

The Responses of Pope Nicholas I to the Questions of the Bulgars A.D. 866 (Letter 99)

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Introduction

Since the sixth century, the Bulgars had known intermittent contact with the Christians of the surrounding nations, whether as merchants or prisoners-of-war or through diplomatic relations. During the later eighth and early ninth century, the Christian population in Bulgar lands increased so much that Christians were rumored to have influence at the court of Khan Krum (802-814); they were also persecuted under Khan Omortag (814-31). The Bulgars continued to remain "officially" pagan until the reign of Khan Boris, who came to power around 852.

Several factors may have led Khan Boris to assume a more favorable attitude towards Christianity. First, Christianity offered a belief-system that transcended — at least potentially — cultural or ethnic boundaries and thereby offered a means not only to unify Bulgaria's disparate populations but also to secure legitimacy and respect with Byzantium and the West. The ideology of Christian rulership also enhanced the position of the prince vis-à-vis his subjects including the often contentious boyars. Furthermore, Boris' sister had converted to Christianity while a hostage in Constantinople and may have influenced her brother. Finally, Boris himself seems to have been attracted to Christian beliefs and practices, as evidenced by the seriousness with which he pursued the conversion of his people.

Boris' move towards Christianity seems to have begun in earnest with the opening of negotiations in 862 between himself and Louis the German for an alliance against Ratislav of Moravia. News of the alliance reached the Byzantines and they attacked Bulgaria preemptively, taking advantage of the weakness caused by famine in that year. Boris surrendered in 864 and by mid-865 had probably been baptized. It was around this time that Patriarch Photius (858-67; 977-86) sent Boris a letter in which he instructed Boris on the basic tenets of orthodoxy and exhorted him to adhere to the principles of Christian rulership. Greek missionaries were sent to Bulgaria to speed the process of conversion but within a year, Boris sought to distance himself from the patriarch in Constantinople and sent a legation to Rome to open negotiations with Pope Nicholas I (858-67) about Bulgaria's movement into the Roman sphere of influence. Letter 99, sent back to Bulgaria with Bishops Formosus of Porto and Paul of Populonia as well as a collection of books and liturgical equipment, records the pope's response to the Bulgarians' questions and problems. Indeed, because of the format of Nicholas' responses, this letter seems to offer a relatively undistorted look at the problems that the Bulgarians themselves thought christianization posed to their culture and the specific aspects of their new faith about which they were curious. It is therefore a priceless document for the study of the process of christianization in the early Middle Ages.

Select Bibliography

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The Text

Not much needs to be said to your inquiries nor have we considered it necessary to pause long over each question, since we, God willing, are going to send to your country and to your glorious king, our beloved son, not only the books of divine law but also our fitting messengers,[1] who will instruct you concerning the details, insofar as time and reason dictate; to them, as well, we have committed books which we thought they would need.

[1] Paul, bishop of Populonia, and Formosus, bishop of Porto.

Chapter I.

Now then, at the very beginning of your questions, you properly and laudably state that your king seeks the Christian law. If we attempted to explain this law fully, innumerable books would have to be written; but, in order to show briefly in what things it chiefly consists, one should know that the law of the Christians consists in faith and good works. For faith is the first of all virtues in the lives of believers. Whence, even on the first day there is said to be light, since God is portrayed as having said: *Let there be light*,[Gen.1:3] that is, "let the illumination of belief appear." Indeed, it is also because of this illumination that Christ came down to earth. Good work is no less demanded from a Christian; for just as it is written in our law: *Without faith it is impossible to please God*,[Heb. 11:6] so it is also written: *Just as a body without a spirit is dead, so, too, faith without works is dead*. [James 2:20] This is the Christian law, and whoever keeps this law properly, shall be saved.

Chapter XXV.

