

VLADIMIR, THEN (10TH C.) AND NOW: A THIRST FOR EMPIRE IN KIEVAN RUS'

My **fascination with maps** dates to my childhood. Early recollections of perusing world maps include seeing an enormous country identified simply by four letters— **U. S. S. R.**— and colored **red** to boot! It overshadowed all other nations. I neither knew anything about the politics, nor the complexity of what a Union of Soviet Socialist Republics even meant. However, the image presented on the map seemed to me was that of an **extremely powerful** and cohesive country. The reality was then, and is today, much more **complicated**. Last week's **invasion** of the sovereign nation of **Ukraine** has left the world reeling—an indefensible act of aggression on multiple levels. That said, the complex socio-political history of the region is worth reviewing, if only to understand what's at stake. It is true that 8 million people in Ukraine (**17%** of the total population) identify as **ethnic** Russians. And 3.2 million Ukrainians live in Russia! The farther east one travels in Ukraine, the more likely it is you would hear Russian spoken.

Conversely, other “independent” nations are little more than Russian vassals— Belarus and Moldova come to mind. Ukraine is of an entirely different nature. Even if Putin is “successful” in his invasion, what does success look like moving forward? An endless guerilla war? Vladimir Putin's **end game** is **not** a desire for the rebirth of the USSR, but he evidently has visions of a **Russian empire** rising from the ashes! A nation of **44 million** people approximately the size of Texas, Ukraine is the largest country located entirely within Europe. Its people have no desire to be a Russian vassal— their resilience has been inspiring. Putin's grandiose vision includes the territory of Ukraine, a nation that dates its beginning to the baptism of **Vladimir I** (Volodymyr) into orthodox Christianity in **988 A.D.** Vladimir was a **Viking chieftain** (yes, **those Vikings**), whose grandmother Princess Olga became Christian. The once pagan **Vladimir** also accepted baptism into what we Catholics consider eastern Orthodox Christianity.

Vladimir I is regarded as a saint in the East; many **Orthodox seminaries** bear the name St. Vladimir. He abolished the **death penalty** and outlawed torture. Even corporal punishment was little used. He was a breath of fresh air in the Middle Ages. **Monasteries** played a significant role in his kingdom. Indeed, the **irony** of Vladimir I and President **Vladimir** Putin sharing the same name is impossible to escape! Many live news reports from U.S. journalists include the gold domes and powder blue walls of **St Michael's Monastery** in the background. (See below) Demolished by Soviet authorities in the 1930's, it was rebuilt in a Baroque style. The Monastery of the Caves stands in Kyiv as a UNESCO heritage sight. Built in 1051, and restored after Communist rule, it serves today as the residence of Metropolitan Vladimir of Kiev, the head of the Church of Ukraine. Ukrainian Christianity traces its roots to Constantinople, not to Russia.

While the Kingdom of Kievan Rus' identified with Russia, it was just as tied to the West; the Diocese of **Lviv** was established in 1361. That said, the **state religion** (9th-12th century) of the kingdom, spanning from the frigid Barents Sea in the north to the Black Sea in the south, was Orthodoxy. It was centered in Kyiv (alt. **Kiev** in pre-1991 Soviet rule) in today's eastern Ukraine. The name Ukraine **appears** in documents in the 12th century and on **maps** in the 16th century. **Before** the definitive East-West split in 1054 A.D., a strain of orthodoxy derived from Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople. Most Catholics in Ukraine belong to the Eastern Rite. St. Constantine's in NE Minneapolis is a beautiful Ukrainian Catholic Church— 40% of its parishioners were **born** in Ukraine.

So, what if anything can **we do** amidst this tragic turn of events? We can begin by praying in

solidarity with our brothers and sisters here who are suffering so deeply from afar. The United States has multiple cards to play in the **energy sector** alone, including **restarting** domestic oil and natural gas production, removing the **dependency** on Russian oil imports (500,000 barrels per day!). Our allies could completely **isolate** Russia via the international banking system by encouraging tough economic sanctions that include forbidding the transfer of funds via the SWIFT system, used to send secure messages and transfer funds between nations. Cutting off all banks would have a devastating effect on all international transactions. Ukraine is a player in the **world agriculture** scene, including production of sunflower oil, wheat, barley and canola oil.

For example, Minneapolis based **Cargill** built a \$100 million grain terminal on the Black Sea. Inver Grove Heights based **CHS** (think St. Paul Saints and CHS Field) has had a presence in Ukraine for 13 years. The world economy is amazingly interdependent. So too ought the community of faith be interdependent. The relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Kremlin is complicated. While **Moscow Patriarch Kirill** appealed to all parties “to avoid civilian casualties,” highlighting the need to “overcome divisions” between the Russian and Ukrainian people, he also referenced “our **common historical Fatherland.**” Many saw this as code language for a theological **justification** for the invasion. May God bless all Ukrainians and bring this **horrible suffering** to an end.

- Last Saturday’s Men’s Association morning retreat was a success. I offer my gratitude to **Dr. Michael Naughton**, Director of Catholic Studies at UST for leading the morning reflections. It was the perfect **lead-up** to Lent and I invite any guest participants to consider formally **joining** the Men’s Association. It’s a wonderful group!
- Calling all Cathedral women– you’re invited! **Dr. Elizabeth Kelly**, author of “Love Like a Saint,” will lead a **women’s** morning of recollection on Saturday, March 19. It begins with 8:00 a.m. Mass, followed by continental breakfast, two reflections and time for prayer.
- After stalled talks with players, **Major League Baseball** has delayed Opening Day by at least a week. My solution– an **MLB Conclave**. Lock ‘em in a room: sleeping bags, granola bars and water. Can’t leave until an agreement is signed!
- Though the U.S. produces **11.5 million** barrels of oil per day, it **consumes** 17 million. Thus, we need to import– including from Russia–to the tune of **500,000 barrels** per day! Russia produces 17 % of all natural gas and 12 % of the world’s oil. Crude oil has nearly doubled in price since January 2021. The Keystone XL Pipeline would carry **830,000** barrels per day, leading to increasing pressure to re-start it.
- Minnesota **public school** enrollment was down for the second year in a row. This year, **870,506 students** are enrolled, compared to 893,203 in 2020. Minneapolis and St. Paul Public schools saw a **13%** and **7% decline** respectively since the pandemic began. Conversely, our archdiocesan Catholic schools have seen an increase in each of the past two years.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector

