

Kingdom Report

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St Patrick, Ireland and Creating Western Civilization

Thomas Cahill wrote the international best seller "How the Irish Saved Civilization". I greatly enjoyed the book, but he was very wrong. St. Patrick did not "save civilization." He and his fellow monks created Western Civilization. A lesson for the Church in Africa.

The Church through the ages has had to take different expressions of community and missions:

- The first expression was church in the home. From the 1st century there were first Sanhedrin persecutions and then Roman persecution. This was an underground church movement that grew rapidly but stealthily through apostolic preaching, signs and wonders, martyrdom and good works.
- The second expression was after 325 AD when emperor Constantine made Christianity the state religion. The church emerged from the underground to openly express itself in a weekly synagogue style churches preaching and worship under the leadership now of elders and bishops.
- Then came the fall of the Roman empire after 420 AD and the invasions of Goths, Huns, Vandals out of the European interior spreading havoc, pillage and destruction throughout a collapsing Roman empire.

The Church had to find a new expression of missions. How to not only save the barbarians through conversion...but how to create a new way of life. A new way to conduct themselves. A way of life is a "Civilization".

The monastery movements were the key to creating what we call "Western Civilization" A new way of life for barbarians. This new way of life was communicated not just by words of preaching, but by a working community in a monastery living by example.

While Benedict demonstrated "Ora et Labora" - Work and Prayer. St Patrick and the Irish monasteries added a vital further element. The study of "Logos". Logos was the Greek idea of "the study of how things work". To fulfill God's command to subdue the earth through productive labour you had to understand how God's creation worked. And so the Irish monks went about collecting and understanding all they could of the collected knowledge of the ancients. And copied it in books and spread that knowledge on.

St Patrick and his Ireland Mission

Rome had virtually abandoned Britain in 410 when its troops were needed to defend Rome against Alaric the Goth. Britain was left undefended, and this gave rise to Irish raiders, who excelled in the slave trade. They were very good at silently snatching

children from their beds at night and sailing back to Ireland before the parents knew what had happened.

Patricius, or Patrick, was a middle-class boy in Britain. His grandfather had been a Catholic priest. At the age of sixteen, Patrick was taken captive to the district of Antrim in Ireland and sold to a local king named Miliucc. He was enslaved for six years, working as a shepherd boy. The Irish at that time were not Christians, and most were illiterate.

During those difficult six years of slavery, Patrick had much time to pray and to develop his relationship with God. Then, while sleeping one night in the hills, a voice came to him, saying, "Your hungers are rewarded. You are going home." He awoke with a start, and the voice then continued, "Look, your ship is ready."

Patrick made a miraculous escape from slavery in Ireland and was able to return to his parents' home in Britain. No longer a teenager, his hard experience and his time with God had matured him.

Patrick's Calling

One night, while in his parents' house, he had a vision of an Irishman that he had known in Ireland. His name was Victorinus, and he was holding a huge stack of letters. He handed one of them to Patrick, and it had a heading: *Vox Hiberionicum*, "The Voice of the Irish." He then heard a multitude saying, "We beg you to come and walk among us once more." This was similar to Paul's Macedonian call in Acts 16:9, 10,

Patrick was not as quick to respond to the call as Paul was. But his visions continued, and finally Christ began to speak more directly to him from within: "He who gave His life for you, He it is who speaks within you." So he returned to Gaul and joined a monastery on an island to receive a more formal Christian education and eventually became a missionary to Ireland. At about the age of 47, he was the first missionary to the "barbarians," those outside of the sphere of Roman law. It was around the year 430-432, about the time that the Vandals had conquered Carthage in North Africa. (Augustine had died there in 430 during the siege.) Patrick was very successful in his missionary work, and thousands came to Christ as the result of his efforts.

Creating Centres of Literacy

Patrick devoted the last thirty years of his life to his missionary work in Ireland. He died around 461 A.D., while the Western Roman Empire was in chaos and nearing its final collapse. During his years of ministry, Patrick realized that in order for Christianity to survive long-term, the people had to become literate.

Patrick became the Bishop of Ireland and created many new monasteries there. The movement evolved into monastic colonies, which became the centres of learning, art, and prosperity. Messengers were sent throughout Europe to find books of every kind, including the Roman and Greek classics.

At the same time, a huge influx of monks fled from Gaul to Ireland as Roman civilization broke down and gave way to the warlords of the Goths.

“After Patrick, they [the Irish] experienced an influx of anchorites and monks fleeing before the barbarian hordes, and these no doubt provided them with some finer points on eremitical and conventual life. ‘All the learned men on this side of the sea,’ claims a note in a Leyden manuscript of the time, ‘took flight for transmarine places like Ireland, bringing about a great increase of learning’—and, doubtlessly, a spectacular increase in the number of books—to the inhabitants of those regions” (Cahill, p. 180).

It was not long before thousands of hopeful students flocked to these learning centres in hopes of receiving an education. They were taught the Scriptures and also to read and write. Not being influenced by Roman Christianity, they were unconcerned about the church creeds which had divided the Christians of the Empire. It never entered their minds to persecute or execute people for “heresy.” Thomas Cahill writes,

“Irish generosity extended not only to a variety of people but to a variety of ideas. As unconcerned about orthodoxy of thought as they were about uniformity of monastic practice, they brought into their libraries everything they could lay their hands on. They were resolved to shut out nothing. Not for them the scruples of Saint Jerome, who feared he might burn in hell for reading Cicero. Once they had learned to read the Gospels and the other books of the Holy Bible, the lives of the martyrs and ascetics, and the sermons and commentaries of the fathers of the church, they began to devour all of the old Greek and Latin pagan literature that came their way. In their unrestrained catholicity, they shocked the conventional churchmen, who had been trained to value Christian literature principally and give a wide berth to the dubious morality of the pagan classics.... “It was not that the Irish were uncritical, just that they saw no value in self-imposed censorship....” (Cahill, pp. 138, 139).