You claim that it is part of the custom of your country that guards always stand on the alert between your country and the boundaries of others; and if a slave or freeman [manages to] flee somehow through this watch, the guards are killed without hesitation because of this. Now then, you are asking us, what we think about this practice. One should look through the laws concerning this matter. Nevertheless, far be it from your minds that you, who have acknowledged so pious a God and Lord, now judge so harshly, especially since it is more fitting that, just as hitherto you put people to death with ease, so from now on you should lead those whom you can not to death but to life. For the blessed apostle Paul, who was initially an abusive persecutor and breathed threats and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, [cf. Acts 9:1] later sought mercy and, converted by a divine revelation, not only did not impose the death penalty on anyone but also wished to be anathema for the brethren [cf. Rom. 9:3] and was prepared to spend and be spent most willingly for the souls of the faithful. [cf. II Cor. 12:15] In the same way, after you have been called by the election of God and illuminated by his light, you should no longer desire deaths but should without hesitation recall everyone to the life of the body as well as the soul, when any opportunity is found. [cf. Rom. 7:6] And just as Christ led you back from the eternal death in which you were gripped, to eternal life, so you yourself should attempt to save not only the innocent, but also the guilty from the end of death, according to the saying of the most wise Solomon: *Save those, who are led to death; and do not cease freeing those who are brought to their destruction.* [Prov. 24:11]

Chapter XXVI.

Concerning those who have slaughtered their kinsman, i.e. someone related by blood such as a brother, cousin or grandson, let the venerable laws keep their force. But if they have fled to a church, let them in fact be saved from the laws of death and let them submit without hesitation to the penance that the bishop or priest of the place has decided: *I do not want the death of the sinner, sayeth the Lord, but rather wish that he be converted and live.* [Ez. 33:11]

Chapter XXVII.

Concerning those, who hand their companion (*socius*) over to death, we think the same thing as above.

Chapter XXVIII.

Concerning a man, who has been apprehended with another man's wife, you will find out what should be judged when you have read the laws. But if the adulterer should flee to a church, we think that the bishop should decide whatever it is clear the sacred canons have defined or the holy bishops of the apostolic see have established.

Chapter XXVIII.

We also judge likewise concerning the man, who has intercourse with a female relative of his own blood. But truly we would direct the leprosy of so great a crime as this to the consideration and judgment of a priest (*sacerdos*).

Chapter XXX.

Concerning a person who has involuntarily killed someone, we have decreed what the sacred rules establish and it is fitting that the bishop, who has been placed with you, always have these rules with him in his hands.

Chapter XXXI.

Concerning animal thieves, let the provisions of the laws, if not mercy, be preserved.

Chapter XXXII.

We allow the same with regard to those who have kidnapped (*rapuerint*) a man or a woman.

Chapter XXXIII.

You indicated that hitherto, when you used to go into battle, you have carried the tail of a horse as your military emblem, and you ask what you should now carry in its place. What else, of course, but the sign of the cross? For it is the sign with which Moses divided the sea and killed Amalec, with which Gideon conquered the Madianites, and Christ our Lord not only conquered but also prostrated the devil, who held power over death. This is the sign which we carry on our foreheads and with it we are protected from all enemies and fortified against all attacks. This is the sign of the faith and the devil's great terror, which Christian princes use in their times of need and with which kings following the truth religion often achieve celebrated triumphs over their enemies with Christ's aid. But that you may know more plainly why it is more fitting that you should carry the sign of the cross as your military sign instead of that horse's tail as you go forth in battle formation, we think that there are a few things to remember about the actions of Constantine, who was the most pious emperor of the Romans and the most famous of all propagators of Christianity. Indeed, *when he led his army against Maxentius, the tyrant of Rome — in fact, even then he was a supporter of the Christian religion, though he had not yet received the sign of the Lord's passion, as it is a solemn ritual to be initiated into our religion — in any event, as he made his journey, while turning over many matters concerning the demands of impending battle in his mind, he often turned his eyes to heaven and thence besought divine aid. And through his weariness he sees in the eastern part of the sky the sign of the cross shining with fiery brilliance. And although he was terrified by so great a vision and disturbed by its new appearance, he sees angels standing there saying: Constantine, in this sign conquer. Thereby rendered happy and sure about the victory, he marks the sign of the cross, which he had seen in the sky, on his forehead and marks this onto military standards, and adapts the labarum, as they call it, into the shape of the Lord's cross. Thus provided with the armed standards of religion, he sets forth against the arms of the impious and without slaughtering the Roman people, just as he prayed to God, he miraculously triumphed over the tyrant Maxentius who drowned in the river.*[12]

[12] Rufinus of Aquileia, Ecclesiastical History IX.9.

