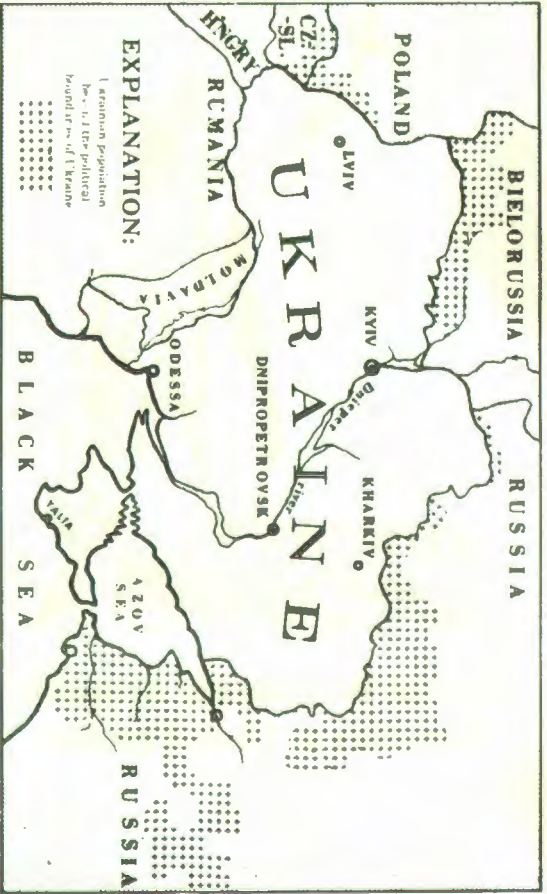




**St. Volodymyr The Great
The Baptizer of Rus'-Ukraine**

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St. Volodymyr

The Great

The Baptizer of

Rus'-Ukraine

(980-1015)



The Ukrainian philosopher, Gregory Skovoroda (†1794), said, "If God wants to show a favor to a nation, he sends it a good leader." Good leaders are, however, difficult to find. One such leader said that great leaders appear in the world only every 1000 years.

St. Volodymyr was indeed a great and good leader for the ancient Rus'-Ukraine and the glory of the Ukrainian people. God used him as an instrument to Christianize Rus'-Ukraine.

Volodymyr—The Ruler of Rus'-Ukraine

Volodymyr was the son of the great prince-warrior Sviatoslav (†972) and the grandson of St. Olga. Sviatoslav was constantly away from Kiev on military campaigns, and so the education of his children fell to his Christian mother, St. Olga. When Volodymyr grew up, he became a wise ruler and a very capable warrior. He defended Rus' from the constant inroads of the Asiatic hordes and constructed forts at its eastern frontiers.

He reconquered Galicia (now Western Ukraine) from the Poles, subdued the rebellious tribes and deposed their princes. He sent his sons to different parts of the country as his

lieutenants to rule in his name. This he did to strengthen the central authority of Kiev, the capital of his vast state-empire.

He helped the Byzantine emperor, Basil II, to defeat his enemies, the Bulgars, and to quell the internal dissidents in Asia Minor. He repelled the Asiatic Pechenegs and, in thanksgiving to God for his help, built the church of the Transfiguration on the battlefield.

Volodymyr Inquires About Different Religions

Once his authority had been firmly established by the force of arms, Volodymyr decided to consolidate the union among the tribes by introducing Christianity into Rus'-Ukraine. The Christian religion proved to be the strongest moral and spiritual link, joining the warring tribes into one nation.

Religious Delegations come to Kiev

Before taking the final decision, Volodymyr inquired about different religions of the neighboring peoples. He examined their teachings very seriously. He was favorably disposed toward Christianity, because his grandmother, St. Olga, was a Christian. Many soldiers of his *Druhyna* (the army) were also Christians. He met many Christians in bigger towns during his travels throughout the state. At the time of Olga's reign (945-962) anyone in Rus' could become a Christian, although, generally speaking, it was not in vogue to do so.



Volodymyr's intention to get rid of paganism and its idols aroused an interest among the leaders of various religions. Their delegations came to Volodymyr to explain the tenets of their faiths.

Volodymyr sends his own delegation

His delegation went abroad and examined different faiths of the neighboring peoples: Islam, Judaism and Christianity. Upon its return, the members of his delegation praised most the Christian religion in the Byzantine Rite (*Povest' Vremennykh Let*-The story of the ancient years, part I, p. 74-75, Academy of Science, Moscow, 1950).

Volodymyr Introduces Christianity into Rus'-Ukraine

After seriously examining the teachings of the various religions, Volodymyr decided to accept Christianity for himself and his country. He was baptized by the bishop of the city of Korsun in Crimea in 987.

Upon his return to Kiev, Volodymyr ordered his officials to destroy all pagan idols in Kiev. In 988 he ordered all inhabitants of the capital to go to the river Dnipro and enter it. This done, the priests baptized them. Volodymyr thanked God for Baptism and implored him to strengthen the Christian faith in his subjects (*Op. cit.*, p. 81).

Volodymyr becomes a different man

After his Baptism Volodymyr changed his life. He became a model Christian and apostle of the Gospel for his people. He sent priests throughout the country to instruct and baptize the inhabitants.

Values and Benefits Christianity Brought to Rus'-Ukraine

The Ukrainian philosopher, Gregory Skovoroda (†1794), says: "Health is a great blessing. And a great blessing it is to have good friends and a happy family. But the greatest of all blessings is to be a good Christian."