This new-found desire to read and write quickly created a huge need for more books to read—and to copy. ***“Like the Jews before them, the Irish enshrined literacy as their central religious act”*** (Cahill, p. 163).

“Ireland, at peace and furiously copying, thus stood in the position of becoming Europe’s publisher. But the pagan Saxon settlements of southern England had cut Ireland off from easy commerce with the continent. While Rome and its ancient empire faded from memory and a new, illiterate Europe rose on its ruins, a vibrant, literary culture was blooming in secret along its Celtic fringe” (Cahill, p. 183).

The Light Shining in the Dark Ages

The collapse of the Western Empire was far more than a change of rulers, laws and political structure. It was a complete disintegration of education and learning, by which Roman culture had been passed down from generation to generation.

“All the great continental libraries had vanished; even memory of them had been erased from the minds of those who lived in the emerging feudal societies of

medieval Europe.... By the end of the fifth century, at any rate, the profession of copyist had pretty much disappeared....” (p. 181, 182).

Yet during this time, education in Ireland was just beginning, and like a newborn baby, it was growing by leaps and bounds. It was inevitable, then, that the educated monks, would finally feel the need to send out missionaries to Europe. These became known as the White Martyrs, sailing into the white morning sky into the unknown, never to return. Such was the dream of Columcille, the spiritual successor to Patrick.

Already, there were foreign students in the monasteries. Many of them returned to their native countries to spread the Gospel. But Irish monks themselves began to set up colonies in “barbarized Europe.”

“More than half of all our biblical commentaries between 650 and 850 were written by Irishmen... and there are traces of the White Martyrs as far as Kiev” (p. 195).

When Columcille died, his spiritual heir, Aidan, continued this missionary legacy. Columbanus, who was born about 540 A.D., departed in 590 for Gaul with a dozen companions. He founded monasteries among the Sueves tribes, bypassing the old Roman churchmen who remained behind their walls with no thought of bringing the Gospel to the “barbarians.” Later, he founded a monastery in northern Italy to bring the Gospel to the Lombards.

In other words, this Irishman was a missionary to Italy, which at one time had been the heart of the Western Roman Empire. His monks, along with many others and in succeeding centuries, continued copying books in many languages, preserving the knowledge of Rome.

“The Hebrew Bible would have been saved without them, transmitted to our time by scattered communities of Jews. The Greek Bible, the Greek commentaries, and much of the literature of ancient Greece were well preserved at Byzantium [Constantinople], and might be still available to us somewhere—if we had the interest to seek them out. But Latin literature would almost surely have been lost without the Irish, and illiterate Europe would hardly have developed its great national literatures without the example of Irish, the first vernacular literature to be written down. Beyond that, there would have perished in the west not only literacy but all the habits of mind that encourage thought. And when Islam began its medieval expansion, it would have encountered scant resistance to its plans—just scattered tribes of animists, ready for a new identity” (pp. 193, 194).

We see, then, how God used the Irish missionary monks not only to preserve ancient texts, but also to give Europe a Christian identity that could withstand Islamic religious conquest that began with Mohammed in 612. It would not be until 1453, when the Islamic Turks took Constantinople, and the remnants of the Eastern Roman Empire collapsed, that we would see a comparable influx of learning into Europe proper. The fall of Constantinople brought thousands of Greek scholars, carrying their Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, into Europe. Up to that time, only the Latin Vulgate was used. These Greek manuscripts arrived at the same time the printing press began to be used (1452). New translations were made directly from Greek.

Thomas Cahill closes his book with this conclusion:

“By this point, the transmission of European civilization was assured. Wherever they went, the Irish brought with them their books, many unseen in Europe for centuries and tied to their waists as signs of triumph, just as Irish heroes had once tied to their waists their enemies’ heads. Wherever they went, they brought their love of learning and their skills in bookmaking. In the bays and valleys of their exile, they reestablished literacy and breathed new life into the exhausted literary culture of Europe. And that is how the Irish saved civilization.”

No Mr. Cahill that is not how the Irish saved civilization. They and the other monastic movements CREATED Western Civilization. Tom Holland the British agnostic scholar and author of classic history books made this very point in his world best seller "Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind:....we are not living in a Greek or Roman civilization. Our entire concept of "human rights" are foreign to Greek and Roman thought and practice. They come from St Paul, Jesus Christ and the Christian scriptures and they were practiced and taught to Barbarian Europeans by thousands of monks and hundreds of monasteries.

This scholastic tradition of the new Christian civilization was passed on through the creation of all the first universities in Europe, England and America...Oxford, Harvard, Princeton, Yale...all started as Christian centres of learning. All of creation is an expression of the character and glory of God. The study of Creation as with the study of scripture is "Theology" in the truest sense....the study of "Theos" ...God.

Our new missions into Africa need a new expression of discipleship. Not just preaching and Sunday meetings. We need to see a new expression of Kingdom communities doing what the monasteries did for Europe. Create a Christian civilization of Africa through communities that live God's Kingdom principles. Pray, preach, work, study....building literate, skilled, loving and working and prosperous communities as witness to the nations of Africa. And spreading those community practices to all the people into a Christian civilization....a way of life that is a testimony to the world. This is who we are and this is how we live.