

ARTICLE VII.

THE CIVILIZING INFLUENCE OF THE MEDIÆVAL
CHURCH.

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"WHAT the Middle Ages Started With" is the title of one of the early chapters in that illuminating book "Civilization During the Middle Ages,"¹ by George Burton Adams. In this chapter he states that there were four sources from which was to come a new civilization. These sources were Greece, Rome, the Germans, and Christianity. Greece contributed her culture, literature, art, philosophy, and science; Rome gave her practical government, and law; the Barbarians added new blood and new institutions; and Christianity was the great heat, which welded these contributions and made them into a civilization.

One cannot make even a cursory study of the Middle Ages without being continually impressed with the importance of Christianity and the church, and the deeper one goes into that fascinating period the more that impression grows. Yet it is impossible to state just what influence Christianity has had upon any civilization, "for its operation lies in the realm of the silent and unobserved forces which act upon the individual character, and the springs of action, but which can, in the nature of the case, leave no record of themselves for later times." But we can quite definitely trace the influence of the church as an institution, though we ought to bear con-

¹ Chap. II. pp. 14-36; see also chap. III., "The Addition of Christianity," pp. 39-64.

stantly in mind that Christian belief and the church as an institution are two different and distinct things. It is the church as an institution we plan to discuss here.

One great fact that must not be lost sight of, if one would have an understanding of the Middle Ages, is that the mediæval church, to a large degree, became the successor of the Roman Empire in western Europe. That is, as time went on, and as the empire became less and less capable of performing the functions of government, these were more and more assumed by the church, as an organization, — a governmental or political institution. It is also interesting to note that the government of the church was modeled after that of the Roman Empire, and the idea of universal dominion which prevailed in the Roman Empire, was taken over by the church. Of course this transfer of power from the empire to the church was a long and gradual process. In the first two centuries after Christianity became the only recognized religion of the empire, the church and the imperial government were on a friendly footing of mutual respect and support. In these early centuries the Popes recognized the supremacy of the temporal power, but when the imperial government no longer was able to give needed support and protection, and as the waves of barbarian invaders made their way into the imperial dominions, and the great empire began to fall apart, the church lost respect for temporal rulers who could not, or would not, furnish protection and preserve order.

Thus the church was thrown upon her own resources, and was compelled out of this grave necessity to assume authority, and power, which was distinctly temporal. For protection against the Lombards, — the last of the barbarian invaders, who were particularly hateful to the church, because of their Arian Christianity, — the Popes were compelled to take

charge of the defenses of Rome, to repair the walls, and to maintain troops. To say that this authority was assumed by these early Popes because they had a thirst for temporal power would be distinctly unjust and untrue.

After the alliance of the Papacy with the Frankish rulers, Pipin and Charlemagne, had been culminated, during the pontificates from Gregory II. to Leo III. (715–800),¹ thus raising up a strong temporal power once more in sympathy with the church, the Popes relinquished their temporal control to a large degree, and the government of the church became completely subordinate to that of the new state.² But with the falling away of the Carolingian Empire, before the close of the ninth century, and with the rise of Feudalism, which reached its culmination in the tenth century, western Europe was once more deprived of a strong temporal government, and the church was again compelled to shoulder the responsibility of keeping order in Europe.

Thus if we say that temporal power was thrust upon the church we will not be far from the truth. If the church had grown up under a strong central government, if there had never been any break-up of a Roman Empire, there would doubtless have been a far different story to record. But since things were as they were, — since the Roman Empire did break up, leaving Europe in a state of chaos, since the Carolingian power likewise came to a speedy end, leaving Europe at the mercy of Feudalism, — it was a lasting blessing to the nations of western Europe, still unborn, that the church

¹ The alliance between the Carolingians and the Popes was made during the pontificates of Gregory II. and III., Zacharias, Stephen II. and III., and Hadrian I. (715–772). The alliance culminated in the crowning of Pipin by the Pope in 751, the Donation of Pipin, and the crowning of Charlemagne as Emperor in 800.

² Lea, *Studies in Church History*, pp. 31–45.

stepped into the breach, and assumed the double burden of temporal as well as spiritual power. We are accustomed to think of the Middle Ages as a period of chaos, and to a certain extent that term well describes the condition of western Europe from the fifth to the thirteenth centuries, but conditions would have been far more chaotic had not the church exercised a restraining power.

After the break-up of Charlemagne's empire, in the ninth century, there were no states in Europe in the modern sense of the word. There were kings, but they were feudal kings, and many times their nobles had more power than they. For instance, in France in the tenth century the king was a mere puppet, and in derision he was called King of Loan, for the little hereditary district around that city was the only territory he actually held and controlled. After the coming to the throne of the powerful Capetian dukes, affairs were little better. In fact, there was no king in Europe who had sufficient power to keep his realm in order, for the chief business of the feudal nobles was fighting; and it was also their chief delight. The only authority which these lawless nobles respected and feared was the authority of the church; and what order was maintained, was that kept by the church.

