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Pope Francis smiles at a child who is held up to him while he is riding in the popemobile. The

Pope Francis greets a child as he rides in the popemobile around St. Peter's Square at the Vatican before his weekly general audience Oct. 25, 2023. (CNS photo/Lola Gomez)

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Since the Gospel message touches every aspect of a person's life, it must be proclaimed in a way people can understand, Pope Francis said.

At his weekly general audience Oct. 25, the pope looked at the lives of Sts. Cyril and Methodius, two brothers from ninth-century Greece who became missionaries in central Europe. St. John Paul II named them co-patrons of Europe and wrote the encyclical "Slavorum Apostoli" ("The Apostles of the Slavs") about them, affirming Eastern Europe's Christian culture.

The region included various peoples and cultures, and "their prince asked for a teacher to explain the Christian faith in their language," which lacked an alphabet, the pope said.

The saints' first task, therefore, was "to study the culture of those peoples in depth" since faith should always be inculturated and culture be evangelized.

St. Cyril invented the Glagolitic alphabet so he could translate the Bible and liturgical texts into their language and, soon, the pope said, "people felt that the Christian faith was no longer 'foreign'" because it was inculturated and "became their faith, spoken in their mother tongue."

"Just think: two Greek monks giving an alphabet to the Slavs. It is this openness of heart that rooted the Gospel among them. These two were not afraid, they were courageous," the pope said.

However, he said, "some opposition emerged on the part of some Latins, who saw themselves deprived of their monopoly on preaching to the Slavs. That is the battle inside the church; it's always like this, isn't it?"

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"Their objection was religious, but only in appearance: God can be praised, they said, only in the three languages written on the cross: Hebrew, Greek and Latin," the pope said, underlining that "they were closed-minded to defend their own autonomy."

But, he said, St. Cyril insisted that "God wants every people to praise him in their own language" and, with his brother St. Methodius, they appealed to the pope who approved their liturgical texts in the Slavic language. Despite St. Cyril's death and his brother's imprisonment, "the Word of God was not shackled and [it] spread throughout those peoples."

Skipping large portions of his prepared text, Francis briefly summed up the three important characteristics of the two saints: unity, inculturation and freedom.

There was unity among "the Greeks, the pope, the Slavs," he said. "At that time, there was an undivided Christianity in Europe, which collaborated in order to evangelize."

With inculturation, "evangelization and culture are closely connected" because the Gospel cannot be preached "in the abstract, distilled," he said.

Proclaiming the Gospel requires freedom, the pope said, "but freedom needs courage. A person is free the more courageous they are and do not let themselves be chained to the many things that take away their freedom."

Francis invited everyone to pray "that we may be instruments of 'freedom in charity' for others, to be creative, constant and humble with prayer and with serving others."