

THE CATHOLIC'S HERITAGE FROM THE CATHOLIC BUILDERS OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION: SOURCE OF CERTAINTIES FOR ONESELF AND FOR CHANGING SOCIETY

2.00 a.m., Thursday, November 8th, 1917, St. Petersburg, Russia: the Red Guards of Lenin invaded and captured the Winter Palace, the seat of the government. That evening, Lenin – who had not slept the previous night – delivered a speech in which he called for worldwide revolution. That night, the world's first Marxist-Leninist government began, headed by Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin.

And so began the long train of events that would lead to the conquest of one-sixth of the world's surface; to firing-squads, man-made famines, forced labour camps, the killing fields of Cambodia, the gulags of Siberia, and the barbed wire wall of Berlin; to a total massacre of between 85 and 100 million people.

John Reed, an American journalist, who took part in the Revolution, in his book entitled: "*Ten Days that Shook the World*", described that November day whose effects we are still undergoing, through the now dominant cultural Marxism, as follows:

"Thursday...Day broke...Superficially all was quiet; hundreds of thousands of people retired at a prudent hour, got up early, and went to work. ...[T]he street-cars were running, the stores and restaurants open, theatres going, an exhibition of paintings advertised.... All the complex routine of common life -humdrum even in war-time– proceeded as usual. Nothing is so astounding as the vitality of the social organism–how it persists, feeding

itself, clothing itself, amusing itself, in the face of the worst calamities...."

Indeed history records that instinctively the masses of people either are unaware of the long term implications of cultural changes or they turn a blind eye or they follow a policy of appeasement with threatening forces.

All of you present here today at this Roundtowers conference are exceptions to this rule. You are awake and alert to the great threat of our era, far greater even than that of 1917, to what Benedict XVI called the "Dictatorship of Relativism". Mighty is the importance, due to the scale of this radical social engineering – to have Catholics who are determined to play their part in resisting its onslaughts. Urgent is the need for Catholics who will begin, as a cultural Marxist leader, Rudi Dutschke, stated, "the long march through the institutions" in order to create again a civilization with a Catholic soul.

Europe, Ireland, indeed the entire world cries out for men and women who identify with the following words of Winston Churchill, spoken on April 3, 1936. Let us recall that they were spoken by a man who for ten years suffered scorn, financial difficulties, and isolation because of his refusal to bow to the politically correct appeasement of Hitler. His words are relevant to Catholic vanguards today confronted as we are with the growing shadow of a new dictatorship. Churchill stated that unless action is taken – immediately -, - I quote - "such civilization as we have been able to achieve" will become "pulp and squalor". People must awaken. People who are "chattering, busy, sporting, toiling, amused from day to day by headlines and from night to night by cinemas,". Because they are in a society that is "slipping, sinking, rolling backward to the age when 'the earth was void and darkness moved upon the face of the waters.'

And, in a dramatic conclusion, the Lion of England declared, "Surely, it is worth a supreme effort – the laying aside of every

impediment, the clear-eyed facing of fundamental facts, the noble acceptance of risks inseparable from heroic endeavour – to control the hideous drift of events and arrest calamity on the threshold. Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!!! *NOW* is the appointed time.”

Nowadays, *everything* is at stake because, as C S Lewis wrote, the individualistic hedonism at the root of the “Dictatorship of Relativism”, I quote, “will damn our souls and destroy our species”. The signs are already all too evident as the beginning of the demographic winter throughout Europe shows.

And so the importance of this series of conferences of the Roundtowers Association with the theme *The Restoration of Europe through the liturgy and the saints*. In other words, the restoration of Europe through Catholicism, *real* Catholicism as distinct from *fake* Catholicism.

Because *Catholicism matters* not only to the individual’s soul but to *society’s soul*.

Only a civilization founded on the truths of Catholicism has the intellectual clarity and supernatural guts to confront, combat, and overcome the fatalist ideology of Hegelian-derived cultural Marxism with its revolutionary lie that truth is measured by the changing events of history, that the new is always the standard, and that Catholicism must be silenced.

Therefore, we must equip– everywhere – *creative Catholic minorities* because it was such Catholic vanguards who laid the foundations of Europe and Western Civilization, the most influential and the most beneficial civilization in history, notwithstanding its defects which are endemic to the human condition.

Part of this equipping will be the arming of Catholics with what Churchill called “*historical imagination*”. As the Jewish political theorist, Isaiah Berlin, remarked: “Mr. Churchill's dominant category, the single, central, organizing principle of his moral and

intellectual universe, is an historical imagination so strong, so comprehensive, as to encase the whole of the present and the whole of the future in a framework of a rich and multi-coloured past."

