

Methodius between Rome and Constantinople: The Return of the Moravian Archbishop to the Byzantine Capital (*Vita Methodii*, ch. XIII)¹⁾

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The contribution proposes a detailed interpretation of *Vita Methodii* (ch. XIII) about the return of the Moravian archbishop to Constantinople and offers a reconstruction of his relationships with the emperor Basilus I and the patriarch Photius in order to better understand the last period of Methodius's activity in Great Moravia.

Keywords: *Vita Methodii*, Moravian archbishop Methodius, Great Moravia, patriarch Photius, emperor Basilus I

In the aftermath of the rise of Photius to the patriarchal chair (878), the revival of Byzantine ecclesiastical and missionary policy contributed to consolidating the influence of the empire in the neighbouring regions.²⁾ Control over the Adriatic put a limit on the incursions of the Saracens and the Narentine pirates, and the relationship with the Croatian prince Zdeslav, a precious ally against the Bulgarian khan Boris, was consolidated.³⁾ The latter had just at that time sent his son Simeon to the Byzantine capital, where he was to be educated (c. 878–c. 886).⁴⁾ However, 878 was not a year only of successes. In fact, the Byzantine Empire had to acknowledge the blow of the Arab conquest of Syracuse, which marked the loss of Sicily. As a result, its archbishop Asbestas, a longtime friend of Photius, never returned to his seat (Winkelmann et al. 2000).

In this atmosphere between hopes and disappointments, the Constantinopolitan synod of 879–880 marked the reconciliation of Photius with Rome and, rescinding the previous sentence, recognized his new ascent to the patriarchal throne.⁵⁾ However, if on the one

1) I wish to thank the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments on the first version of this essay. The following article stems from our research aimed at retracing the vast project of missionary activities the Byzantine church implemented at the time of Photius's patriarchate, which went much further than the Moravian Slavic mission. In the past several scholars have voiced their scepticism regarding the fact that the Slavic mission was indeed a Byzantine initiative that later failed. Sceptics consider the absence of Byzantine documents on the Slavic mission (see, in particular, recent studies by Vavřínek 2015; 2017) as evidence for this. The following research, similar to our other publications in print or forthcoming, endeavors to retrace the different aspects within a wider Byzantine missionary project. Crucial within this research will be the Bulgarian and Moravian issue, studied through a renewed examination of the sources to verify our proposed theses.

2) On the second phase of the patriarchate of Photius and the missionary activity of the Constantinopolitan prelate see Garzaniti 2015.

3) Regarding the Croatian prince Zdeslav, see Dvornik 1970, 232–235 and Fine 2006, 38–39, 43.

4) On the presence of Simeon in Constantinople see the monograph of M. J. Leszka (2013, 25–41).

5) For the canonical dispositions and the acts of the synod see *COGD* 2013, 51–71 and Mansi 1960–1962, 17, 360–330. The events linked to the reception of this synod have been studied in detail with ample quotations

hand the action of the emperor Basil I against the Saracens had the support of the Holy See, still under the Islamic threat on the Tyrrhenian Sea, on the other hand the renewed Constantinopolitan activism, especially in the Balkan and Danubian areas, was agitating the Roman curia and particularly the solid pro-Frankish party.

In light of the complex political and ecclesiastical situation of the time, we would like to re-examine the precious testimony which the brief chapter XIII of the *Vita Methodii* offers us (Lavrov 1930, 76).⁶⁾ The anonymous hagiographer tells of the journey of the archbishop of Great Moravia to Constantinople, which, according to various reconstructions, would have been in the first years of the second patriarchate of Photius. The interpretation of this chapter, however, still remains in many respects an enigma. Above all, it remains difficult to explain the beginning in which it is said that the opponents of the Moravian prelate – clearly identifiable with the defenders of the *Filioque* mentioned in the previous chapter, the German clergy in Moravia – had denounced the hostility of the emperor of Constantinople towards Methodius. Only the visit of the prelate to Constantinople would have healed the situation, dispelling mistrust and hostility and re-establishing constructive relations. In this regard, F. Dvornik, always attentive to the historical reconstruction based on the testimony of the Slavonic Lives of the Thessalonian brothers, expresses with some unease the possibility that the same hagiographer introduced this premise to highlight the continuous difficulties that Methodius had to overcome during his ministry.⁷⁾

The most recent research and a careful re-reading of the sources, however, allows us to give a historically plausible answer to the question and to better illuminate a fundamental passage of the last period of Methodian magisterium. We will do this by interpreting various passages of this chapter in light of the missionary project that Photius, having once again risen to the patriarchal chair after more than ten years, intended to carry out with the support of the emperor.