Chapter XXXIV.

You also asked, if, when a messenger arrives, you should set off immediately in order to get to the fighting or whether there are any days when it is not fitting to go forth into battle. On this matter we answer: there is no day which should be kept completely free from beginning or carrying out any kind of business, except (if too great a necessity does not compel you) the most celebrated days mentioned above, which are venerated by all Christians. But this is not because it is forbidden to do such a thing on these days. For our hope should be placed not in days nor determined by days, but all salvation should be expected absolutely from the true and living God alone. Rather it is because on these days, if the necessity is not unavoidable, one should spend time in prayer and the mysteries of so great a festival should be attended more zealously than usual; for when the Hebrews refused to bear arms against their enemies on the day of the Sabbath, because they were observing the former Sabbath and omnipotent God wished to show them that hope and strength were not to be located in themselves alone and in the observance of days, one thousand of their men were killed, so that the survivors, having been led to penance, would say to each other: *If we do all things just as our brothers have done, and we do not fight against the nations for our souls and our justifications, they shall quickly drive us from the land.*[I Macchabees 2:40]

Chapter XXXV.

You say that when you went forth into battle, you used to watch the days and hours and perform incantations, games, songs and some auguries, and you wish to be instructed on what you should do now. Regarding this matter, we would of course instruct you, if we did not think that you have been divinely instructed on this matter; for atop the divine foundation, we cannot build anything. Therefore, when you decide to go forth into battle, do not fail to do what you yourselves have recalled, i.e. go to the churches, carry out prayers, forgive sinners, be present at the solemnities of the Mass, offer oblations, make a confession of your sins to the priests, receive the reconciliation and communion, open the jails, loose the fetters and grant liberty to servants and especially to those who are broken and weak and captives, and distribute alms to the needy, so that you may fulfill what the Apostle admonishes when he says: *Do everything, whether it be in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus.*[Col. 3:17] For the things which you mentioned, that is, the observations of days and hours, the incantations, the games, iniquitous songs, and auguries are the pomp and workings of the devil, which you already renounced, thank God, in baptism and you cast off all these things completely along with the old man and his actions, when you put on the new.

Chapter XXXVI.

Regarding whether it is licit to walk or proceed to war on Sunday or on the other feast days, when necessity calls, you can note our view in chapter thirty-four of these responses.

Chapter XXXVII.

Just as you asked, we have gladly given you the books that we think you need at present, and we desire to loan you many more through God's largess.

Chapter XXXVIII.

You say that when you are in camp, you are unable to perform fitting and perfect prayers, and because of this you wish us to explain what you should do. Yet we would argue that, however much more the enemies rage and necessity and tribulation lay heavy upon you, so much the more readily should you devote your energy to prayer. For our fathers were victors more by praying than by fighting and gained what they prayed for more by entreaties than by battles. For example, Moses prayed and Joshua fought, but the former conquered more by praying than the latter did by fighting. It is therefore more fitting that one should cease from arms than from prayer.

Chapter XXXVIII.

You asked about the consanguinity of the generations, so that you may clearly know which women you should marry. We have, however, already recalled what the laws allow on this matter but consider it worthwhile to recall it again in summary fashion. They say in fact: *We cannot marry any and every women. Some unions have to be avoided. Marriage cannot be contracted between people in the relation of parent and child, such as father and daughter or grandfather and granddaughter, or mother and son or grandmother and grandson and so on up and down the line. A similar but less stringent regime applies to collaterals.*[12] But we shall leave what the sacred canons and especially the decrees of the highest bishop Zacharias proclaim on this matter, for your bishop to explain to you.

[12] Justinian, Institutes I, 10, 1-2, trans. Birks & Macleod, p. 43.

Chapter XL.