*This, ladies and gentlemen, is the purpose of the Round Towers Association's conference today and also of my book *Heroism and Genius*: to empower Catholics with this "historical imagination".*

Because we Catholics have the same mission now in this second "Dark Age" as our forefathers did during the first "Dark Ages".

By discovering *why* and *how* we Catholics built a civilization during an age of relative darkness, we will realize that although the third millennium's circumstances are different from those of the first millennium, nevertheless neither human nature nor the Catholic mission have changed. *Hence, what we did before, we are called to do again!*

The outline of this first conference is as follows. Firstly, I will briefly present the historical consensus among the leading historians, about the role of Catholicism in building Western Civilization. Secondly, I will sketch rapid portraits of the leaders of the Catholic vanguards who led the struggle that brought Europe as a socio-cultural-political reality into existence.

Firstly, then, the Catholic role in the building of the West.

Historians within the past hundred years have resolutely asserted, often reluctantly, that Catholics were the architects and builders of the reality that became Europe. Catholicism was the keystone in the arch of this new civilization. The arch had many other stones of Jewish, Greek, Roman, and Germanic origin. However, the wedge-shaped stone that supported and locked all the others into position, allowing it to bear the weight of such an integration, was Catholicism. At the end of the centuries after the collapse of Rome, with the dawn of the eleventh century an original civilization came to birth in Western Europe. Why?

Because its culture was quintessentially Catholic in law, philosophy, art, architecture, and in mentality. This new culture brought with it, as Benedict XVI stated, a "new humanism, an authentic 'grammar' of mankind and reality".

One by one historians have spotlighted Catholicism's action. The Oxford don, R. W. Southern, showed the role of Catholic Scholastic thinkers such as Aquinas in creating the rational worldview of the West. Pierre Duhem, the physicist and historian of science, concluded that the Catholics of the Middle Ages placed the pillars for modern physics, and contemporary experts like David Lindberg, Stanley Jaki, and Thomas Goldstein have agreed. In the progress of astronomy, Professor J. L. Heilbron recognized the Church's pivotal function.

In the development of education, A. F. West attributed a key role to the Church's influence during the reign of Charlemagne, and C. H. Haskins has asserted the Catholic origin of universities. In the discipline of law, the scholar Harold Berman concluded that the template of modern legal systems lies in the Church's own canon law.

In economics, John Gilchrist, Henri Pirenne, and Fernand Braudel showed that many of the key features of the free enterprise economic system existed in Catholic medieval Europe, and Joseph Schumpeter in his monumental *History of Economic Analysis* has pointed to Catholics of the School of Salamanca as the thinkers who, I quote, "come nearer than does any other group to having been the 'founders of scientific economics'".

John C. Loudon, Montalembert, and Henry H. Goodell recognized the advances in agriculture made by the Cistercians and other monks. Jean Gimpel and others have revealed the technological sophistication of medieval monasteries. W. E. H. Lecky has shown how the Church introduced social welfare programs with unprecedented organization and intensity.

Therefore history has spoken, the case is closed.

Before identifying and sketching some of the key Catholic movers and shakers, it will be helpful to recall the main events that shaped European history in the first millennium.

When Peter and Paul went to their martyrdoms in 67 AD they left behind a tiny but vigorous Christian community in Rome to which men and women from all levels of society, including the imperial household and the Praetorian Guard, had begun to enter. Slowly, in the midst of admiration, suspicion and persecution, Catholics went from strength to strength in an empire that, between the first and fifth centuries, became a white-haired world sinking rapidly into senility.

The times after the fall of Rome in which our forefathers began laying the foundations of the new society were dramatic indeed. The decades 235-284 were years of civil war and constant political upheaval. In 378 the Visigoths defeated the Roman army. In 402 and 407 as a young Patrick, future missionary of Celtic Ireland looked on, the empire's two legions in Britain sailed away while Saxons and Picts came and attacked the Roman settlements.

On December 3, 406, Vandals, Alans and Suebi crossed the frozen Rhine near Mainz after Roman troops had left to defend Italy, and began rampaging through Gaul, Spain and North Africa. Then, for the first time in almost 800 years, Visigoths under Alaric attacked Rome in 410 and the West shuddered as Rome fell.

On September 4, 476, the last Western Roman emperor, the teenager Romulus Augustus, took the road to the south after being deposed by the barbarian Odoacer. By 554 the thirty-year war between the Eastern Emperor Justinian and the Ostrogoths had left behind a devastated Italy.

