarian duke, Geiza. This convert became king under the name of Stephen and consecrated his kingdom to the Blessed Virgin. The pope gave him the title of "apostolic king" because he had made Hungary a Christian country.

Further east, the principality of Kiev was governed from 945 by Princess Olga, widow of Igor, who had been taught the principles of Christianity by Byzantine priests. The conversion of the princess provoked a violent reaction among the pagans and her son Sviatoslav placed himself at its head. The war which followed took the prince into Bulgaria where, as we have seen, some of Methodius' disciples had taken refuge. The stay made by these Kiev Russians in Bulgaria was to have fortunate results. Sviatoslav returned to Kiev unconverted, but a number of his soldiers while they were among the Bulgars had come to know Christianity in its Slavonic form, far more intelligible to them than in its Latin form. The first step along the right road had been taken. The Christian religion won the day in Russia and Olga's dream had come true.