SAINT PHOTIOS
PATRIARCH OF
CONSTANTINOPLE:
The St. Photios
Shrine Lectures
Volume One

Edited by
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HOLY CROSS ORTHODOX PRESS
Brookline, Massachusetts 02146
SAINT PHOTIOS
AND NINTH-CENTURY
BYZANTINE MISSION

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We have gathered here today to celebrate the living faith of the “dead” in the hope that the faith of the “living” may not become dead; that our commitment to the Christian Orthodox faith and the Greek heritage may be reaffirmed and revitalized. We welcome meaningful celebrations.

We need to remind ourselves of the values and experiences of forefathers like Saint Photios. Saint Photios National Shrine should not be our once a year pilgrimage place, but a source of inspiration, reflection, vision, and challenge to the task of the Orthodox faith’s mission and the Hellenic heritage’s commission.

Photios, “the scion of a noble Byzantine family, of ancient Greek stock” (Francis Dvornik) was the son of Saint Sergios the Confessor and Irene, and lived in one of the most important centuries of the Byzantine Empire. His life and work reflect the main trends in Byzantine thought and civilization following the defeat of the iconoclastic movement in 843. The final restoration of icon veneration marked the victory of the Greek spirit against the Semitic mind.
(both Jewish and Islamic) and determined the course that Christian Hellenism would follow between the Islamic and the Latin worlds for centuries to come.

Photios' intellectual and religious life harmonized Greek classical thought and Christian faith (biblical and patristic). His scholarly activity contributed to the preservation of the classical Greek heritage and his pastoral and theological concerns contributed to a defence and preservation of ancient Christian practices on issues of polity, authority, and apostolic tradition.

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Civil servant, scholar, organizer of missions, and Patriarch of Constantinople, Saint Photios lived between ca. 810-895, a period of momentous events and achievements. The ninth century was of great significance for the medieval Greek or Byzantine Empire, for the Islamic Caliphate in the Southeast, and the Latin Christian West. These three were the major powers which dominated the history of the ninth century. They had achieved a balance of power and even though economic, political, and religious conflicts and antagonisms were not absent, it was a successful and transitory century for all three. Events in all three affected and determined the life and policies of Saint Photios.

The rise of the Holy Roman Empire in Western Europe contributed to the alienation of the Western Church from its Eastern roots. The popes turned for military protection to the Franks and by the middle
of the ninth century the Papacy had become the most powerful institution in the West. Photios had to contend with the Papacy’s claims for absolute authority over the Christian Church. It was Photios who challenged the claims of the popes and secured the freedom and independence of the Greek and Eastern Churches from Latin domination. It was Photios who preserved the authority of the synodic system, who pointed out the deviations of the Western Churches and defended the Orthodox faith as it had been defined in the seven ecumenical councils.

The Islamic southeast under the strong leadership of Harun al-Rashid and other Abbasid rulers had entered into a period of cultural renaissance and territorial expansion which involved missionary activity. Islam gained many converts during this period. In fact the ninth century was a period of much missionary activity for all three monotheistic religions — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Christian missions in particular were active in both parts of Europe and in countries of Asia. All three religions had engaged in some form of theological disputation. We shall speak about this shortly.

For the Greek or Byzantine Empire the ninth century was of even greater significance. It was a century characterized by strong political and ecclesiastical leadership and a revival in every major aspect of learning, culture, and civilization. The council of 843 brought to an end the iconoclastic conflict and provided the presuppositions for a revival in Greek learning, the reorganization of the university and
education in general. The restoration of icons contributed to a renaissance of the arts including iconography and the beginning of what is known as the Macedonian school of Byzantine art. Furthermore the prevalence of the moderates over the extremists in the religious disputes facilitated the missionary efforts of the Church. The emergence of the Russians on the historical stage turned the attention of the Byzantines toward the possibilities of the north. All these in one way or another involved Photios.

The termination of the iconoclastic controversy and the victory of traditional Orthodoxy was a turning point in the history of the Medieval Greek Empire. For nearly a century Byzantine Church and society were badly divided between iconophiles and iconoclasts, between oriental Hellenism and half-Hellenized Orient and Continental Hellenism. Ultimately, it was the Greek appreciation of symbolism, art, and metaphysics that prevailed. Sunday of Orthodoxy is more than a celebration of the restoration of icons—it is also an event which proclaims the victory of traditional doctrine about the person of Christ (Christology) and the nature of the Church (ecclesiology). It is a historical fact that the Hellenic or European provinces of the Byzantine Empire including the Aegean Islands, contributed to the restoration of the icons in the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787, a victory affirmed by the Council of Constantinople in 843.

