

## In Memory of Vladimir the Great

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On July 15<sup>th</sup> we celebrated the feast day of St. Vladimir the Great. Vladimir was Grand Prince of Kiev, ruler of Kievan Rus' from 980 to 1015 and first Christian ruler in Kievan Rus. His military conquests consolidated the provinces of Kiev and Novgorod into a single state, and whose Byzantine baptism determined the course of Christianity in the region.

On the death of his father Sviatoslav in 972, a struggle for power broke out among his sons and in 976 Vladimir who was then prince of Novgorod was forced to flee to Scandinavia. In Sweden he enlisted help from an uncle to assemble an army to reconquer Novgorod. By 980 he had consolidated the Kievan realm from

modern-day Belarus, Russia and Ukraine to the Baltic Sea and had solidified the frontiers against the Baltic tribes and Eastern nomads making Kyivan Rus' one of the most powerful states in Eastern Europe.

Although Christianity in Kiev existed before Vladimir's time he remained a follower of Slavic paganism, attributing his victories to the support he received from pagan forces. He established heathen temples, and, it is said, took part in idolatrous rites involving human sacrifice. Vladimir converted to Christianity in 988 as part of a pact to give military aid to Emperor Basil II. Vladimir offered military aid only if he was allowed to marry Basil's sister Anna. Basil agreed to the marriage only if Vladimir promised to convert himself and his subjects to Christianity. At his command, the people of Kiev and the whole nation were baptized, as were his 7 young sons and two daughters.

Vladimir chose the Byzantine Tradition of the Catholic Church over German Christendom, Judaism, and Islam after the envoys he sent to assess the major religions told him they were most impressed with their visit to Constantinople. "We knew not whether we were in

Heaven or on Earth... We only know that God dwells there among the people, and their service is fairer than the ceremonies of other nations.” What's more he had close political, cultural and economic ties to the East. In particular to Byzantium and Bulgaria! He believed the Christian faith of the Byzantine Rite best suited the psychology and mentality of the Ukrainian people. Moreover, the divine services and sacred books of the Byzantine Rite were written in a language understood by all the people. Vladimir died at Berestove, near Kiev on July 15, 1015, and was buried in the chapel of St. Clement in Tithe Church beside his wife Anne, who died 4 years before him

Vladimir was an Apostle of Faith and gave us the priceless treasure of our holy faith. He had a 3-fold aim: a) to obtain a church hierarchy and priests, b) to build churches and c) to promote Christian education. Immediately after his baptism he destroyed the many pagan statues and shrines to the Slavic heathen gods he had erected and set about to build a church in honor of St. Mary ever Virgin. It was called the Tithe Church because he gave a 10th of his princely income for the support of the church.

People who wrote about him when he was alive say that after his baptism, he completely turned his life around and was totally occupied with evangelical works of mercy and love of neighbor. He used his riches for the needs of the state, the building of churches, and to help the less fortunate. The Christian faith had a positive influence on his heart, soul, and character. He lived and practiced this faith in his daily life. He gave alms to needy, not only in his house but also throughout Kiev and the land of Rus. He clothed the naked, nourished the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, helped the sick, redeemed debtors, freed slaves and became known for his mildness and his zeal in spreading the Christian faith to those who did not believe in the Lord Jesus.

In his lifetime, Vladimir had the reputation of the Baptizer and Enlightener of Rus. He lived his whole life, in truth, in humility, and with long-suffering patience. His memory was kept alive by innumerable folk ballads and legends. Yet, he was not listed among the Saints for a long time. He didn't have his own feast-day. Prayers weren't offered up to him. He was simply referred to as “the Great”. The chief reason for this lack of recognition was that no miracles were performed at his grave. John Chrysostom said “a holy man is recognized not by his miracles, but by his deeds.” His feast day was instituted about 1240, not in Kiev but in Novhorod. He was

given the feast day not because he was a miracle worker, but because he was the Baptizer of Rus' and equal to the apostles.

About 1254 he was called St. Vladimir. In 1311 the archbishop of Novhorod built a church in his honour. His relics lay hidden in a tomb under the ruins of Tithe Church (1240-1635) and were found when rebuilding the Church. His head was given by the Metropolitan to the Kievan-Pechersky Church. The lower jaw, sent as a gift to the muscovite Czar Michael who gave it to the Dormition Cathedral in Moscow. And the arm bone was placed in the cathedral of St. Sophia in Kiev.

To sum up life of St. Vladimir as depicted by oral tradition we would say he was a strong, just ruler who preserved order in the country and did away with every crime and violation of rights and justice. He was a defender of the fatherland against foreign enemies. He was holy, pleasing to God and merciful, a friend of the poor. As the father of a nation, he loved according to the spirit of the Gospel, not in words but in deeds. He did away with destitution and poverty in his country. He was a social reformer not guided by the principle of hatred of one person toward the other, or by the theory of class-struggle without the foundation of Christian love.

On the feast-day of St. Vladimir our church services bestow upon him the most beautiful of praises. He is called "another Constantine in word and deed", "a true preacher", the "root of orthodoxy", "the leader of piety and preacher of the faith", "a second Paul", "equal to the apostles", "brilliant light", "most glorious ambassador of Christ", "emulator of the Apostles, "teacher from whom we learn of Christ". He will live forever in the hearts of the people of our community as their baptizer, their Apostle of Faith, and as their Saint Vladimir the Great.

As members of this great Ukrainian rite we should relate to Christ as did Vladimir, with faith, hope and love. These theological virtues must be joined together. They can't exist separately. Faith and love without hope is despair. Faith and hope without love is selfishness, self-love. And hope and love without faith is a life which is meaningless, without purpose, and without foundation. Like St. Vladimir let us affirm our Catholic belief - the belief that through our Lord Jesus Christ we are assured of the Father's love and life everlasting. Amen.