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THE LIVES OF THE SAINTS

Saint Josaphat of Lithuania: A Saint for Unity

In the new liturgical calendar, the feast day of Saint Josaphat is celebrated today, November 12. In the traditional calendar, he is commemorated on the 14th.

Today's saint was a religious and a bishop who sacrificed his life for the unity of the Eastern and Western Churches. In today's context of ecumenical dialogue, other paths are often pursued, and a concept of unity different from that aspired to by St. Josaphat is defended. Let us take a look at his life.

Josaphat Kuncewicz was born in 1580 in Volhynia, which belonged to Greater Poland at the time and is now in western Ukraine. He came from a respected family; his father, Gabriel, was a councilman. He was baptized in the Orthodox faith with the name John. Even as a child, he was said to be very pious and to have had a vision of God.

Initially, John wanted to become a merchant, so he moved to Vilnius, Lithuania. However, shortly thereafter, he felt called to religious life. He became a monk at the Holy Trinity Monastery of the Order of St. Basil the Great in Vilnius. There, he received the religious name Josaphat.

To better understand his decision to enter this specific monastery, it is helpful to know a little about the historical context.

Since the Great Schism of 1054, most Christians in the Eastern or Byzantine Empire had separated themselves from the authority of the Roman Pontiff. Thus, the so-called Orthodox Church came into being. The schism continues to this day, though some Eastern churches have reunited with Rome. In 1439, at the Council of Florence, an attempt was made to reunite the Eastern and Western Churches. Indeed, unity was achieved for a brief period. However, the reunification gradually fell apart when the Ottomans conquered Constantinople in 1453.

After years of debate, in 1596, the majority of Ruthenian (Eastern Slavic) Orthodox bishops voted in favor of reunification with Rome and, therefore, with the Pope. In this context, an agreement known as the Union of Brest was reached, in which the

Ruthenians pledged obedience to the Pope as Supreme Pontiff, while retaining the right to preserve their own Slavic liturgical traditions. In this way, they could celebrate the Byzantine liturgy, retain the custom of married priests, maintain their own canon law and ecclesiastical jurisdiction, and preserve certain theological distinctions within the profession of faith.

Returning to the story of Josaphat: the monastery he entered was Uniate—it had been reunited with Rome. Therefore, unity within the Church, as agreed upon in the Union of Brest, became a central theme for St. Josaphat after he thoroughly studied the matter. Five years after entering the monastery, he was ordained a priest. Josaphat led an intense spiritual life. The beauty of the Byzantine rite and the prayer of the heart—with its constant repetition of the ejaculatory prayer, “Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me”—were central aspects of his life. He practiced the prayer of the heart so assiduously that his brothers said they could hear him whispering the prayer even in his sleep.

Father Josaphat was an eloquent preacher. With total conviction, he sought to bring all Orthodox faithful into union with Rome—that is, into communion with the Supreme Pontiff. Thanks to his influence, many young people entered the monastery, and he became the spiritual father of many. His sermons even reached the Calvinists.

Convinced that this reunification was God’s will, he acted with great persuasive power—especially after being appointed superior of the monastery and, later, archbishop of Polotsk and thus of Belarus (Ruthenia).

However, his great love for the reunification of the Church met with vehement resistance. While his work in the monastery had been very fruitful and he had succeeded in reforming monastic life, his work as bishop became a heavy cross to bear. Because of his eloquence, Orthodox Christians called him a “thief of souls.” Some saw this as an insult, while others regarded it as a title of honor, since he managed to draw many Christians out of schism. He even encountered rejection from Roman Catholics, especially among the Polish clergy, who opposed the Union of Brest because they wanted the Roman rite introduced everywhere exclusively.

Despite the opposition, the Union of Brest was a success under the influence of St. Josaphat. However, it was soon significantly affected by political tensions. Bishop

Josaphat held firm and defended his convictions with complete clarity. His motto was: *“I want to build Holy Wisdom, even if I have to die in that very moment.”*

The Orthodox bishop of Polotsk became his great opponent. When King Sigismund ceased to unconditionally support reunification due to political circumstances and even recognized the Orthodox hierarchy in the Catholic Kingdom of Poland-Lithuania, Orthodox Christians began to fight and expel the “papists” without fear of repercussions.

But they were not satisfied with that. Their hatred for Bishop Josaphat—whom they called the “thief of souls”—was especially great. Thus, on November 12, 1623, he was brutally murdered by fanatical opponents while on a pastoral trip. St. Josaphat was the first martyr of the Uniate Church, sealing his testimony with his blood.

What is the current situation regarding the unity of the Church? Are there still Catholics who argue that Orthodox Christians should return to the Catholic Church? Are there those who consider the paths laid out by the Union of Brest or the Council of Florence to be ordained by God for achieving unity, even though the Catholic Church today is adapting to the modernist spirit? Is there still talk of an “ecumenism of return”?

Saint Josaphat knew it was worth giving his life for this cause—a united Church between East and West that can bear integral Christian witness.

Saint Josaphat, pray that true unity among all Christians may arise, just as God desires. Amen!

Meditation on the Gospel of the Day: <https://en.elijamission.net/gratitude-2/>