The end of a serious conflict provided the oppor-
tunities and prepared the climate for a new spirit of reconciliation, an intellectual and artistic renaissance, and to a rebirth of missionary zeal and activity. The years following the Council of 843 marked the beginning of the most powerful dynasty of the Byzantine Empire. Currents of opinion and debate, variety of temperament and outlook were never absent from the history of medieval Hellenism and alliances between moderates, conservatives, and extremists existed even after the reconciliation of 843. The liberal moderates found their champion in the person of Photios, one of the most enlightened minds of the middle ages. Excellently trained in theology, in the Scriptures but also in the Greek classics (philosophy, history, language), Photios became instrumental for the revival of learning and the training of a new generation of churchmen and civil servants. Photios' influence was destined to shape the cultural and religious character of the Greeks and of several Slavic peoples for many centuries to come.

Photios, his disciple Constantine, and Leo of Thessalonike, were among the leaders of those who realized and appreciated the achievements of ancient or pagan Hellenism, its philosophy and art, its literature and vision as less antagonistic to Christian theology. Thus their missionary activity was not divorced from educational and cultural considerations. Their missionary work among the Armenians, Georgians, Bulgarians, Slavs, and Russians included the introduction not only of a new faith but also
of a new civilization, laws, learning, institutions. When we speak of Byzantine missions to the Slavs we speak of a variety of cultural activities. “The greatness of Photios lies in his appreciation, clearer than that of anyone else at the time, of the great approach of this era of new tasks and possibilities, for which he, more than anybody, helped to prepare the way,” in the words of George Ostrogorsky, a great Russian historian.

As Patriarch, Photios realized that the international climate was ripe for the Byzantine Church and State to extend their sphere of influence. There were the Khazars in the northeastern part of the Empire; the Russians in the north, several Slavic tribes in central and western Europe, the Bulgarians next door, and the Arabs in the southeast. Whether for political or religious reasons the fact is that several established states and developing nations were interested in the faith and practices of Eastern Christianity. Muslim, Jewish, and pagan rulers had asked Constantinople for theologians who would explain their Christian doctrines, especially those concerning the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation of the Logos-Christ.

In the middle of the ninth century the Muslim Caliph Mutawakkil sent an embassy to Constantinople asking for a Byzantine delegation to go to Caliph’s court in Samara, near Baghdad, and hold a theological dialogue with Islamic theologians. A Greek delegation was sent there in 851. It included Photios, who at the time was a layman and university professor, and his disciple Constantine, a
theologian-philosopher twenty-four years old. It seems that a similar delegation went to Baghdad in 857-58. It is interesting to note that both religions could hold a theological disputation exploring each other’s beliefs and practices.

A few years later, the Jewish ruler of Khazaria asked the “king” of the “land of Greece” (for the Khazars, Russians, Bulgarians, and others the Byzantine Empire was simply Greece and its inhabitants Greeks) for a theological delegation to visit his court and his people to explain Christianity to them. Both Jewish and Muslim missionaries were active among the Khazars. Many of them along with Bulgarians who lived in the territory near the Volga river had already embraced Islam. The Jewish communities along the northern borders of the Byzantine Empire were active too in proselytism. It is not certain whether the Khagan of the Khazars was Jewish by birth or by conversion. In any case Khazaria had many converts to Judaism and to Islam.

Under the circumstances, the Patriarchate in Constantinople did not remain apathetic. Both Patriarch Photios and Emperor Michael III realized that the new nation was fertile ground for missionary activity. Thus when the ruler of the Khazars sent an embassy to Constantinople asking for theologians capable of explaining the Christian faith to his people, Constantine responded. There were many Khazars who were hesitating between native paganism, Judaism, and Islam.
Patriarch Photios advised Emperor Michael and the Prime Minister Bardas to send to Khazaria Constantine and his brother Methodios, natives of the city of Thessalonike. Constantine in particular was Photios' protege and one of his brilliant disciples and his successor at the University of Constantinople. Even though their mission to Khazaria was for more than religious reasons, the two brothers were able to conduct missionary activity and to teach the principles of the Christian Orthodox faith. Theological discussions were held at the court of the Khazar ruler. Among other themes the two brothers discussed the doctrines of the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation and they compared Orthodox Christian doctrines with beliefs of Judaism and Islam. They defended the dogma of the Trinity by quoting passages from the New but also the Old Testament which speak of God as Creator, the Logos as Christ, and the Spirit. They defended the Incarnation by asking the Jewish theologians present why God could not have appeared in human form when he appeared to Moses as a burning bush. They explained and justified the use of icons and compared Christian morality with Jewish and Muslim ethics.