The introduction of Christianity, Dmytro Doroshenko says, "opened wide the way to Byzantine influence in all branches of political, social and religious life. Conceptions of state, of law and of social relations were subjected to Byzantine influence" (A Survey of Ukrainian History, Trident Press Ltd., Winnipeg, 1975, p. 33).

The Russian historian, Paul Dukes, adds, "The importance of this step...is incalculable, both from spiritual and secular view" (A History of Russia, McGraw-Hill Co., New York 1974, p. 11).

These values and benefits were:

- the acceptance of the true religion of Christ and belief in the one God, thus abolishing the cult of idols;
- the introduction of the law of God and of the Gospel which is the highest religious, moral and social code for human conduct on earth and the surest road to salvation hereafter;
- the awareness of human dignity as God's children, hence abolishing slavery and proclaiming the equality of men and women;
- the reform of social customs and adaptation of the laws of the Gospel;
- the building of churches, schools and the increase in the number of clergy throughout the vast country in order to educate the masses in their new religion. (In Kiev alone there were 400 churches in 1018).
- moral and religious union among the various tribes, forging them into one nation;
- the development of Slavonic Rite and services which the people of that time could understand and participate in, thus giving a powerful impetus to the development of a national culture;
- the opening of the door to Byzantine culture-arts and architecture which were the highest in Europe at that time.

(Craftsmen, artists, architects and painters were invited by Volodymyr to settle and to work, promoting culture and arts);
—the building of orphanages, social services to the poor (Volodymyr saw to it that food was brought to them) and old-age homes;
—and finally, Christianity introduced Rus'-Ukraine into the family of Christian nations.

Acceptance and Propagation of the Christian Religion

Volodymyr did not find much opposition from his people when he decided to adopt the Christian faith and make it the official state religion. The ground for Christianity had already been prepared throughout the centuries.

The ancient Rus' had commercial relations with Byzantium (The Eastern part of the Roman empire), especially with Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine empire, the most important centre of Eastern Rite Christianity.

The Ukrainian historian, Dmytro Doroshenko, writes, "Historical records indicate that Christian teachings among Eastern Slavs came not only from Byzantium, but also from Rome...During the ninth century Christianity spread steadily in Kiev, radiating from the church of St. Elijah" (Op. cit. p. 32). It was also spreading from Crimea which had several Christian settlements. The patriarch of Constantinople, Photius, wrote that in 867 there was already a bishop in Rus' (New Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. 14, p. 372).

The split in the Church

When Volodymyr accepted the Christian religion in 988, there was no split between Rome and Constantinople, despite some past misunderstandings. Nicholas Riasanovsky, the Russian historian, says, "The break between the Eastern and

Western Churches occurred only in 1054." (A History of Russia, Oxford University Press, New York 1984, p. 36).

Steady Progress of Christianity

Christianization progressed steadily during the reign of Volodymyr. D. Doroshenko writes, "At the end of Volodymyr's reign Kiev was a rich and civilized city, greatly admired by foreign travellers" (Op. cit., p. 34), and so was the rest of Rus'-Ukraine. As the number of the clergy grew, the evangelization of the country increased. There are writers who affirm that some disciples of Sts. Cyril and Methodius, the apostles of the Slavs, were also preaching the Gospel in Galicia (now Western Ukraine) before 988. They came from Moravia, across the Carpathian Mountains.



Sts. Cyril and Methodius were Greeks, but their mother was a Slav. Cyril had devised a Slavonic alphabet of 38 letters before he began his missionary activity among the Slavs. Cyril's Slavonic script, called Cyrillic, was used in the Ukrainian church services until the second Vatican Council (Conf. Sts. Cyril and Methodius, by Michael Lacko, S.J., Rome 1963, p. 84).

Memorial to the Baptism of Rus'-Ukraine

The official Baptism of the Kievan population took place on August 1, 988. As a memorial to this momentous event the Kievan Church established the custom of solemnly blessing the water on August 1.

Organization of the Kievan Church

After the official introduction of Christianity, the Kievan Church received its canonical form. The metropolitan of Kiev was the head of the Church. He had practically all the rights of a patriarch, except the title. At that time the Kievan Church was territorially larger than the whole patriarchate of Constantinople.

As the head of the Church, the metropolitan appointed the bishops and the bishops assigned the priests as pastors to the parishes. The Constantinopolitan patriarch named the metropolitan of Kiev.

Volodymyr's Last Years

Volodymyr spent his last years defending the country from the Pecheneg attacks, strengthening the authority of his capital Kiev, and endeavoring to invigorate the Christian spirit and teaching of the newly converted subjects.

Although people professed their Christian faith, they still clung to some of their past pagan customs. The Church solved the problem by allowing its faithful to connect, for instance, the birth of Christ (Christmas) with the **Carols**, Epiphany with **Schedrivkas**, a kind of New Year songs, and Easter with **Hahilkys**, which consisted of joyful songs and dances. **Inculturization** is an adaptation to the local customs, traditions and mentality of the people.

In the spirit of **inculturization** (so famous in the African Churches of today) the Kievan Church also permitted the people to preserve the **Trisnas**, a secular celebration after the funerals.

Such **inculturization** helped the people to combine their Christian faith with their national customs which were not opposed to the teaching of our Lord. It also contributed to the propagation of the Gospel, because it made it easier for the

population to accept the Gospel teaching and to apply its laws to their daily lives.

Volodymyr's Death

Volodymyr the Great died on July 15, 1015. His body was buried in the church of the Blessed Virgin Mary which he himself had built.

A great crowd, in tears, participated in his funeral. The Kievan Church established the feast of St. Volodymyr which is celebrated yearly on July 15.

It also canonized him as the baptizer of Rus', and to this day, considers him as "equal to the Apostles."



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