

Saint Josaphat Kuncewycz

SAINT OF THE DAY

12_11_2020

Saint Josaphat Kuncewycz (1580-1623) had such a love for the Church and her unity that he asked God for the grace of martyrdom. He wished to offer himself as a sacrifice to reconcile all the schismatic churches into the one fold. In fact he grew up in the crucial phase that culminated in the Union of Brest in 1595-96, in which a large part of the Ukrainian and Belarusian episcopate abjured the East-West Schism of 1054 and recognised the primacy of the Pope. The Brest Synod was essentially the basis from which originated the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, of Byzantine-Slavic rite. This is part of the group of Eastern European Churches that returned in communion with Rome between the 16th and 17th Centuries. Their members are commonly referred to as “Uniates” (from the Russian *unija*, “union”), from which derives the term “Uniatism”, which some Orthodox circles use mostly in a derogatory sense.

The saint was born of Ukrainian Orthodox parents. From a very young age he suffered at seeing the arguments that tore Christianity apart in Ruthenia. After profound reflection, comforted by prayer, he joined Catholicism and retired to Vilnius to the ancient Basilian Monastery of the Most Holy Trinity, choosing the religious name of Josaphat. The confreres soon became aware of his devotion towards Jesus Crucified, of the way he exercised piety and penance. “In a short time he made such progress in monastic life that he could be a teacher to others”, as Metropolitan Joseph Rutsky said, together with whom he reformed Rutheno-Ukrainian monasticism. Several other monks were attracted by his example and he founded other monasteries to welcome them. He always urged the unity of the Church founded on Peter, a work that he continued also as Bishop of Vicebsk and later as Archbishop of Polack.

His apostolate was so effective that his opponents called him a “soul-abductor”

because of the number of people he reconciled with the Catholic Church. Josaphat had an in-depth knowledge of Holy Scripture, Eastern liturgical books, and the teachings of the ancient Fathers. And with this understanding, nourished by the authentic desire to follow the Divine Will, he divulged writings on the primacy of St Peter, on the figure of St Vladimir and the necessity of union with Rome. He had a filial devotion to the Blessed Virgin and venerated in particular one of her icons, known as Our Lady of Pastures. For the return to unity, he trusted very much in the common and great love for Our Lady of both Catholics and Orthodox.

Pius XI called him “Apostle of Unity”, recalling him on the third centenary of his martyrdom with the encyclical *Ecclesiam Dei*. It is an encyclical that deserves to be rediscovered because it proclaimed an ecumenical dialogue in the light of the truth in charity, which animated the whole mission of Saint Josaphat. Having been warned of the plots against him, Josaphat said a few days before he died: “Lord, grant that I may shed blood for the unity and obedience of the Apostolic See”. His martyrdom took place on the night of November 12, 1623 and was accepted benignly by the saint. He asked God to forgive his executioners, some of whom were so struck by that witness that they returned to communion with the Church, imitated by many other brothers and sisters in the faith.

Patron of: Ukraine

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Ecclesiam Dei