The church saw that sworn contracts were kept, that the wills of the dead were administered, that marriage obligations were observed. It took defenseless widows under its protection, dispensed charity, promoted education, when few laymen, even among the wealthy nobles, pretended even to read. As time went on, the church courts became more powerful than the feudal courts, or even the kings' courts. The church was untiring, as it was fitting that it should be, in its efforts to secure peace; and nothing redounds more to the honor of the bishops than the "Truce of God." This famous

truce provided that all men should abstain from fighting from Wednesday night to Monday morning of each week and during the most sacred festivals of the Christian church. The feudal lords were required by the church councils and the bishops to take an oath to observe this weekly truce, and they were threatened with the dread penalty of excommunication if they failed to keep their oath.¹

But to discuss the civilizing importance of the mediæval church without making mention of monasticism, would mean that it would be but half a discussion at least. Some one has well said, that the monk was the great man of the Middle Ages. The civilizing work of monasticism, entirely apart from its work in the line of religion, was tremendous. "The Rule of St. Benedict,"² drawn up in the year 526, "is as important as any constitution that was ever drawn up for a state"; and throughout the Middle Ages it was the rule that prevailed in practically every monastery in western Europe.

But for the Benedictines of the Middle Ages, Latin literature would have reached us only in scanty remains. Their monasteries were retreats, where scholars might work, in spite of the disorder that prevailed without. One of the duties enjoined upon the monks was the copying of books; although it was often done carelessly and without intelligence, yet that was far better than if it had not been done at all. What little independent literature produced during the Middle Ages was also the work of monks. Such books as "The

¹Emerton, *Mediæval Europe*, pp. 870-871. The famous Truce of God, issued by the Archbishop of Cologne in 1083, may be found in Robinson's *Readings in European History*, vol. 1. pp. 187-191 (translated by Munro from *Monumenta Germaniæ Historica*, *Leges II.*).

²A translation of the Rule of St. Benedict may be found in Henderson's *Historical Documents of the Middle Ages*, pp. 274-314.

History of the Franks," by Gregory of Tours; Einhard's "Life of Charlemagne," Bede's "Ecclesiastical History of England," and the "History of the Lombards" by Paulus Decanus, are examples. Another important and interesting form of literature produced by the monks was the monastery annals, which are the chief source for our knowledge of mediæval history. Most of the larger monasteries kept such annals, though in most cases they record events largely of local interest only; but it would be impossible to construct the history of the Middle Ages without the annals and the documents preserved by the monks.

The monasteries were also the seats of education and learning, out of which came the mediæval universities. Among the famous monastery schools might be mentioned the school of Rheims in the tenth century, and the monastery of Bec in Normandy in the eleventh century, from which came Lanfranc and Anselm, the first two Archbishops of Canterbury after the Norman Conquest of England. Monks were the tutors of the sons of rulers; and, more than that, they were the advisers and secretaries of the rulers themselves. Throughout the Middle Ages the Archbishop of Canterbury was the chief adviser of the English king, and the Archbishop of Rheims exercised almost equal authority in France.

In the affairs of everyday life the importance of the monk and the monastery was also most evident. The monk performed an extremely beneficent work for western Europe in reclaiming labor from the disrepute into which it had fallen, in the latter Roman Empire, due to the prevalence of slavery. He built his monastery in the forest or in the swamp, and then set to work to clear the forest and drain the swamp. One of the objects of the monastic system was to provide work for the monk, that would keep his mind and body so

occupied that temptation could find no entrance; and so it was under such incentives that he performed much useful work, and set an invaluable example of industry.

Of course there is the dark side of the picture, that we have not noted here. The influence of the church in the Middle Ages was not always for good. Some of the bishops and archbishops were little better than the lay nobles about them. There are even instances where the "Truce of God" was broken by the bishops themselves.¹ The monks also were not always as exemplary as they might have been. Corruptions crept in, as they always do. There were periods when stringent reforms were needed, and again and again during the Middle Ages it was found necessary to reassert the principles of the Rule of St. Benedict; for with increasing wealth the monk forgot his vow of poverty, and lived in luxury, and with his increased influence he forgot his vow of humility. But what I have wished to bring out in clear outline is the fact, that, as a whole, the influence of the Christian church in the Middle Ages made for a higher and better civilization. In fact, I feel that it is not putting it too strong to say that the mediæval church as an institution, coupled with its teachings, was the greatest civilizing force of that formative period.

One can little wonder that the church, having such power and influence thus literally thrust upon her, came to love it, and attempted to confirm it with false decretals, and to increase it. It is only what every institution controlled by men has ever done.

To the ordinary Protestant any claim on the part of the Catholic Church to temporal power seems preposterous. Such claims he would regard as evidence of insatiable greed, and

¹Lea, *Studies in Church History*.

an unholy and unquenchable thirst for power. But such an opinion, in the light of history, is perhaps unjust to the Catholic Church. She looks upon her exercise of temporal power not only as her historical right, but also as her historical duty. If the church was needed in the Middle Ages to exercise control over the temporal affairs of men and nations, why not now? But right here the Catholic Church makes the old mistake, a mistake that she has been deliberately making since the Council of Trent,— she is trying to foist mediæval ideas and ideals upon the modern world. She forgets the changes that have been wrought since the days of the Carolingians and the Hohenstaufens. She boasts of the unchangeable church, and is arrogantly proud of the fact that the church to-day is the same as it was a thousand years ago. But the fact that the church has changed so little since mediæval times is the main ground for present criticism. We have little but praise for the church of the Middle Ages, but a mediæval church in a modern world is pathetic, if not ridiculous.