The proud city of Rome that had once boasted a million-strong population had become a ghost-town of 40,000 people. In the midst of relentless butchery and chaos even the possibility of death by plague rather than by the rampant mutilations and

other types of torture was preferred by the leading figure of the age, Pope Gregory the Great

Night indeed had fallen over Western Europe.

During the fifth to the seventh centuries, Western Europe resembled *Mordor*, a "dying land not yet dead" (Tolkien). Writhing under ceaseless assaults of transient barbarian populations yet still reminded of civilization by the remnants and ruins of Roman highways and bridges, aqueducts and amphitheatres, amid nightmarish confusion men thought of yesterday as a dream and despaired of tomorrow. Bloody chaos reigned.

Men fluctuated between frenzy and hopelessness. How could the age old civilization of Rome be conquered by barbarians. Even that tough, choleric individual, St. Jerome, fell momentarily into agony in that momentous year of 410: "My voice fails me. Sobs choke my words..." What was left of the civilization that had been built over a thousand years? In the face of universal decay and events seemingly masterminded by satanic powers, hope was fast abandoning the hearts of men. In anguish they looked around for a meaning to it all, for an overarching purpose to existence that would give them hope that, somehow, truth and goodness would ultimately vanquish the relentless waves of evil that were lashing the shores of society and their hearts.

It was in those darkest of hours that Catholicism stepped into the breach and proved herself to be the worldview, the only worldview, that can provide light and energy to man's soul in such hours. With her eyes fixed on the North Star of history, the Unchanging One, Jesus Christ, Truth, Life and Way, she resolutely taught Romans and barbarians the great certainties of Catholicism.

With these truths the Church showed the men and women of the Dark Ages, whether Roman patricians or Anglo-Saxon chieftains, that her *raison d'être* was to communicate the divinely revealed purpose of history. She thus restored hope, empowering men to face their present, no matter how terrible. Moreover, she taught Romans and invaders and immigrants that there could be not only a renaissance of the Roman social order but a birth of a better one, a Catholic civilization.

However, fifth-century Catholic intellectuals such as Paul Orosius in his *Universal History*, Salvianus, and Paulinus of Nola all pointed out that this construction required making the divinely revealed certainties found in the Catholic Faith and the supernatural energy found in the sacraments the foundations.

The strategy of these Catholic vanguards was transparently clear: the pro-active proposal of conversion to the Catholic Faith to all non-Catholics.

During that long night from the fifth to the tenth century, in a saga of ceaseless heroism, Catholic vanguards won over the barbarian races to the one true Faith.

In 496 Remy, Bishop of Reims, christened Clovis, King of the Franks. In 500 Avitus, Bishop of Vienne, friend and mentor of Sigismund, King of the Burgundians, received him along with thousands of his warriors into the Church. In 575 Columbanus and the Celtic monks disembarked on the shores of Brittany and, like flashes of lightning, crossed France, travelled up the Rhine into Switzerland and northern Italy, preaching, founding abbeys and initiating the revitalization of the local churches. In Spain the Visigoth martyr-prince Hermenegild and Bishop Leander of Seville converted the Visigoths under King Reccared I in 589.

To England arrived the Roman monk, Augustine, in 597: within five years King Ethelbert of Kent and several thousand Saxon warriors asked for baptism. The Lombards converted

between 653 and 700. Boniface and the Benedictines reinvigorated the Church in the area of modern day France and began fostering the conversion of the Saxons and Frisians of Germany and the Netherlands from 716-754. Then on Christmas Day 800 Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne as Emperor, restoring thus, in a certain sense, the Roman Empire in the West. But with a mighty difference: now it was in its ideals a *Catholic* empire, thanks in large part to the Catholics led by the man whom Charlemagne called "my mentor", Alcuin.

The North was impenetrable for centuries due to the hostile Vikings who inspired such terror that Catholics of the ninth century added a prayer to the liturgy: *A furore Normannorum libera nos, Domine!* Finally, one missionary succeeded: the "Apostle of the North", Ansgar (801-865)—whose name means "God's javelin"—penetrated deep into the Norse territories of Denmark and Sweden. Time and again he met defeat but eventually he succeeded in setting up a beachhead at Lake Mälaren with a small group of Swedish converts. By 1100, Sweden was well on its way to becoming Catholic.

To Iceland Catholics arrived in 874, since at least forty of the original four hundred Viking settlers from Norway under Ingólfur Arnarson included Irish Catholic slaves. In the fourteenth century the rim of Christendom extended to include Finland. Finally, by around 1450, Lithuania also had become part of Christian Europe.