First of all, we must recall what was stated in the previous chapter of the hagiographic story (*Vita Methodii* XII). At the end of the seventies, Methodius's relations with Pope John VIII had suffered a serious crisis due to the denunciation of the prelate that the German clergy in Moravia had presented to the Roman curia. The anonymous hagiographer

from the rich documentation in English translation in Dvornik's fundamental study (1948, 159–201). In this article we will refer mainly to the most up to date monograph dedicated to the Slavic mission (Dvornik 1970). On the variable reception of the synod in the following centuries, see V. Peri, who considered a philological reconstruction of the conciliar acts necessary (Peri 2002). On the good relations of Photius with Rome in those years, in particular with Pope John VIII, see Dvornik 1933, 313–321.

6) For the Slavonic Lives of Constantine and Methodius we refer to the edition of P. A. Lavrov (Lavrov 1930), but, if necessary, also the edition of F. Grivec and F. Tomšič (Grivec – Tomšič 1960).

7) "It seems therefore more logical to see in these words only a means by which the writer sought to introduce another incident to enhance the honor of his hero. This new honor would be all the more impressive if it came from an unexpected quarter which might have been imagined to be hostile to Methodius" (Dvornik 1970, 171). This position is shared by B. N. Floria: "Начало этой главы неоднократно вызывало недоумение у исследователей. Непонятно, почему «цесарь» – византийский император Василий I Македонянин (867–886), мог гневаться на Мефодия и зачем противникам Мефодия – немецким священникам – нужно было распространять сведения о враждебности императора к Мефодию. Исследователи поэтому предполагают, что этот текст представляет собой плод вымысла агнографа, располагавшего материал в XIII и XVI главах своего труда по определенной схеме: клевета на героя и ее опровержение" (Floria 2000, 321). On the commentary to this chapter, see Dittrich 1962, 244–257; Berezovskij 1963; Dvornik 1970, 170–174; Floria 2000, 320–325; Tachiaos 2015, 209–211. The polarization of the debate on the controversy between Rome and Constantinople has certainly played a central role in the various commentaries, as shown by the presentation of the different positions by L. A. Berezovskij and more recently summarized by Floria (2000, 322–323).

makes reference to it, recalling the Old Testament episode of the rebellion of Dathan and Abiram against Moses in the desert (Num.16).⁸⁾ The *Vita Methodii* remembers the German clergy's appeal to the papal authority against Methodius and his doctrine and, following an erudite definition that Photius had offered in his *Mistagogy*, assimilates the adversaries of the Moravian archbishop to the supporters of the ancient "Father / Son heresy".⁹⁾

The story is briefly summarized in the Slavonic *Vita*, but Latin sources attest that Methodius, denounced by Svatopluk himself, had been forced upon the Pope's urgent invitation (June or July 879) to go to Rome to confirm the orthodoxy of his doctrine (Caspar 1974, ep. 200, 160; Betti 2014, 163).¹⁰⁾ After the defense of the archbishop before the curia, pope John VIII confirmed the doctrinal orthodoxy of Methodius and acknowledged the lawfulness of the Slavonic in the liturgy in the letter *Industriae tuae* (June 880) (Caspar 1974, ep. 255, 222–224).¹¹⁾ At the same time, however, he ordered Viching, the most important exponent of the German clergy in Moravia, as his suffragan bishop at the Nitra seat (Caspar 1974, ep. 255, 223). Entrusting a diocese to the same person who led the opposition to Methodius with the support of Prince Svatopluk, the Pope aimed to counterbalance the authority of Methodius in the hope of pacifying the two sides. With this decision he simultaneously affirmed his authority over the new church. It is no coincidence that in his letter the Pope reminded the Prince of the possibility of sending other priests to be consecrated in Rome for other episcopal seats, underlining the direct dependence of the Moravian diocese and its internal organization on the Holy See (Betti 2014, 152–153).

