

Our Debt to the Catholic Church

by Sebastian R. Fama

I make no secret of the fact that I am a Catholic. When speaking to friends and acquaintances, the subject inevitably comes up. A few years back a friend and I went to lunch. As we were sitting down, she said: "How was your weekend? What did you do?" I told her that I had attended an event at my church. I did not elaborate nor did I say that she should have been there. She was silent for a moment and then she said, a bit defensively: "Well maybe Christianity works for you but it doesn't work for me. Don't judge me."

I was surprised by her response. She knew from past conversations that I was active in my church. I said to her: "I am not judging you. I just answered your question." I said no more and the conversation shifted to other subjects. As the day wore on, I began to think about what she said. I had heard it many times before. When people say that Christianity does not work for them, what they really mean is that they do not want to be a part of it. Whether or not it "works for them" is another subject altogether.

Before Jesus came along, women and children were the property of men. If I were to ask my friend which system worked better for her, what do you suppose she would say? I would wager that she prefers the present system. I would also assume that she appreciates the fact that there are hospitals available to provide for her medical needs. The Catholic Church established the first hospitals in response to the Biblical mandate to care for the sick. Thomas E. Woods notes that by the fourth century most cities had church sponsored hospitals. Even monasteries served as providers of medical care (*How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization* page 176).

For centuries people lived hard lives with few creature comforts. But today, thanks to science, we live lives that people in the distant past could not even imagine. Before the Catholic Church came along beliefs concerning nature and the world around us were, for the most part, nothing more than superstition. But the Church changed all that. You see, the Bible tells us that the universe in which we live is governed by laws. For instance; When speaking to Job God said the following: "Do you know the ordinances of the heavens; can you put into effect their plan on the earth?" (Job 38:33). And in the book of Wisdom, we read: "But you [God] have disposed all things by measure and number and weight" (Wisdom 11:20).

Now if God created the universe to operate according to rational laws, it seemed only natural that those laws could be understood and harnessed. Consequently, Catholics began to discover, study, and use the laws of nature that Scripture alluded to. And thus, the study of science began. 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.

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 the modern scientific method" (*How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization*, page 94).

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.

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 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, 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).

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 and practices.

Despite all this, 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 her mission, sometimes shaken, but never defeated.

The miracles performed by Jesus give credence to His message. In like manner the Church's tremendous contributions to Western Civilization give credence to her teachings. Jesus said we should judge a tree by its fruit (Matthew 7:15-20). I think it is clear at this point that the Catholic Church produced some pretty good fruit. Fruit that advanced the cause of mankind. And that should work for anyone.