During these centuries, due to the absence of the political, legal and military stability of the Roman Empire, Western European society resembled a ship on unknown seas, lashed by high waves. The Church led by the priesthood was the only institution around capable of taking command of the rudder and navigating because only she knew the direction the ship should be taking to reach a haven of social order.

In the vacuum of civil leadership it was particularly the bishops who shouldered responsibility for society, for within their ranks were to be found many of the heirs of either imperial officials or converted barbarian leaders. These were the men with the social ascendancy, episcopal authority, training, intelligence, vim and grit necessary to front the spiritual, moral, social and economic disorder within the city walls as well as the military menace from without. Although their ancestors had been either Roman aristocrats or barbarian chieftains, these bishops increasingly defined their identity as first and foremost Christian. It is fascinating to see that, generally speaking, one finds in the episcopal ranks the most vital, intelligent and energetic men of the era: idealists, creators, and organizers. Overachieving youth were drawn to the priesthood as the institution that was on the cutting-edge of dealing with the greatest issues of both time and eternity: the defense of all that is truly human in civilization and the leading of men to salvation. Perhaps their view of their role is best symbolized in the action of Bishop Rigobert of Reims (d. 743) who, in order to ensure that the people of his city were safe at night, slept near the ramparts with the keys of the city gate beside him.

It is simply impossible to list all of the outstanding bishops who lived during the Dark Ages. Some 9,000 place names in France, 4,500 in Spain, 2,500 in Italy witness to their influence.

But among all of the great Catholic leaders, four stand out as giants of thought and action who did much to place the foundations of the new Christian civilization: Ambrose, Augustine, Leo the Great and Gregory the Great. These were the men who ensured that the Church "was the one path across the dark ages that was not dark"... "a shining bridge connecting two shining civilizations"(Chesterton). As Christopher Dawson, in his ground breaking book, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, called

the “fathers of Western culture” because in their writings and actions they laid out the blueprints of the new world order.

Ambrose, born around 338 into one of the patrician families that had been part of the ruling elite of the Roman Empire, in his early thirties became governor of much of northern Italy. In 374, by acclamation, the people declared that they wanted him as Bishop of Milan. For over twenty-four years, as a mirror of the ideal shepherd, Ambrose taught, sanctified and ruled the city that was the capital of the Western Empire.

But it was as a man of government in Christ’s Church that he made the deepest impression on the imagination of the West for two millennia. By carrying out his duties as bishop to their extreme implications, he showed the Church and society that the Catholic priest is no sacristy figure, but a leader who stands on the front steps of the Church to be the voice of conscience and guide of society in politics, economics and culture; that he is *defender of the city* because he is Defender of the Faith.

Ambrose, though a man of refined tact, friend to the emperors Gratian and Theodosius, was a fighter when it came to claiming the Church’s rights. He firmly asserted, “The Emperor is in the Church, not above it!” and therefore he added “when kings err the bishops must not fail to correct them with just reprimands.”

Ambrose burnt the lesson into the memory of the West through his confrontation with Emperor Theodosius the Great. For in November 390 Ambrose excommunicated the generally upright but rather hotheaded ruler for his massacre of thousands of innocent people in Thessalonica, telling him that it would only be after he had done penance for his sin that he could again cross the threshold of the basilica and receive Holy Communion. His letter to Theodosius combined utmost finesse with unflinching firmness: “You shall then make your offering when you have received permission to sacrifice, when your offering shall be

acceptable to God.”

After a month’s delay in which shocked courtiers urged the emperor not to give in, the ruler of the Roman Empire took off his imperial robes at Christmas and donned the penitent’s clothing, walking through the square of Milan to the cathedral where Ambrose welcomed him. “Stripping himself of every emblem of royalty,” said Ambrose in his sermon at the emperor’s funeral in 395, “he publicly in church deplored his sin. That public penance, which private individuals shrink from, an Emperor was not ashamed to perform; nor was there afterward a day on which he did not grieve for his mistake.” When Theodosius was approaching death he called Ambrose to his bedside: “Even while death was disintegrating his body,” said the bishop, “he was more concerned about the welfare of the churches than about his personal danger.”

The submission of Theodosius was one of the most stunning and symbolic moments of Western Civilization. The painting of the event by Subleyras depicts men looking on in staggered amazement at what is occurring. As indeed they might! That dramatic scene of a bishop’s hand raised in absolution, and an emperor dressed in penitential purple kneeling before him, showed the social pyramid of the ancient world turned upside down.

