

Readings: *Acts 13: 46 – 49; Psalm 116 (117); Luke 10: 1 – 9.*

The festival of the two saints whom the Church celebrates today has long been observed by the Eastern and some local Western Churches, but has only recently been widely observed throughout Europe. In 1980 Pope John Paul II declared them co-patron saints of Europe with Saint Benedict. This was part of his vision of the ‘two lungs’ – Eastern and Western – of the Church. Methodius and his younger brother Cyril (baptized as Constantine) were born in Thessalonica in the mid-ninth century when there was conflict between Eastern and Western political and religious leaders over control of Moravia (now part of the Czech Republic).

In 862 the Moravian leader asked the Byzantine Emperor to send missionaries to evangelize his people, requesting that they should be able to teach, neither in Greek, the language of the Eastern Churches, nor in Latin, the language of the Western Church, but in Slavonic, the local language. The Emperor sent Cyril, who had studied secular sciences and had been part of an imperial embassy to what is now Ukraine, and Methodius, who had been the governor of a Slavonic province and later abbot of a monastery.

One of their tasks was to begin to translate the Bible and liturgical texts from both Eastern and Western Churches into Slavonic. As there was no written language, they needed to invent a script. It was based on the Greek alphabet with additional letters and later became the Cyrillic alphabet (named after Cyril) in which Russian and other Slavonic languages are written today.

Their work of evangelism in Moravia was very fruitful, but, not being bishops, they could not ordain deacons and priests to extend the work and care for the faithful. So in AD 867 they travelled to Rome. There they met some opposition to the use of Slavonic in the liturgy, but Pope Hadrian welcomed them and had the Slavonic liturgy celebrated in some Roman churches.

Cyril died on 14 February 869 and was buried in the church of San Clemente. In the following year Methodius was consecrated as a bishop. His work was hindered by disputes between Eastern and Western Churches, and on his death in April 884 the area the brothers had evangelized was split between those in communion with Rome and those in communion with Constantinople – a tragic example of the malign influence of cultural and political issues on the unity of the Church.