Meanwhile, Pope John was anxious to send letters to the bishops of Istria and Dalmatia, in particular to bishop Theodosius of Nin, to remind them to remain faithful to the Latin tradition despite the presence of Slavic and Greek missions and the pressures to submit to other jurisdictions.¹²⁾ Only at the end of 879, the situation was improving in favor of

8) Commenting on the Old Testament quotation, Dvornik refers to the short Life of Methodius, preserved in a late Prologue (1405), which speaks of Sedislav (Zdeslav), but this interesting passage remains obscure (Dvornik 1970, 233; see Lavrov 1930, 103).

9) The insertion of the *Filioque* in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Symbol, which supposed the procession of the Holy Spirit "from the Father and the Son", had become a cause for division between the Frankish church and the Byzantine church since the Carolingian era (see Peri 2002). Photius had already examined the question in relation to the missionary activity in his Letter to the Eastern patriarchs (867, Ep. 2, Laourdas – Westerink 1985, 39–53). Subsequently, he studies it in more detail in the *Mystagogy* which is generally dated between 885 and 886 and seems to respond precisely to the needs of defense of the prelate Methodius and his disciples against the German clergy. Therefore Z. R. Dittrich suggested that the *Mystagogy* was written by Photius after the visit of the Moravian bishop to Constantinople (Dittrich 1962, 255). In the quoted passage the patriarch, using a learned reminiscence, assimilates the *Filioque* to the Monarchist heresy of Sabellius, who in the 4th century claimed that Father and Son were the same thing (*Mistagogia*, 15, in Fozio 2018, 14; see Tachiaos 2015, 205); cf. Chadwick 2003, who prefers to place the work during the time of Pope Nicholas.

10) On the correspondence of John VIII in relation to Moravia, see Betti 2014, 109–206.

11) In this letter we see the title *archiepiscopus sanctae ecclesiae Marabensis*, the subject of many interpretations; we cannot take all into consideration here, see Betti 2014, 164–165.

12) In his letters to the bishops of the Dalmatian area from Nin to Split (879), the Pope feared the spread of "Greek and Slavic" influence. In 879 he wrote: "Porro si aliquid de parte Greecorum vel Sclavorum super vestra ad nos reversione vel consecratione aut de palli perceptione dubitatis, scitote pro certo, quoniam nos secundum sanctorum patrum decessorumque nostrorum pontificum statute vos adiuvaré auctoritate curabimus" (Caspar 1974, ep. 196, 157). When the letter speaks of Slavs, reference is made in all probability to the Methodian clergy who entered the Croatian area, starting with Nin, creating a situation of conflict with the Latin episcopate of the coast which the Holy See resolved only a few decades later with the synods of Split (925, 927; see Garzaniti 2010).

the papal curia when the Croatian sovereign Zdeslav, who was supported by the emperor Basilius, was overthrown and killed. In his place Branimir ascended the throne and assumed a pro-papal policy, supporting close relations with the curia, as the papal letters attest.¹³⁾

In the same year, as we have mentioned, the synod began in Constantinople, presided over by Photius himself in the presence of the papal representatives, Eugene, bishop of Ostia, and Paul, bishop of Ancona, of numerous exponents of the Byzantine and Eastern episcopates as well as bishops of Dalmatia and its hinterland.¹⁴⁾ The following year not only saw the pacification of Rome with the Constantinopolitan prelate, but also the solution to some delicate questions, beginning with the ecclesiastical jurisdiction over the Bulgarian Khanate that Rome had stubbornly claimed for decades.¹⁵⁾ At this synod, the representatives of the Byzantine clergy and the Eastern patriarchs strongly supported the patriarch Photius and his missionary action, especially with regard to the Muslim Arabs. The synod not only reconciled Rome with Constantinople, but also established a mutual recognition of the excommunications and anathemas imposed by the respective ecclesiastical authorities and reaffirmed the necessary communion of the Byzantine bishops with the Constantinopolitan patriarch.¹⁶⁾

