**Monks and Universities**

Coming off Catholic Schools’ Week, we have the opportunity to reflect on two critical ways in which the Church preserved and promoted education in the history of Western Civilization.

Beginning in the fifth century, the once seemingly invincible Roman Empire succumbed to the invasions of the barbarians from the East. In the context of the invasions, many cities were destroyed, as well as great works of art and written documents. It was in the monasteries that much of classical literature was preserved; the monks safeguarded and meticulously hand-copied these documents as part of their way of life. As theologian David Bentley Hart wrote in his book, *The Story of Christianity*, “…had it not been for the Christian monasteries of Western Europe, practically nothing of classical Latin antiquity would have survived the empire’s disintegration” (London: Quercus, 2008, p. 82). He goes on to write:

Had it not been for the monastic institutions established by Benedict and others, with their libraries and scriptoria, the cultural devastation of Western Europe consequent upon the decline of the Western empire would have been complete. As the West was progressively sealed off from the high civilization of the Eastern Christian world, and knowledge of Greek became scarce in the West, the only institution that could boast any continuity with the culture of antiquity was the Church (ibid, 84).

Of singular importance was Cassiodorus (490 – ca. 585), a monk in Italy. He founded the Vivarium, a monastery dedicated to the collection and preservation of classical texts. Following Cassiodorus’ lead, many other monasteries made a commitment to this work. In these monasteries, the works of “Virgil, Ovid, Cicero, Pliny, Horace, Statius, Persius, Lucan, Suetonius, Seneca, Martial, Apuleius, Juvenal, Terence…as well as of such portions of Plato, Aristotle, and the Greek Church Fathers as were available in Latin” were preserved (ibid, 85-6).

In addition to their work in preserving texts, monasteries were also often centers of learning, initially for the training of new members, but later in offering education more broadly.

Our second topic this week, universities, brings us to the High Middle Ages (11th – 14th centuries). Again, Dr. Hart: “Perhaps no accomplishment of the High Middle Ages was ultimately more significant for the later development of Western civilization than the cultivation of a new dedication to scholarship, not only in the abstract disciplines of philosophy and theology, but in the humane, natural, physical, and theoretical sciences” (ibid, 155).

As Dr. Thomas E. Woods, Jr., points out: “The institution that we recognize today, with its faculties, courses of study, examinations, and degrees, as well as the familiar distinction between undergraduate and graduate study, comes to us directly from the medieval world” (Thomas E. Woods, Jr., "The Catholic Church and the Creation of the University," *Catholic Education Resource Center*, web. 27 Jan. 2015).

In the context of last week’s discussion of the Church and science, we spoke about the myth of conflict between them. A connected myth is that the Church is opposed to reason and learning, or that the Church tries to brainwash her followers and eliminate any contrary voices. Both the examples we have discussed today show this to be yet another myth. If this were true, why didn’t the monks allow all of that classical Latin literature to perish? Further, why would the Church have played a central role in the establishment of universities?