You say that it is a custom of your country that, before you set out for battle, a most faithful and prudent man is sent by your lordship, who inspects all the arms, horses, and things which are necessary for battle; and if, at someone's home, they are found to have been readied in a useless fashion, that person receives capital punishment: now you wish to know what we think should be done in this case. Truly we encourage you to turn all this [attention] to the arming of your spiritual weaponry and we advise you to turn the rigor of such great severity to the exercise of piety. For just as the preparation of arms and horses was hitherto investigated as to whether they were well suited to oppose the visible enemy, so now you should zealously inquire as to whether each person possesses their spiritual arms, i.e. good works, in readiness *against the princes and the powers, against the worldly rulers of these shadows, against the spirits of iniquity in heaven.*[Eph. 6:12] Finally, the horse is understood as the soul, obviously because just as a man is carried by his horse, so he is ruled by his soul; clearly then, whoever does not have their arms prepared against the enemy, perishes, because, as is written, *Cursed be the man, who does the work of God with neglect.*[Jer. 48:10] Concerning a horse which hasn't been trained in its spirit, it is well said by the Psalmist: *A man cannot trust his horse to save him, nor can it deliver him for all its strength.*[Ps. 32:17] When he is prepared, in contrast, it is said: *The horse may be ready for*

the day of battle; but the Lord give the safety.[Prov. 22:31] And so, what you have hitherto observed carnally and the arms which you have cruelly exacted from poor men who perhaps were not able to prepare them, now venerate spiritually and exhort great and small to prepare them piously and spiritually.

Chapter XLVII.

You ask whether it is permitted to play games during Lent. This is not permitted to Christians not only during Lent but also at any other time. But because we cannot yet persuade you to abstain from games at all times, since you, weak as you are, cannot yet ascend to the mountain to receive the highest commandments of God but are located in the plains like the former children of Israel[cf. Ex.19:12] so that you can at least receive some of the simple and lesser commands, you should at least spend more time more intent upon prayer, abstinence and every kind of penance during Lent and at times of fasting, as we have explained at length above, and stay away from games, empty conversation, scurrility, and idle chatter, which do not belong to the occasion. For as the Lord says in the Gospel: *What men have said, let them render an account for it,*[Mt. 12:36] and if for the idle word, so much the more for the harmful or criminal word! Therefore, do not let the vanity of any pleasure or game be able to seduce you, especially in a time of fasting; for lamentations do not accord with games, and a false, deceptive happiness cannot produce real tears in your neighbor. Furthermore, there is the judge who says: *Woe unto you, who laugh now, because you shall moan and weep;*[Lk. 6:25] on this Solomon says: *Laughter shall be mixed with sorrow and sadness sits at the end of joy;*[Prov. 14:13] and he again says: *I thought laughter an error and I said to joy: Why do you deceive in vain?*[Eccl. 2:2] On this he again says: *The heart of the wise, there is sadness, and the heart of fools, there is happiness;*[Eccl. 7:5] for the sacrifice which is pleasing to God is affliction against sin, as the Psalmist attests, who says: *The contrite spirit is a sacrifice to God.*[Ps. 50:19]

Chapter XLVIII.

Consequently we judge that one can in no way take a wife nor hold celebrations during Lent. But you may know what the sacred canons says about this, when your bishop teaches you.

Chapter XLVIII.

Furthermore, you ask whether you are permitted to show your wives gold, silver, cattle, horses, etc. before [the marriage] since it is for the dowry. Because it is no sin and the laws do not prohibit it, we, too, do not forbid it to happen; and not only this, but whatever else you did before baptism, you are completely allowed to do now. *For we know that Peter was a fisherman, and Matthew a tax-gatherer, after their conversion Peter returned to fishing, but Matthew did not go back to the business of tax-gathering, since it is one thing to seek sustenance through fishing, it is another to increase wealth through the gains from tax-gathering. For there are some businesses which can be performed without sin scarcely or not at all. Therefore to those alone, which implicate one in sin, is it necessary that after conversion, the mind not return. But whatever someone did without sin before conversion, it is no fault to do this again after conversion.*