In these circumstances Methodius's position was further complicated. Trained in the Byzantine bureaucracy and a member of diplomatic missions of the Eastern Roman Empire together with his brother Constantine-Cyril, who had been a pupil of Photius, he was related to the powerful Caesar Bardas, a relative of Photius, killed by Basilius before his ascent to the imperial throne (Varona Codeso – Prieto Domínguez 2013). While Photius had fallen into disgrace and had been forced to renounce the patriarchate (867), Methodius had become an archbishop by papal nomination and had profited from the knowledge and experience gained in Constantinople on behalf of the pope of Rome. Now, on the occasion of the Constantinopolitan synod that had seen a notable participation of ecclesiastics, far beyond the Byzantine jurisdiction, the Moravian archbishop had not even attended the meeting since he had had to go to Rome. The papal representatives, present in the Byzantine capital, as well as the Dalmatian bishops, could testify to the successes of the mission in Great Moravia, which despite belonging to the Roman jurisdiction was led by a Greek well known in Constantinople, and, if we heed the papal missives, the Slavic missions had also reached the Western Balkans, inevitably crossing paths with the Byzantine missions.¹⁷⁾ The career and work of Methodius, a Byzantine official, could rightly appear in the eyes of

13) See above note 2.

14) The synod saw the participation of some Dalmatian bishops between Split and Dyrrhachium (see Hergenröther 1867–1869, II, 615), of the bishop of Ochrid, Gabriel, of the bishop of Tiberiopolis, Theoctistus, and was also signed by a “metropolitan of Moravia” named Agathon (see Dvornik 1970, 157–159; Naxidou 2006; Komatina 2010). It would be necessary to deepen the question of the complex ecclesiastical geography of the Dalmatian area and its hinterland, as well as of Epirus, also in relation to the Byzantine presence in southern Italy.

15) Reference is made to the fourth session in which, although recognizing Roman authority, the boundaries of the Bulgarian church were not established. Their definition was given instead to the emperor (December 879; *COGD* 2013, 54; Mansi 1960–1962, 17, *Actio* IV, 488). See Dvornik 1948, 173–175, 181–182, 184–185, 190–191 for an introduction to the decision coming from a compromise and for a comment based on contemporaneous sources. On the relations between the first Bulgarian empire and the Holy See in those years see Gjuzelev 2009, 122ff.

16) Reference is made in particular to the first canon approved during the fifth session (January 880; *COGD* 2013, 55, 69).

17) See above note 11.

the Byzantine curia as an act of lese-majesty. In the aftermath of the Constantinopolitan synod, the German clergy present in Moravia, starting with Viching himself, could thus spread the news of the hostility of the emperor and his curia towards Methodius to weaken and further isolate the elderly bishop who had just been forced to defend himself in Rome.

After explaining his doctrine before the curia during his Roman stay, the archbishop Methodius, however, had inevitably realized that although John VIII pursued the policy of his predecessor Hadrian as a whole, the pro-German party had become stronger. Bishop Formosus, who had previously been deposed and exiled from Rome by John VIII, managed to have the same Pope imprisoned just a few months before the synod (878) in an attempt to become the head of the Bulgarian church.¹⁸⁾ In doing so Formosus tried to influence relationships between the papacy and the Frankish Empire and began to lead the way to the papal throne.¹⁹⁾

Upon his return to Moravia, Methodius, subjecting himself to a heroic effort, accepted the invitation of emperor Basilus to visit the Byzantine capital. The prelate could thus reconcile himself with his mentor Photius, recognizing the ancient debt to the empire, but above all establishing important support for his anti-German policy. This was essential to combat the spread of the *Filioque*, which had not yet been adopted in Rome, but also to impede the implementation of other Frankish traditions. More generally it was to support the formation of a Slavic church, still dependent on Rome, but separate from the German episcopate. Moreover, it must be emphasized the newly celebrated Constantinopolitan synod had once again and explicitly condemned any addition to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Symbol.²⁰⁾ This mission was probably carried out in agreement with John VIII, as the papal letter of March 23, 881 seems to refer to.²¹⁾ Considering the process of reconciliation taking place between Rome and Constantinople, from the Roman point of view, the presence of archbishop Methodius in Constantinople, years previously ordered in Rome, served from the Roman point of view to reaffirm the question of Roman jurisdiction in the Byzantine capital, whose borders in the Danubian region and the Balkan peninsula were still not well defined. We could therefore date the Methodian mission around 881/882, as was proposed in the past.²²⁾

18) Bishop Formosus was the same who in the time of pope Hadrian attempted to become the head of the Bulgarian church, see Sennis 2000.

19) After the death of John VIII (December 16, 882), Formosus took possession again of his diocese of Porto and, after having transferred its see to Rome, he played an increasingly important role in the curia up to the ascent to the papal throne (891) (Sansterre 1997).

20) Reference is made to the penultimate session, although the discussion remains open when it is emphasized that the synod had not, however, spoken openly against the *Filioque* (see *COGD* 2013, 56). On this issue see the detailed commentary of Dvornik (1948, 196).

21) Reference is made in particular to the passage “Cum Deo duce, reversus fueris” to be related to the journey of Methodius to Constantinople, which was therefore agreed upon by the Holy See (Caspar 1974, ep. 276, 244; see Bidlo 1916, 44–45).

22) In contrast to our previous hypothesis of a possible date of 879 (Garzaniti 2015), we now adhere to the proposals of J. Bidlo (1916, 45: June 880 – March 881), and of Dvornik (1970, 173: winter 881 – summer 882) since we must take into account the presence of Methodius in Rome. In the wake of V. N. Zlatarski (1935), also Ch. Hannick places the journey in the years 881/882 (Hannick 1978, 311). It seems more difficult to imagine it after the death of John VIII (15 December 882), during the papacy of Stephen VI, as other scholars have done, at the time when the hostility of the Roman curia towards Methodius grew. In this case the journey would have represented a real affront to the German clergy and to the Holy See (Wasilewski 1987, 106–107).

In light of the described situation, we can now consider the entire chapter XIII of the *Vita Methodii* with its various passages:

But their wickedness did not stop there, but they said: “The emperor is furious with him, and if he finds him, he has no life ahead of him”. The merciful God, however, Who did not wish His servant to be subjected to calumny in this instance either, put it in the emperor’s heart – for the heart of the king is always in the hand of God – to send him a letter: “Venerable Father, I would dearly like to see you, therefore it would be a good thing if you would take the trouble to come for me to see you, while you are yet in this world, and to get your blessing”. He immediately set off and the emperor received him with joy and great honours, praised his teaching and retained a priest and a deacon, with [their] books from among his disciples. He met all his requirements, in whatever he wished, and refused him nothing, and when he had shown him his love and had given him great gifts, his entourage accompanied him officially to his seat. The same [did] the patriarch.²³⁾

Our reconstruction therefore allows us to understand why Constantinople was initially hostile towards Methodius at the time of Photius’s ascent to the patriarchal throne, but at the same time why a rapid reconciliation was realized after the synod of 879–880. Constantinople particularly hoped to strengthen the weak pro-Byzantine party still present in the Roman curia. In this story we can also see the continuation of the work of reconciliation between Rome and Constantinople that twenty years earlier had among its protagonists just Cyril and Methodius when the two brothers went to the Holy See with the gift of the Pope Clement’s relics (Garzaniti 2015, 56).²⁴⁾

To justify the change in attitude of the emperor, *Vita Methodii* refers to the Book of Proverbs, which states, „the heart of the king is always in the hand of God“ (Pr. 21, 1). In general, commentators do not identify this passage or at least do not explain it. Recently Tachiaos has correctly related this biblical passage to the traditional Byzantine political doctrine which at the time had one of its main promoters in Photius (Dvornik 1970, 170; Tachiaos 2015, 209–210).²⁵⁾

From the hagiographic text we also learn that, due to this providential change of mood, the initiative to invite the Moravian archbishop originated in the Byzantine curia itself. Considering the delicate political situation of the Balkan and Danubian territory, in particular the loss of influence caused by the death of the Croatian sovereign Zdeslav, we might see in the Byzantine invitation the resumption of the ecclesiastical initiative of the patriarch Photius, which materialized in the emperor’s renewed attention to Great Moravia.²⁶⁾ However, the question of the object of Methodius’s prayer, to which the letter refers and to which we will return later, remains open.

23) English translation in Tachiaos 2015, 167.

24) Methodius’s journey was also related to the building of a chapel in honor of St. Clement, identified with the Roman pope, in the imperial palace and with the presence of a relic of the Saint in Constantinople (see Wasilewski 1987, 107–110; Floria 2000, 324).

25) The credit for pointing out this quotation is really due to M. V. Anastos (1954) who emphasized it as one of the principal elements of the official Byzantine political philosophy. This study became the basis of further research in this field (cf. Vavřínek 1963, 82f., 110f.; 2013, 208f.).

