

The Message of Carpatho-Russia to the Western World:
Virtue is more Important than Riches

Leaving Russia for a few weeks and flying from one continent to another, we constantly discovered that we were among Russians again, in our churches, in our country. This was a voyage around the Russia which lives far beyond the borders of our country, on little islands of Russian Orthodoxy.

Comments of a participant in the September 2007 world tour of the Sretensky Choir to commemorate the unity between the two parts of the Russian Orthodox Church



In the Carpathians

It was in the year 863 that the two brothers, St Cyril (826-869) and St Methodius (c. 815-885), went out to spread the Gospel of Christ in the Moravian Empire, in today's Czech Lands. Thus began their mission to the Slav peoples. As we know, they suffered persecution and, though protected by the still Orthodox Pope of Rome, they were forced to retreat from Central Europe to the east and south by the semi-barbarian Germans.

Their influence is remembered in Prague and Moravia to this day. Their cross also adorns the Slovak flag. And the relics of St Ludmila (+ 927) and her grandson St Viacheslav (Vaclav or Wenseslas, + 929) witness to their presence. However, Sts Cyril and Methodius were to take their mission eastwards and southwards. They and their disciples were destined to work among other Slav peoples, in Carpatho-Russia, Bulgaria and in what is now Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, Macedonia and Poland. Later, these missions were in their turn to bear fruit to the east and the north. Indeed, missionaries from Bulgaria and Carpatho-Russia, where the Carpatho-Russian language to this day conserves much of Church Slavonic, were to take part in the

Baptism of Kievan Rus from 988 on. From there, the originally Slav mission spread to what we now call Russia and then through Siberia to China, Korea, Japan, Alaska and so today has become worldwide.

The peoples whom the two holy brothers brought to Christ were to reject the 1054 Schism of Western Europe, together with the alien culture that developed out of that Schism. That spiritually alien, Non-Orthodox culture spread eastwards, reaching Kosice in eastern Slovakia with its Gothic Cathedral and still further eastwards with its oppressive Polish, Teutonic and Hungarian castles. Nevertheless, for centuries the Orthodox peoples of those lands remained loyal to the undiluted Orthodoxy Christianity of Jerusalem, as preached by the Church.

These peoples included the Carpatho-Russians, who remained outside any Orthodox State and still today live scattered over the southern slopes and valleys beneath the Carpathians. Their territory includes the south-western corner of Ukraine, called Transcarpathia, north-eastern Slovakia, south-eastern Poland and parts of Hungary, Romania and Serbia. Though surrounded by militant Western culture, in their villages, on hillside and valley the Carpatho-Russians built themselves wooden churches and handed down the Orthodox Faith from generation to generation. Thus, they clung to the Orthodox Tradition, to their churches, homes, countryside, crafts, dress, way of life, the whole Orthodox culture.



A wooden Carpatho-Russian church

Oppressed by Roman Catholic Pole, Hungarian and Austrian, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Carpatho-Russians were eventually forced by the threat of starvation into Uniat compromise. However, from the very beginning of the twentieth century large numbers of Carpatho-Russians returned from Austro-Hungarian oppression to the fold of the Orthodox Church. The leader of this movement was a local man, who became a monk and a priest. Today he is venerated as St Alexis, Apostle of Carpatho-Russia (1877-1947). And even though before and during the Second World War the Carpatho-Russians were persecuted by western Ukrainain nationalism, which allied itself with Hitler's Fascism, and after that War by Stalin's Communism, they still remained faithful to the Church. Indeed, where in 1900 there was not a single Carpatho-Russian Orthodox, today, there are some 700 Orthodox parishes and thirty monasteries and convents.



The holy relics of St Alexis in St Nicholas Monastery in the town of Mukachevo

Surrounded by Western culture, with their oases and pockets of Orthodoxy, the humble and poor Carpatho-Russian people set an example to Western people, who wish to return to Orthodoxy after a thousand years of Schism. In particular, we believe that Carpatho-Russia has a message for these Islands.

True, some in our island archipelago composed of Great Britain and Ireland and lying off the western coast of Eurasia, compare our Orthodox situation to that of Japan, another island archipelago, but off the *eastern* coast of Eurasia. However, there are differences between these islands of the setting sun and the land of the rising sun. These Isles of the West cannot be compared to Japan, for Japanese culture, coloured by the religious philosophy of Buddhism, had always been pagan. On the other hand, the culture in these islands was once in communion with and an integral part of the rest of the Church, as Japanese culture had never been. Through the apostolic mission of St Nicholas of Tokyo, we rejoice that some Japanese have indeed *become* Orthodox Christian. But the native people of these islands are rather called on to *return* to Orthodox Christianity - as the Carpatho-Russians returned to Orthodoxy in the first fifty years of the twentieth century.

On the other hand, although the mission of Sts Cyril and Methodius in 863 has parallels to the mission of St Gregory and St Augustine to the English in 597, there are also differences between the return of the Carpatho-Russians to the Mother-Church and the return to Orthodoxy of the natives of these islands. The Carpatho-Russians were forced to adopt Eastern-rite Catholicism only in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. On the other hand, the native peoples of these islands were forced into adopting Western-rite Catholicism, not two or three hundred years ago, but nigh on a thousand years ago. Moreover, most of them were then forced into adopting Protestantism and from there fell into secularism. Thus, the native peoples of the Isles of the West have wandered much further away from the Church of Christ than the Carpatho-Russians ever did. Therefore, their return must inevitably be more difficult and take that much longer. Furthermore, the return of the Carpatho-Russians, led by St Alexis, a model for us, was supported and renewed from Russia. The extent to which we can hope for support and renewal from Russia is not yet clear.

So what then is the message of Carpatho-Russia to Western countries and in particular perhaps to these Isles of the West? What is the message of the corner of Holy Russia, of Russia outside Russia, to the rest of us who are also islands of Holy Russia, scattered across the five Continents? We believe that it is contained in the title of a play written by the Father of Carpatho-Russian literature, Fr Alexander Dukhnovich (1803-1865), in the nineteenth century. It is called *Virtue is more Important than Riches*. Frankly, this title expresses the very essence of that Orthodox Faith, which the Western world long ago rejected and today refuses to understand. As Christ said in the Gospel: *Ye cannot serve God and money, and, Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature?* (Matt. 6). Virtue is indeed more important than riches, for virtue is eternal, but riches are merely passing.

The West gave the Orthodox East Industrial Capitalism and then Communism. But we are called on to love our neighbour and even more: *But I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you* (Matt 5). Therefore we offer the West Orthodoxy, the Church. This is the Message of Carpatho-Russia and in fact of the

whole Orthodox world. This is what we offer, calling all to repentance, and first of all ourselves.

All the Saints of Carpatho-Russia, pray to God for us!



The new Orthodox Cathedral of the Exaltation of the Cross in the Carpatho-Russian Capital, Uzhgorod. Recently completed, it can contain 6,000 faithful.