The successors of bishops, who only eighty years before had been executed by emperors, now judged these emperors within their basilicas. The Caesars who had often behaved as if “I am the State” now recognized themselves as subjects of the Natural Law and accepted the Catholic Church as its custodian. It was nothing less than a massive socio-political revolution.

Ambrose died in Milan during the night between Good Friday and Holy Saturday in 397. On his deathbed, with his arms wide open in the form of a cross, his lips moving in silent prayer, his dying became the final act of a lifelong thrust for mystical identification

with Jesus Christ, Crucified and Risen, the source of his convictions and courage.

The intellectual whom Ambrose had baptized, Augustine, was born on November 13, 354, in the area of modern-day Algeria at Thagaste, now Souk-Ahras. He was a Berber, a Numidian, and thus, although we have no description of his appearance, it is not unlikely that he was a typical member of his people: tall, long-limbed, with bronzed skin, a high forehead and striking black eyes. Brilliant and hot-blooded, the wild youth, who only needed to put a minimum of effort to achieve high academic grades, was caught playing dice in the classroom on more than one occasion and thrashed. Yet he would tolerate no restraint on his passions, except, sometimes, from his gentle and intensely Catholic mother, Monica, whom he dearly loved.

Augustine was no ivory-tower intellectual but one in close contact with his people and his era. Each Sunday the excited crowds of Hippo went to the Basilica of Peace to hear him preach. They loved their bishop and knew that he loved them. As he himself said, I quote, "I do not wish to be saved without you" and "Why am I in the world? Not only to live in Jesus Christ; but to live in Him with you. This is my passion, my honor, my glory, my joy, and my riches."

Seated in the sanctuary, at a distance of only five yards from the first row of his audience, Augustine well knew that his fellow North Africans would only enter into his ideas if he first entered into their passions. So he would start with the problems worrying them, talking in a straightforward manner; pleasing their North African love of subtlety in language, holding them spellbound with his ability to reason out a biblical text as if it were a riddle; becoming emotional about what moved both them and him: happiness, love, fear, guilt, peace; more than once reducing them to tears.

At times they would interrupt him to finish off one of his biblical quotations, other times they applauded, on occasion they would quietly gripe when he called for an end to some semi-pagan practices. As the sermon went on, Augustine would ask for a moment of silence because his frail voice tired quickly. The love of God, the hope springing from union with Jesus Christ, the urgency of conversion, solidarity with the suffering including those in Purgatory, and the role of the Catholic heroes and heroines who had preceded them – the saints – were the leitmotifs of all his preaching.

Augustine, convinced that he would fulfill his duties towards his people in the measure of his own interior strength, turned the episcopal residence into a type of monastery. There, he and the priests, deacons and clerics who lived with him adopted a community lifestyle committed to pursuing Christian excellence. They renounced personal property and lived austere: plain furnishings, no silver cutlery except spoons; dishes of wood, stone or earthenware; eating together their meals of bread and vegetables with a little wine while listening to a reading or discussing matters of the spirit.

His final days were spent in overcrowded Hippo whose streets were jammed with refugees seeking a safe haven from the fury of Genseric's red-haired Vandals who, wherever they went, burned fields, looted towns, massacred, maimed and raped. On August 28, 430, in the third month of the siege of his beloved city, Augustine, his weary body racked by a high fever, died. As death approached he had prayed, asking God for pardon for having done so little for him, time and again reading aloud the words of the penitential Psalms that he had nailed to the walls of his cell.

By remaining in a city filled with fear, his physical strength failing but his will steadfast, his frail voice preaching the hope of Christ to the multitude packing the Basilica, urging the citizens to a

hardy military defense, putting nerve into priests who were tempted to flee, he became the model of so many bishops during the darkness of the centuries that followed.

Augustine, as the thousand-year-old civilization of Rome burned, experienced the drama of it all in his own flesh yet never surrendered to despair but pointed in his writings, above all in his monumental *The City of God* to the new world order that Catholics were called to build.

Thus, he became the guide for Catholic leaders during the first millennium, notably for the man who brought to birth what some historians have called "the first Europe", the Emperor Charlemagne, who kept a copy of Augustine's book on his bedside table.

But he also immediately influenced the two outstanding pontiffs of his era: the fifth century, Leo the Great who, as a young priest, had once met him, and the late sixth century, Gregory the Great.

Leo changed the course of European history in the year 452, twenty-two years after Augustine's death. Italy was in turmoil. The Roman armies were in retreat, the emperor and the imperial court had fled from Ravenna, and panic set in among the population of Rome as Attila and his army of Asiatic Huns swept southwards through the peninsula toward the city of Rome. In desperation the Emperor Valentinian III turned to the Pope, Leo I, to ask him, somehow, to halt the invasion.