Soon after the disputation some two hundred pagan Khazars requested to be baptized and received into the Orthodox Church. The Khagan, who had received the two brothers amicably, announced that he had given permission to those who wished to receive baptism. Whether he allowed this for political reasons or genuine religious toleration we do not
know. It is certain however that he wanted to maintain friendly relations with the Byzantine Empire.

There is little doubt that the credit for the Byzantine mission to the Khazars belongs to the two brothers but Photios was the main force behind that expedition. Francis Dvornik, a modern authority on the subject, rightly observes that “if Photios had not been elected patriarch, he would probably have been the man whom the government would have chosen to represent Christian theological scholarship in Khazaria.”

B

Much more important and fruitful was Photios’ concern with the Christianization of the Slavs. Thus a period of intensive missionary activity among several Slavic tribes began during Photios’ patriarchal tenure. But once again political necessities and religious considerations were interrelated. Church and State, religion and culture were not divided. The origins of the Byzantine missions to the Western Slavs must be traced to the political developments in the West.

In the year 856 the king of the Eastern Frankish Empire Louis Germanikos was succeeded to the throne by his oldest son Charlemagne, who extended his Kingdom over Bavaria. He was ambitious and his policies included not only the creation of a great Empire but also the destruction of the Moravian state which occupied the territory between Bavaria and Bulgaria. In order to achieve his goal, the
Frankish king negotiated an alliance with the king of the Bulgarians who had extended his own rule far to the West. Thus Moravia was squeezed between the Franks and the Bulgars and felt the need for a strong ally.

It was under these political circumstances that the king of the Moravians Rastislav sought the assistance of the Greeks. He asked the Byzantine Emperor not only for a formal diplomatic recognition of the state but also for missionaries to teach his people Byzantine Christianity. The Patriarch and the Emperor responded promptly. Once again they turned to the experienced brothers Constantine and Methodios to lead a missionary expedition to Moravia.

The two brothers, sons of the governor of the district of Thessalonike, had received an excellent education and understood the Slavic mentality well. Both were multilingual. Constantine in particular, in addition to his native Greek, knew Slavic, Syriac, Latin, Arabic, and Hebrew. It seems that several years before their departure for Moravia, at the advice of Photios who was greatly concerned with the Christianization of the neighboring Bulgars, had invented a Slavonic script, the so-called Glagolitic alphabet, and had translated the Bible, the liturgical and other books in Slavonic.

Thus well trained and prepared, the two brothers led their missionary delegation to the Western Slavs and in 863 they arrived in Moravia. Their missionary activity was very successful especially during the first
three years. Constantine and Methodios earned a
great reputation and approval not only of Constan-
tinople's Patriarch but also for Rome's pope who
invited them to his see in order to inform the Church
of Rome of their activities. While the two brothers
were in Rome, Constantine, who had adopted the
monastic name Cyril, died prematurely on February
14, 869, in a Greek monastery.

Methodios initially received the support of Rome
and became Archbishop of Pannonia, with Sirmium
as his see. As Archbishop there he became a victim
of political and ecclesiastical intrigues to the extent
that he suffered in the hands of Ratislav's successor
and the Frankish clergy, who resented the fact that
the two Greek brothers introduced Christianity in
the local language rather than Latin as was the prac-
tice of Rome.

Methodios found himself abandoned by Rome
and his disciples were expelled from Moravia. He
died on April 6, 885, and his funeral was conducted
in Greek, Latin, and Slavonic. He was buried by the
Cathedral of Stare-Meste, the present day city of
Gradisch-Uherske Hradiste' in modern Hungary.
Theophylaktos, Archbishop of Bulgaria in the early
twelfth century, who wrote the life of Clement, one
of Methodios' disciples, relates that the two brothers
left behind 200 congregations with a multitude
(plethos) of priests, deacons, and subdeacons.

