

EVANGELIZERS

The Irish have their Saint Patrick. The Italians have their Saint Anthony. The Germans have Saint Boniface. Every nationality has its evangelizer. The Slovaks, along with several other Slavic nations, claim Saints Cyril and Methodius. The Church celebrated their feast day on February 14. However, it does not get the attention that feast days of other saints do, overshadowed, as it is, by the observance of Valentine's Day.

During the Ninth Century, there were Irish and German missionaries in pagan Great Moravia, where the Slovaks lived. Nevertheless, its ruler requested the pope for missionaries who could speak his people's language. He had none. Turning to the emperor in Constantinople, the request resulted in Constantine (who later took the religious name of Cyril) and Methodius being sent to evangelize the people of Great Moravia.

In preparation for their task, the two saints prepared an alphabet and translated both liturgical and scriptural texts into it. The first was the Gospel of Saint John, which begins by proclaiming the fact that the Word became flesh. It is interesting to note that the word for "word" in the language was "slovo," from which Slovak, the eventual name of the people, may have derived.

Saints Cyril and Methodius were ahead of their time in a number of areas. One of the more significant was their celebrating the Mass in the vernacular. Several times, they were reported and then summoned to Rome for doing this. Each time, they received support and encouragement from the pope. On one of those visits, Cyril became ill and died on February 14. The reputation of these two evangelizers was so great that the pope decreed Cyril's funeral to be celebrated with pontifical solemnity. The frescoes on the wall of the original Church of Saint Clement in Rome (where Cyril was buried) attest to this fact.

Methodius, now a bishop, returned to his missionary work among the Slovaks in Great Moravia. He established the Diocese of Nitra in the year 880, according to the Pontifical Annual Directory of the Holy See. That same directory also notes that the current bishop of Altoona-Johnstown was chosen from among the clergy of that particular diocese, which, of course, is true. But, that's another story.

The Book of Sirach exhorts us to recall the memory of those who have preceded us. "Stalwart men, solidly established and at peace in their own estates – all these were glorious in their time, each illustrious in his day. (44:6-7)" The blood that runs in the veins of many in the United States today has its origin in a variety of nations. The same can be said of our Christian Faith. It has been bolstered by a variety of saintly and courageous evangelizers. Even though the ultimate source in both cases is the one God, celebrating our ancestors who have passed on to us the gifts of existence and of a relationship with the Lord is a worthy thing to do.

Then, there is our own particular situation. Many in our Diocesan Church can trace, at least partially, their bloodline back to the families that came to settle these beautiful Allegheny Mountains. As for our strong relationship with the Lord, we owe that to the indomitable, dedicated, and saintly Servant of God Demetrius Gallitzin. May he soon join the ranks of those in whose memory we publicly rejoice for the gift of Faith that they left us!