A born leader of men, Leo was serene and inspired serenity; generous, compassionate, accessible and modest; an orator whose words moved both the learned and the uneducated; and with a mind able to pinpoint concrete solutions for complex problems. This was the man who rode out, unarmed, to confront Attila on the banks of the Mincio River near the city of Mantua.

The French historian, Henri Daniel-Rops, described the meeting as follows:

“Attila was just preparing to cross the Mincio when he saw a strange procession advancing toward him, shrouded in a cloud of gold-tinted dust: priests in dalmatics, monks in drugget [coarse wool clothing], two patricians on horseback, and a host of deacons and choristers bearing crosses and banners and lifting high gold monstrances which gleamed in the sunlight, were marching slowly to meet him. From the entire column the rhythmical responses of hymns and psalms rose on high, swelling into a formidable chorus. In the midst of the procession rode an old man with a white beard, praying as he rode. The Hun galloped toward the river, urged his horse into it, and halted on a sandy bank in the middle of it, within hailing distance of the strangers. “What is your name?” Attila shouted to the old man. There came the answer: “I am Leo, the Pope.” The singing had stopped. Attila hesitated for a moment, then, urging his horse forward into the water again, gained the far bank. And the Pope came forward to meet him...”

And that is all we know for certain about the event. On his return to Rome, Leo remarked to Emperor Valentinian: “Let us give thanks to God, for He has delivered us from great danger.” The event showed Italy that a new defender of her cities and countryside had appeared in place of the emperors whose political power was decaying in the West.

Men and women now looked to the papacy as their protector with Leo fully exercising his role, influencing the imperial court, and going forth again in 455 to face Genseric and the Vandals. To the conservative Romans who still clung to paganism and accused the Church of bringing about the downfall of the Empire, Augustine

had replied in the parchments of the *City of God* but Leo had answered on horseback at the Mincio riverbank.

By establishing a papacy that exercised its prerogatives Leo placed it in a position of such prestige that in the hands of his preeminent successor, Gregory the Great, and other pontiffs, it was in a strategic position to ensure Catholic unity, impulse missionary penetration of Barbarian nations, and become the arbiter of justice in Europe.

Later on, in the first half of the eighth century, it would also be capable of forging that alliance with the Frankish king, Pepin, that would impulse the Christianization of the only nominally Christian masses of Franks.

This alliance would achieve two crucial results for the creation of Europe.

Firstly it enabled the application to much of Western Europe of the emerging synthesis of the Catholic Faith, Greco-Roman law and classical culture.

Secondly, it empowered the monks' missionary thrust to expand the rim of Europe northwards and eastwards.

A century after Leo had confronted Attila the Hun, Pope Gregory the Great (540-604), was born. This is the individual whom the non-Catholic mathematician and philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead, described as "a man whose high official position is surpassed only in the magnitude of his services to humanity".

He belonged to the ancient and wealthy Roman family of the Anicii who had given the world two emperors, the philosopher Boethius, and most importantly, Benedict of Nursia. As a child he lived in a palace on the Caelian Hill with a view of some of ancient

Rome's majestic buildings. The talented youth rose rapidly in the city's government to become its governor in 572. Then he turned his back on the world's honors to become a monk, giving his estates in Sicily to establish six monasteries and transforming his Roman palace into an abbey. There Gregory named someone else as abbot and lived as one of the rank and file, dedicated to prayer and study.

It was not to last. Pope Pelagius II obliged Gregory to abandon his peaceful life in order to assist him in governing the Church. What a remarkable man! So remarkable that the thought has entered my mind – most unchristian of course – that if we Catholics decide to start cloning individuals, Gregory should be high on our list!

This leader of men had fragile health, so fragile that, to his personal embarrassment, he could not keep all the Church's rules of fasting because they made him faint. Nevertheless, he was, as the historian Daniel-Rops stated,

“one of those men who by rigorous self-discipline are able to obtain more from a sickly body than most of us obtain from a healthy one. Ambitiously bold in his ideas, resolute in their application, following through every task which he undertook to the last detail, he was a worthy son of those great administrators whose endeavors had created the Empire. Gregory was a hot-tempered man, somewhat inclined to intransigence, but he radiated such boundless generosity of spirit that, without trying to please, he made people love him. His intellect matched his character: it was lucid, penetrating, and quick to assess men or to judge situations; there was no danger of him mistaking weakness for charity, illusion for hope; the art of government came to him naturally, and it had been further matured by his long official employment. He was a tireless worker, always busy

dictating letters (we still possess nearly nine hundred, dealing with the most varied topics), receiving visitors, and vastly increasing the scope of a pope's duties."

