

***How the Catholic Church built Western Civilization* by Thomas E. Woods, Jr., Regnery Publishing Inc. Washington DC, 2005, 280 pages, US\$ 29.95, ISBN 0-89526-038-7**

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Thomas Ernest Woods, Jr. is an American historian, political analyst, and author. He has written extensively on the subjects of American history, contemporary politics, and economics. Woods is a senior fellow of the Mises Institute and host of 'The Tom Woods Show', he holds a degree in history from Harvard and his Ph.D. from Columbia University. He is a New York Times best-selling author and has published twelve books. Woods is believed to be a proponent of the Austrian School of Economics.

The Catholic Church is an institution that can trace its history almost two thousand years back. What most people know about the Church is usually the content aired by media, references made about the Church in movies, opinions formed by certain protestant and independent churches and images created about the Church by rock musicians and cult groups. Very few people take the pain of looking into its two-thousand-year old history and try to make sense of things. Today, for an average college student or a professional, the Church is about scandals and corruption. To most people including some Catholics, the Church is a rigid and an archaic institution trying to curb people's freedom; a totally wrong notion.

Woods' book is a rebuttal to the notion that the Church was responsible for driving the world into dark ages once the Roman empire started disintegrating. The popular notion has been that the Roman Church suppressed intellectual pursuit and focused more on punishing people who delved in occultism and it was protestant reformation that brought freedom, culture and technological innovation. Woods argues in this historical account that this notion is completely false.

How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization is divided into 12 topical chapters, each of which tries to cover a vast portion of the Church's history and her role in shaping Europe. Woods gives accounts of the rise and fall of kings, development of theological views and the Church's role in development of economic theory; written with the presumption that the reader would have a basic knowledge of western history, even if that were not the case he has provided sufficient background information making the narrative easy to follow. The topics that Woods chose to cover in his work are very vast and complex, each topic would fill volumes yet the author has precisely brought out historical facts to challenge popular belief and opinions of other historians, some of whom he has mentioned in his introduction.

In the chapter entitled, 'a light in the darkness', Woods gives a historical account of how the Church helped establish normalcy in Europe by converting the Franks to Christianity. First the Merovingians and then the Carolingians, both these Frankish dynasties established Christendom over the ruins of the Roman Empire. During the reign of Carolingian ruler Charlemagne or Charles the Great, Europe saw a revival of intellectual pursuit. Charlemagne strongly encouraged education and arts, as he requested the bishops to organise schools around their cathedrals. It was during this period, scholars managed to rescue ancient Latin texts by collecting and copying them. Growth of monasteries during this period was a blessing as Europe suffered at the hands of the invading Viking, Magyars and Muslims, because it was these monasteries that kept the spirit of learning alive.

Woods goes ahead and enlightens us on how the Church developed the university system in the middle ages, how new developments in the field of science took wings under the care of the Church. The book also makes a brief mention of many catholic religious who were also scientists. There are accounts of how the Church let art flourish even when Iconoclasm, which originated in the Byzantine Empire was trying to reject veneration and depiction of religious figures and images. The Church was responsible for the origins of International Law, which was proposed by priests like Francisco de Vitoria, Domingo de Soto and Luis de Molina. The author goes on to tell us how the catholic scholars were the earliest proponents of economic and social thought and how the early missionaries pioneered hospitals to take care of the sick. Woods gives accounts of canon lawyers and catholic jurists who brought about an end to the primitive and barbaric mode of law that had existed from the dark ages till as late as the eleventh century, in the process giving birth to western legal principles.

Towards the end of the book, all the facts presented by the author culminate at one point, that it is the catholic faith, ideology and perseverance that brought the western world out of dark ages, nurtured it during the middle ages and gave it wings during the renaissance. In other words, Catholicism was responsible for the western civilization as we know it today, according to the author, all these were part of God's plan and God used the Church to implement them.

Woods through his book is trying to remind the western world of its true roots, which most people have forgotten. The book is a real treasure trove of information about the history of the Catholic Church, it gives detailed accounts of how the Church made efforts to preserve and shape mankind and trying to constantly remind the world of the love and presence of God. A great read for researchers and people interested in history of the Church and Europe. The book can also be instrumental in bringing about a shift in paradigm among those, who are ill-informed about the Catholic Church.