

## **ST PIUS X WEEKLY REFLECTION**

### **Sinning Saints (3)**

#### **St Olga of Kyiv (c890/925 - 969)**

St Olga is unusual in this series on sinning saints. While the others' major sins were in devoting their early lives to hedonism, worldliness and, (save for St Thomas Becket) sexual misconduct, Olga's were primarily sins of terrible cruelty.

Ninth century tribes in Eastern Europe were in regular conflict with the Byzantine Christian Empire, based in Constantinople. These tribes sought help from Scandinavian Vikings (the "Rus"). Kyiv became the headquarters of Viking rule for the Rus Empire which included modern Ukraine, Belarus and parts of Russia. Olga is thought to have been of noble birth from a Viking Rus tribe. She was married at a young age to Igor, the King of the Rus Empire, who would receive funds by way of tribute from the various tribes in the Federation.

The Drevlyane were one such tribe. Igor went with his men one day to collect the tribute and, on the way back to Kyiv, he decided that they had not paid enough. He returned with a smaller entourage, whereupon the Drevlyane ambushed and killed him. Olga became Queen Regent since her son was just 3 years old. Prince Mal of the Drevlyane decided to seek her hand in marriage with a view to ruling the Rus Empire. He sent 20 chieftains to communicate his offer. On their arrival at Kyiv, Olga received the chieftains. She then insisted they return overnight to their boat so that they could be paraded through the streets the next morning to the approval of the people. This is what happened. But during the night Olga had had a deep pit excavated and, at the end of the parade the boatful of men was dumped in the trench and they were all buried alive.

Olga then sent a message requiring the top Drevlyane nobility, who were seemingly unaware of the fate of the first delegation, to come to Kyiv and to escort her to their city. When they arrived, they were told to enter a bathhouse so as to bathe after their journey. This they did whereupon, on Olga's orders the bathhouse was burned to the ground with the noblemen trapped inside.

Further reprisals followed and, in due course, Olga laid siege to the city where Igor had been slain, but she could not take the city. Olga sent a message requesting that the Drevlyane recommence paying the tribute. They agreed but, unsurprisingly, were wary of Olga's vengeful intentions. She reassured them by saying that she sought no further vengeance and that she would be satisfied if each household sent her three pigeons and three sparrows. They agreed. When the birds arrived Olga instructed her troops to tie a 'fuse' of sulphur and cloth to each bird, to set it alight and then release the birds to return to their nests in the city. The entire city was burned to the ground. As the inhabitants fled, Olga had them killed or captured as slaves.

Subsequently Olga's son was crowned King. In about 957 Olga went to Constantinople where she met the Emperor Constantine VII. No doubt for political reasons he proposed marriage to her. She said she could not marry him since she had not been baptised; Constantine initiated her in the Faith and was godfather at her christening. He then proposed marriage again whereupon she said she could not marry him since she was his godchild. The Emperor was impressed by the shrewdness and the two Empires enjoyed a period of peace.

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Despite the manoeuvrings which led to Olga's conversion, she became a devout Christian. On her return to Kyiv her son, the King, would have nothing to do with her religion, though he promised her that he would not persecute Christians. Olga then commenced a programme of building churches in a number of Rus cities. Her Christianity dominated her life and she dedicated herself to being a witness to the Faith by her piety and good works. She served the poor and acquired a reputation of honesty in affairs of state until her death in 969. Though the merits of her new life were lost on her son, they so impressed the next generation that her grandson, Vladimir, who became King in 980, became a Christian and in 988 the religion was officially adopted in the Rus Empire. Olga's life was therefore a key factor in the conversion of Ukraine and Russia from paganism to Christianity.

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7<sup>th</sup> June, 2026

