

Each year I read a little of the history behind the veneration of Saints Cyril and Methodius and each year am impressed by the muddle the Church got into then, in its various competing claims or attempts at evangelisation, and by the muddle the Church continues to get into today, in very similar ways and places. This may simply reflect my own muddle over who is saying what to whom and why – that search for what is really going on here in the fog of human living, behind all these competing claims that beset us still. It all seems so far removed from the ‘simplicity’ of the gospel – love and do what you will etc. And therein perhaps lies the problem.

Cyril and Methodius are noted for their promotion of the vernacular: that is, the use of a language understood by the people of a particular locality, in this case, the language of the Slavs and the principle, if not the details of their own original alphabet, has survived in the Orthodox Church and has now also come to be the norm in the Catholic Church. But with it has also come the weaponisation of Christianity by others in the cause, one might say, of lesser aims – political or economic or national ambitions. This isn’t a fault of Cyril and Methodius or of religion generally but a fact of human nature from its beginning – its use or abuse by others for other reasons. So we celebrate the idea of unity because disunity is our default position. This was brought home to me at a recent ecumenical meeting when a very learned scholar complained of the rivalry between two Catholic institutes of learning in Rome competing with each other for affluence and status:

*‘It’s ridiculous’, he said. ‘They are all trying to achieve the same thing!’*

I thought that that was the most wonderful insight into how the search for unity becomes, in itself, a cause for rivalry and competing claims and, in its turn, readily weaponised by others. I’m thinking here of both Trump and Putin, today, using the diversity of views within Christianity for their own political purposes. This is not countered by playing them at their own game but by being totally surrendered to another game entirely – the surrender to love. This may sound simplistic but it’s a far more difficult game to master than any other and its beginnings are here in the languages we speak to one another.

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