26) Dvornik tried to explain the succession of the various events in more detail (emperor Basilus’s invitation, Methodius’s journey to Rome and his return to Moravia) based on the papal correspondence and in the perspective of papal diplomacy (Dvornik 1970, 171). The same fall of Zdeslav would, in his opinion, find an

According to *Vita*, Methodius was welcomed in Constantinople „with joy and great honours“, to indicate from the Byzantine point of view the full recognition of his episcopal dignity and the importance attributed to the visit. It appears relevant in particular that his doctrine was „praised“, thus indicating Constantinopolitan approval, similar to what had happened in Rome with the quick application of the canon on mutual recognition of excommunications and anathemas just approved by the synod of 879–880.²⁷⁾ At the same time, the full continuity of Methodius’s teaching with the Byzantine theological tradition and with the Photian project was shown.²⁸⁾

The attention of the commentators obviously focuses on the fact that Methodius left two disciples in Constantinople, a priest and a deacon, and some Slavonic books. In our opinion it is not just an act of deference towards the mother Church or the recognition that the Slavic mission had begun in Constantinople, but most importantly, a repetition of the process of sacralization of the Slavonic books which had begun in Rome, in Santa Maria Maggiore, as witnessed by both the *Vita Constantini* (XVII, 5) and the *Life of Clement* (III, 9) (Tunickij 1918, 72, 74; cf. Garzaniti 2018, 20).

Furthermore, the presence of Methodius’s two disciples, a priest and a deacon, allowed the possibility of using the Slavonic books for the celebration and thus laid the foundations for new missionary work. During the second patriarchate of Photius it was possible to think of using these books for the evangelization of the populations within the Byzantine Empire itself or in closer contact with the Byzantine Empire.²⁹⁾ We have no historical record of such use, but we know how much Basilios was concerned about the reorganization of the Slavic populations within his empire.³⁰⁾ The silence of the sources should not be surprising. We must not forget that the question of language was of primary importance and caused conflict with mutual accusations only in the areas in which the Latin (German) missionaries were present, not in Byzantium.

Finally, we must point out the emperor’s prodigality towards the archbishop of Moravia with the conferment of rich gifts, about which, however, no further information is given. To these are added, according to the last words of the chapter, the gifts of the patriarch, whose name, however, is never indicated in the *Life*. If we consider the fifteenth chapter which tells the translation activity of Methodius together with a group of disciples, we might hypothesize that the books necessary for the formation of the Moravian Church would be

explanation in the disappearance of the Byzantine support in the search to compose the conflict with Rome (Dvornik 1970, 235). On this last hypothesis, however, I would express some doubts. It seems difficult to us to conceive an emperor’s submissive attitude towards the Holy See.

27) See above note 15.

28) We will return in the future to the question of the profession of faith of the Thessalonian brothers and its Byzantine sources. In fact, we have a fundamental testimony of a profession of faith in the Slavic version attributed in the manuscript tradition to Constantine-Cyril. Only in recent years has its Greek original been identified (A. Jurčenko), which belongs to the Constantinopolitan patriarch Nicephorus (758–829), (Lučovickij 2007). The same first chapter of *Vita Methodii* can actually be considered a true and proper profession of faith (see Dvornik 1933, 308–309).

29) See Dvornik 1970, 173; Wasilewski 1987, 105–106; Floria 2000, 325; Tachiaos 2015, 211. Bidlo and later Zlatarski refer to the possible use of Slavonic books also in the Bulgarian Khanate. Methodius would have introduced them by crossing the khanate during his journey to Constantinople (Bidlo 1916, 50; Zlatarski 1935, 285). Let us not forget that in those years, Simeon, son of the khan Boris, was educated in the Byzantine capital (see above note 3).

30) With regard to the Serbian populations and their Christianization at the time of Basilios, see Wasilewski 1987, 105 and more recently Popov 2007.

among the gifts. This would be fundamental both on a symbolic level and on a practical level, as this would allow for the establishment of the doctrine of Eastern Christianity in the new community.³¹⁾ The Bible version was followed by „the Nomocanon, that is the canons for the laws, and the Book of the Fathers“ (*VM XV*, 4–5).³²⁾ Methodius’s request, mentioned at the beginning of the chapter in the emperor’s letter to the prelate, probably referred to these books.