The combined missionary work of the two
brothers lasted for nearly 22 years. Their mission,
however, was continued by their disciples who were
especially successful in the state of Zalevar. It survives to the present day in the country of Czechoslovakia, including the old districts of Croatia and Pannonia. George Ostrogorsky, one of the great authorities of Byzantine history, has summarized the importance of the two Greek brothers as follows: “For the southern and eastern Slavs the achievement of the two brothers who had started their career under the patronage of Patriarch Photios was of undying significance. Not only did they give Christianity to those tribes but they gave them their alphabet and the very beginnings of their national literature, culture, and civilization.”

The missionary work of the two brothers reveals the basic principles of the theology and the practice of mission. First, the two missionaries learned the language of the people they were sent to evangelize. Second, they went to the new nations well prepared with a translation of the Scriptures, the liturgy, and other prayer books in their own dialect. Third, their primary consideration was to organize an *ecclesia*, a worshiping community rather than a Byzantine or Greek colony. The sources do not indicate whether the two brothers initiated the establishment of hospitals, schools, hospices, orphanages, homes for the poor, and other social welfare institutions as was the practice in Byzantium.

In addition to his concern with the Christianization of non-Christians, Photios was greatly interested in the propagation of the Orthodox faith among Christian heretics and the return of schismatics to
the fold of the Church. He exerted many efforts to quell internal divisions and promote better relations with the other Orthodox Patriarchates. For example in his desire to see the Armenians in union with the Church he initiated a correspondence with their Catholikos. He was more successful in his efforts to achieve the union of the Tessaraskedekatitai with Orthodoxy.

Photios was truly an ecumenical patriarch, and he could not leave out of his concern the next door neighbors, the Bulgarians. Even though many Bulgars had become Christians as early as the seventh century, it was after 864 that Bulgaria became officially a Christian state.

Under the leadership of their king Boris, the Bulgarians realized the need to organize their state on a firmer political and religious foundation by adopting Christianity as their official religion seeking an alliance with Constantinople rather than the remote Franks. In 864 Boris received baptism and was named Michael. His baptism set an example for his subjects to follow. Following Boris' baptism, Patriarch Photios sent Greek priests to organize the Bulgarian Church. The Christianization of the Bulgarians led to their political, racial, and cultural unification.

The last major event associated with Photios' missionary policy was the appearance of the Russians on the historical stage. In the year 860 the Russians attacked Constantinople while the Byzantine Emperor Michael was leading an expedition against
the Arabs. Patriarch Photios was present during the attack and provides a vivid picture of the Russian onslaught. The Russians suffered a heavy defeat but their first attack on Constantinople opened up the way in the relations between the Greeks and the Russians. Soon after their raid, the Russians made overtures to Constantinople for a mission. Even though we associate the conversion of the Russian state with the conversion of queen Olga and especially Vladimir in the 10th century, Photios indicates that some Russians became converts to Orthodox Christianity during his own time. In a letter to the Patriarchs of Antioch, Jerusalem, Alexandria written in 867 Photios writes that the Rus “who raised hands against the Byzantine state” now “confess the pure religion of the Christians.” In the words of Ostrogorsky: “The great Patriarch had realized that to convert the young nation to Christianity and to bring it within the Byzantine sphere of influence was the most effective method of averting the danger threatening the Empire from this direction. A few years later, with justifiable pride, he was able to point to the first results of his missionary undertaking.”

In summary, admittedly with only one exception Photios did not join in missionary field work. But there is little doubt that as Patriarch and head of the Byzantine Church not only did he bless but also inspired, directed and supported the Byzantine missions to the Khazars, Slavs, Bulgarians, and Russians. And as already indicated religious missions involved efforts not only to teach Orthodox Chris-
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tianity but also to transmit cultural forms, institutions, art, literature, political concepts, and even systems of government.

Directly or indirectly the great Patriarch became instrumental for the introduction of several Slavic nations into the orbit of civilization. Father Francis Dvornik, of Slavic origins himself, has beautifully emphasized that the Byzantine Empire “moulded the undisciplined tribes of Serbs, Bulgars, Russians, Croats even, and made nations out of them; it gave to them its religion and institutions, taught their princes how to govern, transmitted to them the very principles of civilization—writing and literature.”

Even if Photios had accomplished nothing else in his life, his role in ninth-century Byzantine missions was large enough to justify the adjective “great” that history has bestowed upon him. Saint Photios left behind a rich heritage and a brilliant example for moderns, whether clergymen or laymen, to follow.

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