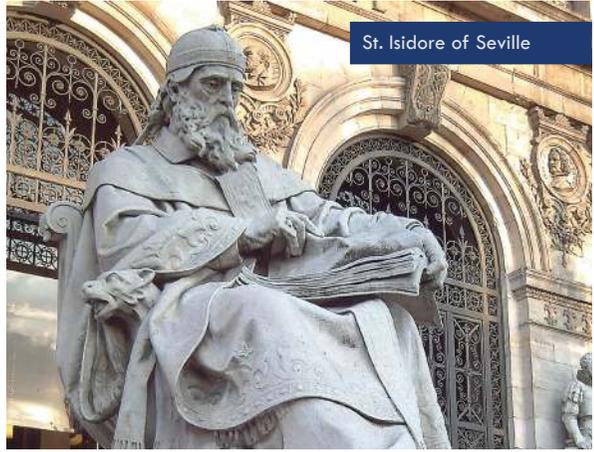


Building Christian Culture amid a Crisis of Learning



St. Isidore of Seville

By Robert Louis Wilken

We live at a time when the wisdom of the past is being discarded, even scorned. What was built up over centuries is now gradually and systematically dismantled, as the humanities are pushed to the margins of higher education. Not only has the educational system failed to cultivate the arts of correct speech and precise writing; there is also a palpable loss of faith in our civilization and its achievements. As society becomes more secular, the retrieval, cultivation, and renewal of our cultural inheritance is an urgent task for Christians today. Facing this crisis, we can do no better than to look to the early centuries of the Church. There we find figures who helped to build Christian culture by preserving, renewing, and perpetuating the arts of language and liberal learning.

Although the early Church's great theologians and philosophers, such as St. Augustine of Hippo, have won the most lasting fame,

About the Author



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some of the most enduring contributions to Christian life have come from scholars who worked in the humble but essential

disciplines of grammar and rhetoric. Among such thinkers, no one deserves greater recognition today than St. Isidore of Seville, a Spanish bishop in the seventh century. Without his vision the Church and society would have lacked the tools to make the transition from the ancient to the medieval world. The example of Isidore and of other early Christian scholars shows the vital role that language and the liberal arts have played in the building of Christendom.

Preserving Faith through Grammar

Isidore—one of the thirty-six Catholic saints to be honored as a Doctor of the Church—was born in Cartagena in the southeastern part of Spain. As war ravaged his native region, his family moved to Seville, where his brother Leander was bishop. There Isidore was educated at an episcopal school under his brother's tutelage. When Isidore later became bishop himself, he took a particular interest in liturgy and canon law. Yet in his writings, he devoted himself not only to ecclesiastical and doctrinal matters, but also to the liberal arts, to history, and to the correct use of Latin. His writings helped lay the foundation of liberal education in medieval Western culture.

In Isidore's time, after the fall of the Roman Empire in the West, the cultural inheritance of the ancient world was being forgotten. Two centuries earlier, when Augustine, Ambrose, and Jerome were writing, Christians were the beneficiaries of an educational system that had been in place for hundreds of years. When Augustine wrote his treatise, *On Instruction in Christian Faith*, an essay on interpreting and expounding Christian teaching, he could assume that his readers knew Latin grammar and the standard rhetorical techniques. But a hundred years later, such knowledge could no longer be taken for granted. Few cities could meet the expense of maintaining schools and paying teachers. In response to this cultural decline,

a number of distinguished educators emerged in the Church. Their task was not, as Augustine's had been, to transform what had been received in light of Christian truth, but to preserve and transmit what was being forgotten.

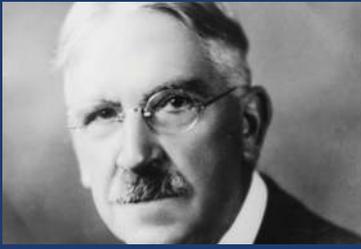
The work that best represents Isidore's intellectual contribution is called *Etymologies*, an encyclopedia in twenty books that provides information on the seven liberal arts as well as geography, language, ancient literature, architecture, scripture, and theology. Isidore's aim was to summarize all the branches of knowledge by drawing on the deep reservoir of classical learning in the writings of Roman authors such as Cicero, the statesman; Virgil, the epic poet; Plautus, the playwright; Livy, the historian; and many others of equal distinction.

