The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

How St. Cyril Brings Rome and Moscow Together

By Russell Working

January 26, 2014

Not far from the Colosseum in Rome stands an ancient church that embodies the mystic kinship Russians have often felt toward the Eternal City — along with the rivalry.

Overlooked by many tourists who throng to more famous sites, the Basilica of San Clemente draws pilgrims to a basement corner decorated with signs in Russian, Ukrainian, Bulgarian and other Slavic languages.

The church holds the remains of St. Cyril, the 9th-century evangelist and linguist who created the Cyrillic alphabet. And the basilica is named for St. Clement, a first-century pope who was martyred in the Crimea.

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Pope John Paul II, who will be canonized himself in April, used to pray here in the 4th-century lower level before a mosaic of St. Cyril, honoring the saint's missionary work among the Slavs. The site will interest anyone who ever thumped himself on the head for pronouncing a Cyrillic "P" like a Roman one in some classroom long ago.

"In Rome, you can feel legend, mystery, history and mythology, and they mix all together," said Antonio Rinaldini, a tour guide at Roam Around Rome.

The same could be said of Moscow and its historic view of its holy mission. The remarkable basilica — whose third, lowest level holds a 2nd-century villa and pagan temple — brings to mind Russia's claim that Moscow has supplanted Rome and Byzantium as a "Third Rome."

But let's start with St. Clement and St. Cyril.

The Dominicans who run the basilica say Clement was exiled to Crimea and condemned to labor in the mines during the reign of Emperor Trajan (98 to 117 A.D.). Angered by his missionary successes while a prisoner, his captors tied him to an anchor and drowned him in the Black Sea. This, and not a secret affinity for the U.S. Marine Corps, explains the anchor motif in the church's beautiful mosaics and frescos.

Later, legend has it, the water receded, revealing Clement's tomb, built by the angels. His body was later recovered.

Enter St. Cyril. In the 9th century, he reportedly recovered the remains of St. Clement and brought them to this basilica, which dated to the 400s. When St. Cyril died, he too was interred here. In the 1100s, workers filled the old basilica with rubble and built the current one on top. The lower levels were only excavated in the 19th century, when they were rediscovered during renovations.

If there ever was an influential saint, it is Cyril. I first encountered his alphabet in fourth grade, when a teacher taught us a little Russian. I was fascinated. In a notebook, I neatly formed words out of the curious letters: the spidery Ж, the two-legged Д, the Щ and its tail-less cousin Ш, which Nabokov beautifully describes in "Speak, Memory" as "the fluffy-gray, three-stemmed Russian letter ... as old as the rushes of the Nile."

But one day, my older brother caught me copying words in Cyril's script, and he said sternly: "Russians are communists. Why are you learning that?"

Feeling vaguely traitorous, I threw the notebook away. But Russia had snared me, and it still has not let me go, even if the alphabet did prove to be a struggle when I started studying

the language later on. I am married to a Russian woman, my stepson and his wife are Russian, and Cyril's letters float down like snowflakes at family mealtimes.

The basilica is a reminder that Roman civilization is far more ancient than Russia's. But after the fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1453, Muscovites proposed their city as a Third Rome. The monk Filofei wrote to Tsar Vasily III, "For two Romes have fallen, and the Third stands, and a fourth shall never be, for Thy Christian Empire shall never devolve upon others."

You would think this would imply a respect for Rome, but Moscow's messianic status has been most loudly proclaimed by those who disdained Roman Catholicism and the West.

Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote of "Papal Catholicism, dying forever," and looked forward to a "reborn Eastern Christianity," British author Peter J.S. Duncan writes in "Russian Messianism: Third Rome, Revolution, Communism and After." A similar sense of destiny would animate the October Revolution.

Outsiders, too, have often perceived something sacred in Moscow. In "War and Peace," Napoleon gazes upon "this Asiatic city with its numberless churches — Holy Moscow!" More recently, think of the Western dupes who made pilgrimages to the new Rome of Moscow, then the world capital of communism.

Today, younger Russians, less defensive about their homeland, find much to admire in Rome. Anna Pyasetskaya, a Moscow public relations specialist, recently visited Rome and sensed "something in common in the psychology of our countries."

She wants to return "to venerate the saints I haven't visited yet," she says. "Russians love Rome, and I love it very much. And I also believe that 'Moscow is the Third Rome, and there will never be a fourth.'"

No doubt. But at the risk of offending the saints, I do wish Cyril had stuck with the Roman alphabet.

Russell Working, a Chicago-area writer, lived in Vladivostok for five years. He recently visited Rome on a press tour sponsored by Promoroma, an agency of the Chamber of Commerce of Rome.

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