Indeed, his biographer, Paul the Deacon, informs us that "he never rested" (*Vita*, XV). In his final years although continuously sick and confined to bed because of typhoid fever and gout, he constantly kept up with all the reports coming in from the missionary bands of monks he had sent to convert the barbarians and laid out plans for the organization of Britain's dioceses and the future of a completely Christian island.

During his fourteen-year reign, Gregory's wise, forceful and daring strategies defended and expanded the rim of Christendom in spite of savage Lombards to the north and south of Rome and incompetent representatives of the Eastern Roman Emperor in the north-east. Gregory's letters to missionaries included wise instructions for the inculturation of everything within the customs of the Germanic peoples that was compatible with the Natural Law and the Catholic Faith—a decisive part of the blueprints for a common Christian European culture.

All was done amid an Italian countryside of burning towns and unsafe highways. The decisive new thrust for the conversion of Anglo-Saxons, Lombards and Visigoths showed the ancient world that a new empire was coming into existence, independent and distinct from the political power of Byzantium, using stones from the ancient Roman world but with its own pillars, power, authority and instruments. By the end of the reign of Gregory the Great, men knew that papal Rome had indeed succeeded the imperial city and the most clear-sighted among them sensed that the seeds of a new West were being planted amid the centuries of winter.

The seed-sowers were the monks, both Benedictine and

Irish, whom Gregory had impulsed throughout his reign. The preface to one of St. Columba of Iona's hymns describes the arrival from Rome to the windswept island at the distant edges of the northern world of Pope Gregory's messengers, bearing the gift of a set of hymns for evening prayer and in return the sending by St. Columba of his own compositions to the Pontiff. To these creative minorities we will now turn our attention.

The soul of Gregory the Great had been greatly influenced by the thought and monastic way of life of St. Benedict. As Pope he encouraged the spread of Benedictine abbeys which, together with those founded by the Irish monks, became the training centers for many of the most gifted and dedicated of the Church's bishops and priests during the Dark Ages. These monasteries became the launching pads for the missionary penetration of the Barbarian races and the oases for the preservation of Greco-Roman culture. In their cloisters, ever so silently, ever so gradually, these men sketched the blueprints of a new cultural synthesis which, in the eighth century, began to take shape in the society of Charlemagne's empire. This became the foundations of the Christendom that would emerge in the twelfth century when the ethos and institutions characteristic of Western Civilization became clearly visible.

On September 4, 476, the barbarian Odoacer had deposed the last Roman emperor Romulus Augustus—an episode that has come to symbolize the collapse of the proud Roman Empire. Fifty-three years later, in 529, half-way along the road between Rome and Naples, on a mountain-top with the ruins of a temple to Apollo, another empire was founded, when a youth named Benedict, who had turned his back on the decadence of Rome, started the monastery of Monte Cassino.

Benedict (480-547) was born in Norcia, a town located on a plain within view of some of the highest peaks of the Italian Apennines,

among people legendary for their ruggedness, austerity and energy, "*severissimi homines*" [the sternest of men] (Cicero). As a youth he travelled to Rome, then under Barbarian rule, for studies. In those years much was stirring within his soul, a radical Christian idealism was awakening which would make no compromise with the forces of darkness either in self or in the world around him. Sickened with the debauchery of Roman society, the roughly nineteen-year-old Benedict travelled thirty miles eastward to Subiaco he went, determined to find a place of silence indispensable for shaping depth of spirit. For three years he endured the solitude of a cave on the rocky flank of the mountain cliff in that isolated valley, engaging in that hardest of combats, the combat of self against self. The outcome of this interior warfare was a new man – the man who would build Monte Cassino and the movement known to Western Civilization as the Benedictines.

Down that mountainside slowly came a trickling stream of Christian life which, with the centuries, began to grow and swell until it became a mighty river of grace and culture, irrigating the plains and valleys of Europe. Benedict and his monks can rightly be called "Fathers of European civilization" for during the Dark Ages their monasteries became "the storehouse of the past and the birthplace of the future" (Newman), "almost like fortresses in which civilization took refuge under the banner of a saint" (Chateaubriand).

In 1953, the historian of civilizations, the non-Catholic, Arnold J. Toynbee, made a "long-meditated pilgrimage" to the cave at Subiaco. He was conscious that the Western Civilization for which Benedict had laid important seeds was dead and had been replaced by a secularized culture whose influence was swiftly expanding worldwide. *Time* magazine reported that the "tall, white-haired Englishman with gentle eyes stood in silent prayer", praying, as he himself afterwards disclosed, "that the spirit which

had once created a Western Christian Civilization out of the chaos of the Dark Age might return to re-consecrate a latter-day Westernizing World”.

