

What impact did the Catholic Church have on Western Civilization? (Part 1)

Western civilization has its origin in Hellenistic (Greek) culture—one of the greatest and most original cultures that the world has ever known. Its importance was not due to its political power but to its educational character—a training of the mind and character that created a tradition of literature, learning, philosophy, science and art.

In spite of its rich intellectual development, this great civilization possessed no common religion, which could provide an internal principle of spiritual unity. This quest reached its culmination in the first centuries of the Christian era, especially in the third and fourth centuries. The whole of the Greek-speaking world, with a few minor exceptions, accepted Christianity as the common faith of the civilized world.

The establishment of the Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire provided the Empire what it most needed—a new moral basis which was common to the whole Mediterranean world. This was the formation of a new spiritual community, whereby the ordinary man found a citizenship, which was at once wider and deeper than that of the old city-state. This spiritual citizenship was open to the poor even more than the rich. It was not based on the shifting foundations of political circumstances but on eternal spiritual principles.

The influence of the Church imprinted a distinctively Christian character on the Roman Empire. Her ideals were opposed to all the main features of the earlier imperial society—to the luxury of the rich, the idleness and intemperate living of the poor and the oppression of the slaves. In the place of the classical contempt for manual labor and “vile mechanical arts”, which was the inheritance of Hellenistic culture, the Church did all in her power to substitute the duty and honor of work.

At the same time, the Church held trade in little honor, and condemned unhesitatingly the usury which was the foundation of so much of the prosperity of the upper classes of Roman society. But above all, the influence of Christianity was shown in the protection of the weak in a time of universal suffering and want.

From the earliest times, the Church had exercised charity upon the most lavish scale, and when at last she had the power to influence the rich, the extent of Christian almsgiving became so great as to cause a real economic change in the distribution of property.

Thus while the Church could not cure the social evils that had become endemic in the Roman Empire and the Mediterranean world, it did bring into that world a new hope and a way of life which were to be a source of a new Christian culture.

In addition to the social and moral impact that the Church imparted on the culture, it also produced a great religious innovation—the monastic life. The original Egyptian monasticism of St. Anthony of the Desert and the early hermits was essentially a flight from the world and secular culture. A different type of monasticism began in the fourth century, which was a religious community living in obedience under a common rule and a common superior, and devoting their time not only to solitary prayers and meditation but to organized common work and common worship. The development of this type of monasticism in the East was attributable to the teachings of St. Basil the Great and in the West to the teaching of St. Benedict.

Early in the fifth century the Roman defenses were broken and the Empire gave way to a series of barbarian kingdoms—Goths, Vandals, Franks, Anglo-Saxons and Lombards. As the Empire deteriorated, the old Roman ruling class no longer had a political career in the service of the Empire, but found a new vocation of spiritual leadership as bishops of the Catholic Church. St. Ambrose in the late 4th century was already high in the civil service of the Empire when he was chosen as Bishop. The fact that the episcopate was drawn from the upper classes of the old Roman society was important, not only because it gave them social prestige necessary to impress the barbarian rulers, but also it enabled them to carry on the traditions of higher culture and classical learning on which the continuity of Western culture depended.

For five hundred years and more the Church pursued the double task of making the pagans Christian and making the barbarians civilized, and these two tasks were one, since as we know even today, religion and education—Church and school—are two sides of one reality which is both spiritual and social.

This process of conversion occurred at a time when the Church was in a world of perpetual war and violence—not only the organized war of states and kingdoms, but private wars and family feuds. In such

a world the Church had to undertake the task of introducing the law of the Gospel and the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount among peoples who regarded homicide as the most honorable occupation and vengeance as synonymous with justice.

The great social institution by which the Church carried out the work of Christian acculturation and which dominated the whole development of early medieval culture was the monastic community. Every monastery formed a self-contained society, both spiritually and economically, and thus provided an oasis of peace in a land of war, a cell of Christian culture in a barbarous and semi-pagan world.

The monastery had a defined social form or constitution, a high spiritual end and an independent economic foundation. It is true that it is based on the denial of the three most powerful instincts that govern society—that is to say, the sexual impulse, the economic impulse and the power impulse, which are excluded by the threefold vow of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience. Yet, in spite of this radical refusal to compromise with human nature, the monastic community proved to be highly successful as an efficient social institution. In the course of time, it produced all the fruits of higher culture—art, music and learning—and passed them on through its educational activity to the society that surrounded it. Indeed, from the seventh to the tenth century, the monasteries were the only effective educational force that survived in the Western world.

The achievement of the later Middle Ages from the eleventh to the fifteenth century deserves the name “renaissance”. These centuries, especially the twelfth and the thirteenth, witnessed a most remarkable revival of cultural activity in every field, intellectual, political, and economic. It saw the building of the great cathedrals and monastic houses, the foundation of the new medieval cities, the development of canon law, Scholastic philosophy, and vernacular literature.

For six hundred years Western society had been slowly emerging from barbarism and attempting to create a new Christian order out of the ruins of the Roman Empire and the chaos of warring tribes. The violence and disorder of feudal society was incapable of producing the unity necessary to advance the culture. Thus it was the reform of the Church and the revival of Western monasticism that led to the renaissance that produced the unity of Western Christendom.

In the thirteenth century this work of unification was almost complete, at the time when the external

expansion of feudal society had reached its full development. Almost the whole of Europe and a considerable part of the Eastern Mediterranean formed one great society, united by a common faith, a common law and common institutions.

This combination of the unity of social institutions with the unity of religious faith and ecclesiastical order explains the achievements of medieval culture in so many different fields, and in particular the field of art.

Romanesque architecture and sculpture and Gothic art all manifested themselves in the building of the great medieval cathedrals. The Gothic cathedral, like the culture which produced it, is a profound unity. It is one of the great arts of the world, the expression of one of those rare moments in the life of humanity when the inner and outer worlds are united in vital rhythm and intelligible harmony.

The influence of the Church also had an impact on the economic order. Every individual and every corporation had its special office to fulfill in the Commonwealth, and each was entitled to a just reward. The “just price” was that which was a true recompense for the labor expended, whereas a price raised by scarcity and the buyer’s need, or lowered by the seller’s economic weakness, was unjust and illegitimate.

The most honorable economic functions were those that were most productive; hence the medieval preference for the farmer and the craftsman to that of the merchant. The true end of labor was not profit measured by money, but the service of others. To work for profit alone was to turn honest work into usury, and all occupations which looked for excessive profit, or in which the profit was unrelated to the expenditure of labor, were looked upon with disfavor.

The medieval period also produced a mode of philosophical thought known as Scholasticism, which without doubt exerted its influence on the development of European thought. This philosophical age from the 11th to the 13th century laid the foundations for the scientific achievements of the modern world. For we owe to it that confidence in the power of reason and that of faith in the rationality of the universe without which science would be impossible. It destroyed the old magical view of nature which our ancestors shared with every other primitive people and which still lingers on today.

Source: The Formation of Christendom by Christopher Dawson

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