

Sts. Borys and Hlib

(About icon cards for participants received at the Fall 2019 Catholic Bible Seminar)

First, I would like to give some context to better understand the story of Saints Borys and Hlib (the card given out at our prayer meeting tonight).

The medieval Ukrainian state was known as Kyivan-Rus, not to be confused with Russia as we know it today. There are varied viewpoints on how Eastern Slavic countries formed, but basically, the southern part of Kyivan-Rus, centered on the ancient City of Kyiv, became today's Ukraine. Succession of Kyivan royalty involved dividing the kingdom between princely sons of a deceased monarch (the title in Ukrainian is князь pronounced Kniazh), with a fight for the throne of Kyiv, because it was the seat from which the entire country was governed.

Saint Kniazh Volodymyr the Great accepted Byzantine Christianity and had the people of his realm baptized in 988. This was at a time when east and west was united under the Roman Papacy. After Saint Volodymyr died in about 1015, a feud erupted for the Kyivan throne among his sons – Yaroslav, Sviatopolk, Borys and Hlib – and resulted in the deaths of Borys and Hlib.

Borys was named Roman at his baptism and Hlib was named David. After their father's death, the eldest son Sviatopolk planned to kill his brothers Borys, Hlib, and Yaroslav in order to seize power. He sent a message to Borys, pretending that he wished to live in peace with him, and to increase Borys' land holdings inherited from their father.

Some of Saint Volodymyr's advisers told Borys that he should take the army and establish himself as ruler of Kyiv. Saint Borys, however, said that he could never lift his hand against his own brother. Unfortunately, Sviatopolk was not so scrupulous. He came to the town of Vyshhorod to ask its leaders if they were loyal to him. They assured him that they were ready to die for him. Sviatopolk sent assassins to kill Borys, who already knew that his brother wanted him dead.

When they arrived they heard him chanting psalms and praying before an icon of Christ. He asked the Lord to strengthen him for the suffering he was about to endure. He also prayed for Sviatopolk, asking God not to count this against him as sin. Then he lay down upon his couch, and the assassins stabbed him with their lances, and also killed some of Borys's servants. Wrapping Borys in a cloth, they threw him onto a wagon and drove off with him. When Sviatopolk saw that he was still breathing, he sent some men to finish him off with swords.

Hlib, under the impression that his father was ill and not yet dead, was sent for by Sviatopolk and rushed to his father's death bed. On the way, their brother Yaroslav learned of Sviatopolk's murder of Borys and urged Hlib not to meet him. Instead, Hlib went on to pay his respects to Borys. In the middle of praying over his deceased brother and to God, Hlib was stabbed to death by an assassin.

Although Boris and Hlib were not martyred for their faith (they are properly called 'passion-bearers' rather than martyrs), their voluntary and meek sacrifice for the sake of averting the suffering of others

and preserving the Christian ideal, had a profound effect on the subsequent development of Christianity in Ukraine, then called Rus, and the entire Eastern Catholic Church.

The brothers were canonized in 1015. Thus they lived up to the faith their father brought to Kyivan-Rus and became first saints canonized in Kievan Rus' after Saint Volodymyr converted his nation. Their feast day is observed on July 24.

Just to round out the story, Yaroslav the Wise ascended to the Kyivan throne, bringing stability to his nation over a long reign. He built churches and monasteries, including the Church of the Holy Wisdom (St. Sophia) one of the most significant cathedrals of Eastern Catholicism, and placed Ukraine and its people under the Protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary. He was known as “the Father-in-law of Europe” with sons and daughters marrying into 8 royal families, including his daughter Anna marrying Henry 1 of France.

Among the prayers at Matins and the Divine Liturgy (Mass) are the following:

By words and deeds you fulfilled Christ's commandments and precepts. Without hatred you confronted the enemy who came to kill you unjustly.* Like the first martyr Stephen, you prayed:* Do not hold this against them,* O Christ our God, the Lover of mankind.*

Come, faithful of our churches, and behold how innocently the martyr Borys accepts the sentence,* whose side they pierced at the instigation of the devil,* causing him the shedding of blood.* Behold Hlib who like a lamb was slaughtered by his brother Sviatopolk.* They received crowns while their brother perished in oblivion.* They received glory and pray for our souls.*

O genuine passion-bearers and true followers of the Gospel of Christ, chaste Borys and innocent Hlib,* you did not oppose your brother turned enemy* who killed you bodies but could not touch your souls.* Therefore let the wicked lover of power shed tears of lament* while you rejoice in the presence of the Holy Trinity with angelic choirs.* Pray that the land of your kinsmen may be pleasing to God* and that all the children of our land may be saved.*

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, now and for ever and ever. Amen.

Sources:

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