In this regard it may be recalled that Methodius, when he had been in Rome to defend his doctrine, had been able to see the rich gifts that the emperor Charles the Bald had brought with him to Rome when he was crowned by Pope John VIII. Among these were the famous chair of St. Peter and, perhaps brought to Rome later (877), the great Latin Bible that is still preserved today in St. Paul outside the Walls (Sennis 2000).

Thinking of the patriarch’s gifts, we recall that in those years in Constantinople, probably in the patriarchal scriptorium, the *Soterios*, an anthology of fundamental introductory texts to Christian doctrine, had been accomplished. At the beginning of the 10th century the Slavonic translation was carried out in the so-called “Simeon miscellany” dedicated to the Bulgarian emperor, witnessed by *Izbornik 1073*. Simeon, as we said, still very young then, lived in the Byzantine capital during the years of the synod and at the time of Methodius’s visit to Constantinople (Garzaniti 2016).³³⁾

The end of the chapter which refers to Methodius’s return journey with the imperial escort, allows us a final reflection.³⁴⁾ It was an escort not so much to honor the archbishop but to defend him when crossing countries in a state of continual belligerence and with uncertain borders. This is underlined by the following chapter of the *Vita Methodii* (*VM XIV*) in which the dangers and labors faced during his journeys are enumerated, inspired by the *Second Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (see 2 Cor. 11, 26–27).³⁵⁾

This story reminds us in particular of the previously narrated (*VM IX*) episode of the capture of Methodius and his disciples during their return journey from Rome to Pannonia. In this regard it should be remembered that among the most relevant provisions in the documents of the synod of 879–880 is the prohibition of imprisonment and relegation of bishops by civil authorities on pain of excommunication.³⁶⁾ In the past Photius himself had suffered this bitter experience of relegation at the time of his first deposition. More recently, as we have seen, Pope John VIII had also endured prison at the instigation of Formosus.

31) F. Thomson (1998, 639) related Methodius’s journey to Constantinople with the subsequent translation activity.

32) Regardless of their precise identification, which is still being discussed today, these were fundamental texts concerning the organization of the church in Moravia and the formation of the clergy.

33) Dvornik supposes that during his stay Simeon could have known the priest and the deacon left by Methodius in Constantinople, as later the Methodian clergy arrived in Constantinople after the death of Methodius (885; Dvornik 1970, 251–252).

34) According to Dvornik, the return journey did not cross the First Bulgarian Empire but the Adriatic inland regions through Pannonian Croatia (Dvornik 1970, 174). Bidlo offers a different interpretation, according to which, in the wake of F. Miklosich’s version, this passage would simply refer to the ceremony of welcoming the bishop in the imperial palace (sic! Bidlo 1916, 40–41).

35) In the Slavonic Lives of the Thessalonian brothers and in the Cyrilo-Methodian sources their work is continuously interpreted in the light of the Pauline model (Picchio 1982; Garzaniti 2018, 24).

36) Reference is made to the third canon approved by the fifth session (January 880; *COGD* 2013, 55, 70–71).

In our opinion the canonical provision of the aforementioned synod was a warning to the imperial authorities and to their supporters to force them to respect the freedom the ecclesiastical authorities should enjoy.

It can therefore be concluded that chap. XIII of the *Vita Methodii*, in light of historical sources, in particular those on the synod of 879–880, is of fundamental importance for the reconstruction of the last activities of Methodius and the situation of Great Moravia in the geopolitical and ecclesiastical context. The very reconciliation between the Churches of Rome and Constantinople, between Pope Stephen and patriarch Photius, that happened during the synod, made the reconciliation between the Moravian archbishop and the patriarch of Constantinople possible. Their mutual act of recognition of Methodius's orthodoxy, in Rome and then in Constantinople, was the sign of the synodal union. At the same time, it strengthened the position of the Pope towards the German church, together with the position of Photius towards the emperor, of his curia and of the oriental patriarchs as a defender of orthodoxy. It also further consolidated the position of Methodius threatened by the German episcopate. Naturally, just as would happen in the following centuries, the attempt at the reconciliation, result of weak compromises, clashed inevitably with the rigidity of the more radical positions that at this point were culturally and politically separated.

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