



**Saints Boris and Gleb the Passion Bearers
Whom the Holy Church Commemorates on July 24.**

Boris and Gleb were the younger and much beloved sons of Grand Prince Vladimir, the ruler of Kievan Rus, who in 988 brought his subjects to the waters of Holy Baptism. The two brothers were also baptized at which time they received the Christian names Romanus and David. The older of the two, Boris, was very gifted and learned to read and write. He shared with his brother his knowledge of the Scriptures and the lives of the Saints whom they both strove to emulate. Indeed, by the time they came of age to rule their respective patrimonies, the territories of Ryazan and Murom, they had already cultivated in their hearts Christian virtues of mercy, compassion and kindness, traits still rare in a land freshly converted from barbarous paganism.

Boris was particularly esteemed among the people and the soldiery. His popularity provoked bitter jealousy in his eldest brother Svyatopolk (known to history as "the Accursed") who scorned the laws of the newly adopted Christian religion, so dear to his younger brothers, in favor of satisfying his unbridled ambition. He saw Boris as a rival for the position of Grand Prince, and when Vladimir died Svyatopolk wasted no time in plotting his brother's murder.

Boris had been sent by his father to fend off an anticipated raid by the Pechenegs. He was returning to Kiev when he was met by emissaries sent by Svyatopolk, from whom he learned of his father's death and his brother's self-willed accession to the throne. The latter, knowing that the people would rather have Boris as ruler and desiring to forestall any opposition that this news might stir up, bade his messengers assure Boris of his fraternal goodwill and his intent to increase Boris' domain.

Boris was well aware of his brother's long-standing hatred for him and recognized in this message the kiss of Judas. The young prince knew that his life was threatened. His immediate concern, however, was not the adoption of some military strategy--whether offensive or defensive--but how to act in such circumstances as befits a Christian. Reflecting upon the words of the Gospel: "If any man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar" (I Jn. 4:20) and "Love your enemies" (Matt. 6:44), he firmly rejected the advice of his father's retainers who urged Boris to oust the unpopular Svyatopolk, pledging their support to such a plan, "Be it not for me," he replied, "to raise my hand against my brother. Now that my father has passed away, let him take the place of my father in my heart."

Knowing that armed resistance would only provoke needless bloodshed, Boris sent away his soldiers and remained alone where they had encamped on the bank of the Alta, together with a few servants, it was Saturday evening and he retired to his tent to recite the vigil service. As he read the Six Psalms (The First Six Psalms of the Psalter), the cry of the Psalmist echoed in his heart: "O Lord, why are they that afflict me multiplied? Many rise up against me..." (Ps. 3:1 LXX). Informed that his murderers were approaching, the Prince turned to an Icon of our Saviour and prayed beseechingly: "Lord Jesus Christ, Thou didst accept Thy Passion on account of our sins; grant me also the strength to accept my passion. I receive it not from my enemies but from my brother, Lord, lay not this sin to his charge."

As the murderers burst into the tent, Boris' faithful servant George, a young Hungarian, placed himself between the prince and his attackers in an attempt to save

his master's life. The servant was killed at once, while the Prince, grievously wounded by the thrust of a lance, was bound up in the tent canvas and taken on a cart to Kiev. But he never reached the city. When Svyatopolk learned that his brother was still alive, he sent two Varangians to consummate the bloody deed, which was accomplished when one of them plunged his sword into Boris' heart.

Svyatopolk's next victim was Gleb. He sent word to the guileless prince that his father was very ill and was calling for him. Always obedient to his father, Gleb set off at once with a small retinue. Near Smolensk, where his route took him by boat down the river Smyadyn, he was met by emissaries from his brother Yaropolk bearing a letter of warning from their sister Predislava: "Do not come," she wrote. "Your father has died and Svyatopolk has killed your brother."

But the warning had come too late. The murderers hired by Svyatopolk caught up with Gleb on the river. He knew that he alone was the object of the pursuit and, like his brother, Gleb urged his company not to offer armed resistance, as they were outnumbered and all would perish. After a momentary weakness in which he begged his assassins to spare his young life, he calmly accepted his fate in the understanding that the voluntary suffering of the innocent is a direct imitation of Christ. Gleb was killed by his own cook who, terrified into compliance by Svyatopolk's henchmen, seized the head of the young prince and cut his throat. His body was thrown onto the shore and covered with brush.

Five years later, when Yaroslav finally succeeded in overthrowing the treacherous Svyatopolk, the bodies of the two royal martyrs, discovered to be incorrupt, were laid to rest together in the church of St. Basil in Vyshgorod, Yaroslav' s residence near Kiev. Their tomb immediately became a place of pilgrimage, and the many miracles which took place before their relics offered sufficient warrant to the Church's hierarchy to consent, following Yaroslav's request, to list the two brother-princes in the ranks of the Christian martyrs.

Although Boris and Glob were not martyred for their faith (they are properly called 'passion-bearers' rather than martyrs), their voluntary and meek sacrifice for the sake of averting the suffering of others and following Christ's example, had a profound effect on the subsequent development of Christianity in Russia. Russian iconographers were attracted to the Icon of Christ as the sacrificial Lamb Who 'was led as a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before his shearer is dumb, so He opens not His mouth' (Esaias 53:7 LXX). They also recalled the prophesies concerning the Lord's Resurrection. 'The

Lord also is pleased to purge Him from His wound' (Esaias 53:10), and 'to shew Him light' Esaias (53:11)¹. Russian piety came to be characterized by a tender humility and an acceptance of suffering following the example of Christ. In the Twentieth Century, Russia's New Martyrs offer a supreme testimony to the enduring influence of this yearning for a martyrdom that transfigures a Christian's death into the likeness of Christ's death and Resurrection, which that Christian kingdom first witnessed in the exploit of the two youthful brother princes and passion-bearers, Boris and Gleb.



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¹ These prophesies of Christ's Resurrection are not found in the King James Version which is based on a Hebrew text designed by Jewish scribes to eliminate references to the Lord's Resurrection (Virtual Parish Editor).