

Our Debt to the Catholic Church

by Sebastian R. Fama

Attacks on the Catholic Church have never been in short supply. The Church's critics have been maligning her and predicting her demise for centuries. While those same critics fade off into history one by one, the Church continues in her mission, sometimes shaken but never defeated.

Whenever scandals arise in the Church gleeful detractors try to portray the aberration as the norm. Starting with Judas, the Church has always had within its walls those who would betray Christ. However, to focus on such individuals while ignoring those who take their faith seriously is dishonest. Any faith should be judged by the actions of those who practice it, not by those who don't.

To be sure, any scandal should be dealt with swiftly and decisively. Church leaders who fail in this regard betray the Church and do tremendous harm to the cause of Christ. Once there is knowledge of wrongdoing, action must be taken immediately. To do anything less makes one an accomplice.

When you consider all the facts, it is easy to see that the Catholic Church's record is something to be admired. The miracles performed by Jesus give credence to His message. In like manner the Church's tremendous contributions to Western Civilization give credence to its teachings.

Protestants would do well to note that God chose to give the Bible to mankind through the Catholic Church. After the fall of Rome, it was the Catholic Church that preserved literacy and education. The barbarians who ruled after the fall of Rome had no interest in preserving education or any of the ancient literature. Monasteries produced thousands of books and preserved many others. Schools were established in cathedrals. These cathedral schools would become the first universities complete with degrees and accreditation. Many convents and monasteries established their own schools.

In answer to the Gospel's call to care for the sick, the Church was the first to establish hospitals. Thomas E. Woods notes that by the fourth century, most large cities had Church sponsored hospitals. Even monasteries served as providers of medical care (*How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization* page 176).

From the beginning of its existence the Catholic Church has led the way in charitable giving. This of course is the natural result of Christ's call to care for the less fortunate. In a column for the National Catholic Register Andrew McNair revealed some pretty interesting statistics. He writes in part:

Every year, more than 9.5 million Americans in need turn to one of 1,400 charitable organizations run by the Catholic Church.

The Church runs more than 600,000 soup kitchens and stocks more than 2 million food banks and pantries. The Church provides temporary shelter for children and families, battered women, senior citizens and others. At present, about 110,858 people depend on these shelters for help.

Catholic counselors and counseling agencies help close to 700,000 families, individuals and groups.... Catholic housing services help around 67,000 homeless find and keep a permanent place to live. And Catholic neighborhood-support services sponsor youth centers, summer camps, sports programs and senior citizens centers; at present, nearly 300,000 people are enrolled in these services. Close to 80,000 girls and women are being served by Catholic pregnancy services.

In the 12th century the Church began to develop its system of canon law. This would eventually provide the foundation for Western Law. Prior to this, law in medieval Europe consisted of custom and some statutory law. Western Law was based on rules of evidence and rational procedures. Later on, in the 16th century, and in

response to the mistreatment of natives in the New World (North America), Fr. Francisco de Vitoria established the basis for international law. This reflected the biblical teaching that all men are created equal (Galatians 3:28).

We find passages in the Bible which indicate that the universe in which we live is governed by laws. For instance, in Wisdom 11:20 we read: "But you [God] have disposed all things by measure and number and weight." In Job 38:33 God says: "Do you know the ordinances of the heavens; can you put into effect their plan on the earth?" Now if God created the universe to operate according to rational laws, it seemed only natural that those laws could be understood and harnessed. Thus, the study of science was born. Thomas E. Woods relates that "Roger Bacon, a Franciscan who taught at Oxford, was admired for his work in mathematics and optics, and is considered to be a forerunner of modern scientific method" (*How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization*, page 94).

The Jesuits contributed heavily to the study of science. In "*The Jesuits: Missions, Myths and Histories*" Jonathan Wright notes:

They had contributed to the development of pendulum clocks, pantographs, barometers, reflecting telescopes and microscopes, to scientific fields as various as magnetism, optics and electricity. They observed, in some cases before anyone else, the colored bands on Jupiter's surface, the Andromeda nebula and Saturn's rings. They theorized about the circulation of the blood (independently of Harvey), the theoretical possibility of flight, the way the moon affected the tides, and the wave-like nature of light.

The Jesuits were wise enough to record the results of their research into encyclopedias. Thus, others were able to benefit from their work. The Jesuits were responsible for spreading scientific knowledge to China, India, Lebanon, The Philippines, Africa, South America, and Central America.

Fr. Nicholas Steno is credited with formulating most of the principles of modern geology. Catholic monks were the movers and shakers in developing agriculture. The Benedictines made great strides in this area. They turned swamps into fertile land. Through their effort's peasants learned about irrigation. Thomas E. Woods notes that "The monks were also the first to work toward improving cattle breeds" (*How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization*, page 31).

The Church was instrumental in the development of Astronomy, Mathematics, Banking, Chemistry, Architecture, Economics, Culture and Art. Pope Sylvester II is responsible for the Christian world throwing out Roman Numerals in favor of the Hindu-Arabic numbers that we use today. He also invented the clock so that we would no longer have to rely on sundials. Space does not permit me to list all the contributions that the Church has made to Western Civilization. Suffice it to say, the list, as Mr. Woods and others so ably illustrate, is quite long. It is important to note that the Church's contributions to Western Civilization were a direct result of its beliefs.

Despite being betrayed by some of its members, the Catholic Church has managed to accomplish what no other institution could. Even the Church's most devoted critics must admit that they have benefited greatly from the efforts of those Catholics who have chosen to live their faith.