

A day to honor 'Good King Wenceslas'

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 28, 2009 NCR Today

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Prague

Celebrating the feast day of the most famous figure in Czech history, a 10th century ruler known around the world as 'Good King Wenceslas' thanks to the popular Christmas carol, Pope Benedict XVI closed his three-day visit to the Czech Republic this morning with a Mass in honor of St. Wenceslas, the country's patron saint.

The Mass was held in Stará Boleslav, a pilgrimage destination about 15 miles outside Prague believed to be the site of the death of Wenceslas in 935. (In Czech, 'Wenceslas' is rendered as "Václav" and remains perhaps the most common first name in the country.)

The early history of Christianity in the Czech lands is thoroughly intertwined with the story, and at times the legend, of Wenceslas. Tradition holds that his grandfather was converted by St. Cyril and Methodius, the legendary 'apostles to the Slavs,' thereby becoming the first Christian prince of the Czechs. His grandmother Ludmilla, today venerated as a saint, was strangled to death by a pagan servant in a dynastic dispute.

When Wenceslas came to power around 924, he promoted the development of Christianity across Bohemia, importing priests and sponsoring the building of churches. He was also said to have a great love for the poor, the quality celebrated by the Christmas carol.

Alas, Wenceslas was never quite as adept at consolidating his power, and in 935 a group of nobles allied with his brother Boleslav succeeded in killing him.

Wenceslas went on to become remembered as a saint and the great protector of the Czech nation. According to one local legend, a huge army of knights is asleep inside a Bohemian mountain, and will awake under the command of Wenceslas when the motherland is in ultimate danger. (That led to a wry joke among Czechs groaning under almost four centuries of successive Austro-Hungarian, Nazi and Communist domination: 'What exactly is he waiting for?')

Another legend holds that when the nation is on the brink of ruin, the huge statue of Wenceslas astride a horse in downtown Prague will come to life. Crossing the Charles Bridge, the horse will stumble over a stone, revealing a famed sword that's the Czech equivalent of Excalibur. With that sword, the Czechs will defeat their enemies.

Sept. 28 is the feast day of Wenceslas, and Benedict XVI praised him this morning as that rare ruler who 'had the courage to prefer the kingdom of heaven to the enticement of worldly power.'

Benedict used his homily this morning, delivered in Italian and then translated into Czech, to offer Wenceslas as a model of fidelity and holiness.

tThe pontiff asked rhetorically whether holiness is 'still relevant' or whether it's more commonly seen as 'unattractive and unimportant.' In truth, the pope said, it doesn't take a long look at people who try to live with God, and without respect for others, to see 'how sad and unfulfilled these people are.'

tThe same 'fear of God' that animated Wenceslas, Benedict said, remains the key to 'building a more just and fraternal world' today, as well as quenching 'the profound thirst for meaning and happiness in the heart of every person.'

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Prior to the Mass, Benedict paid a brief visit to the Church of St. Wenceslas in Stará Boleslav, where a skull believed to be that of the king, adorned with a golden crown, is preserved in a small glass case.

tThe pope also spent a few moments greeting elderly clergy who live in a nearby retirement home operated by the Czech bishops' conference. On his way out, he also waved to a youth chorus that performed during the visit.

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