Due to the missionary impulse given to the Benedictines by Gregory the Great, they began to emerge from Italy, spreading northwards. In 595 forty monks headed by Augustine, prior of the Abbey of St. Andrew’s in Rome, were sent to evangelize England. As they travelled through Gaul (France) they inspired the foundation of the Benedictine abbeys.

But twenty years before the sons of St. Benedict had arrived from the south, there had landed on the shores of northern France bands of fiercely austere but winsome monks who came from what Romans then regarded as the ends of the earth, the mist-covered island lashed by Atlantic waves on the westernmost shores of the known world.

On the coast of northern France, near Mont-Saint-Michel, there is a granite cross to recall that day in 575 when Columbanus, accompanied by twelve monks, disembarked. These men blazed a trail across France, the Rhineland, Switzerland and Northern Italy—the area that would largely comprise the heartlands of the 8th century Carolingian empire—founding or inspiring some two hundred monasteries before 730. These abbeys became the chief nurseries of a Catholic priestly and lay elite for the ongoing Christianization of north-western Europe in the seventh century, basis for the Anglo-Saxon missionary effort of the first half of the eighth, launching pads for further missionary thrusts into Scandinavia and the Baltic lands, for the renaissance of learning, and the *naissance* of a new Christian culture under Alcuin and Charlemagne in the second half of the eighth and early ninth centuries.

It is hard to know which quality to admire most in Columbanus, in this Father of Europe—his daring spirit or the sublime and tender sensitivity evident in his letters and poetry, his tenacity and austerity or his deep culture. By all accounts Columbanus had a larger-than-life personality.

As he travelled through Europe, wherever he went, like all the Celtic monks, he could easily be seen approaching. He wore a long white habit, carried a curved staff, and had a water-bottle and pouch containing relics of the saints hanging from around his neck. Whether before kings or simple countryfolk, the man, I quote, “whose eyes were the color of gray sea water”, whose voice was “strong and melodic” and whose hair, tonsured in the Celtic style, fell behind onto his shoulders, inspired awe. He was, as Daniel-Rops described him,

“This bearded, gnarled giant, with muscles of steel, who could fell a tree with one blow of his axe and dig the soil for fifteen hours on end without showing any signs of fatigue. Yes, it was a rugged man who landed at Guimorais! A kind of Israelite prophet, walking the sixth-century earth, as plain-spoken as Isaiah or Jeremiah, on whose face, so his biographer assures us, “the might of God was clearly visible”, a great walker and preacher, a tireless pioneer, a healer, and almost a soothsayer, and yet a man whose Irish ancestry had left him his sense of poetry and mystery, his love of nature and of day-dreaming.

His achievement can only be described as colossal, as Dr. Alexander O’ Hara will unfold in his lecture. Benedict XVI described him as one of the Fathers of Europe as did a founding father of the European Union, Robert Schuman, whom Dr. Alan Fimister will present to us.

Among the Irish monks, next to Columbanus in degree of impact during the Dark Ages was Columba (521-597), who founded the monastery on the island of Iona, off the coast of Scotland, in 563. After his death Iona became the training-ground for bishops and missionaries who pioneered the conversion of northern England. Thanks to the conversion of Britain many Anglo-Saxon monks in the seventh and eighth centuries would in turn become torchbearers of the Faith to Europe, and among these was Alcuin of York, the intellectual power behind the throne of Charlemagne, the individual who initiated the forging of a Christian synthesis of the Roman and Teutonic cultures, that enabled the birth of the "first Europe", and the flourishing civilization of 13th century Christendom, the original Western civilization.

Conclusion

In conclusion.

Our Catholic forefathers, the men and women who, with colossal courage and creativity derived from the super-natural life of the sacraments and certainties of Catholicism, had a vision of history.

That vision of history should be ours.

It can be summed up in one sentence, as expressed by Thomas Carlyle:

"History is the essence of innumerable biographies".

This is the vision of history that is a *shout* to Catholics today.

"Remember!"

Remember, as you stand at a cross-roads of history!

Remember, as you confront the "Dictatorship of Relativism"!

Remember who you are and what you once achieved.

Recall the crucially important social consequences of your Catholicism.

Never, never, never, never forget that the Catholic by being truly Catholic changes himself, society, and civilization.

That you cannot fail to change the world by being a real Catholic!