Isidore was engaged in an enterprise unlike the movement of "cultural literacy," promoted by University of Virginia English professor E. D. Hirsch. Like Isidore, Hirsch sought to compile a common body of cultural knowledge that should be known by any educated person. Hirsch was opposed to pragmatist educator John Dewey's emphasis on experiential learning, as well as to the views of many of his colleagues in American universities who put "critical thinking" in opposition to cultural content.

Isidore's own work came at a pivotal moment in an ongoing effort to guard classical and Christian learning from oblivion. His brother Leander had contributed to this effort by building up the episcopal library in Seville. When Isidore became bishop, he not only continued to add volumes to the collection; he also built a scriptorium, a writing room for copying manuscripts, to make fresh copies of classical writings.

In these endeavors, however, Isidore's importance is not owing to his originality; for he followed the example of an older

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John Dewey (above) emphasized experiential learning that replaced content with critical thinking. But according to E. D. Hirsch, effective thinking is best learned through knowledge of an inherited cultural tradition.

contemporary, Cassiodorus, who had served at the court of the Ostrogothic kings of Italy. When he was seventy years old, Cassiodorus returned to his home in southern Italy and founded a monastery. There he moved his personal library and gathered a company of scholars to make copies of the Scriptures and the classics of Latin literature, to translate Greek works, and to write a book entitled *Institutes of Divine and Secular Letters*, a compendium of Christian and pagan learning. His ideal was a Christian school in which the study of sacred literature and the liberal arts would complement one another.

The intellectual agenda of Cassiodorus, like that of Isidore, was markedly different from that of Augustine, Ambrose, or Jerome. Its chief purpose was to provide readers with basic information. So Cassiodorus begins by listing the books of the Bible, their order and division, how they are to be interpreted, and brief comments on Christian teachers such as Cyprian, Hilary, Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine, the great Latin writers of Christian antiquity. But then one comes upon a chapter entitled “On Scribes and the Remembering of Correct Spelling.” Christian teachers now assumed responsibility for managing the mechanisms of the Latin language. Cassiodorus knew how essential it was to speak and write Latin correctly if Christian faith was to be handed on in its fullness, not in the shriveled form that existed in

his own time.

In light of Cassiodorus’s labors, it is not surprising to discover that Isidore also gave a prominent place to grammar, a place it would continue to hold among medieval Christians for centuries. In the *Paradiso* Dante calls grammar “la prim’arte,” the art that comes first. In the *Etymologies*, Isidore devotes fifty-eight pages to grammar, whereas rhetoric receives only ten, dialectic twenty-one, arithmetic ten, and geometry eight. In the passages on grammar, Isidore discusses the eight parts of speech, illustrating the meaning of technical terms with examples from classical Latin writers. He explains the meaning of analogy as a “comparison of similar things,” as when “something doubtful is compared to a similar thing that is not doubtful.” He explains the usefulness of etymology: “If you know the origin of a word, you more quickly understand its force.” He analyzes figures of speech such as metonymy, explaining something by an attribute (“win laurels” instead of “fame”); synecdoche, using a part for the whole (“admission one dollar per head,” rather than “per person”); litotes, something affirmed by the negative of the contrary (“not few” instead of “many”); and the like. In places the *Etymologies* reads like Fowler’s *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, a book in which one can learn to use, for example, *allude* and *allusion*, *continuously* and *continually*, and many other words correctly.

But grammar is not simply a matter of knowing which case goes with which preposition or when to use the subjunctive mood. Grammar, according to Isidore, is “the science of correct speech”: the study of the features of language and the rules that govern the relation of words and concepts. Grammar teaches students to make clear distinctions and to use words precisely, and in doing so encourages clear and cogent thinking. In turn these skills lend solidity, authority, and elegance to writing.

Without grammar, moreover, there could be no transmission of the text of the Scriptures or of the classics of pagan antiquity and no understanding of their content. For Isidore, culture meant not only the Bible and the writings of the Church Fathers, but also literature and history. Significantly, his library was inscribed with the words: “Sunt hic plura sacra, sunt mundialia plura” (there are many things here dealing with sacred matters, and many with secular matters). Sacred and secular books stand side by side.

Evangelizing the East through Alphabets

Christianity is a tradition of learning as well as of faith. Writers like Isidore and Cassiodorus received and preserved a tradition of Christian learning that extends back to an even earlier date. A Christian library was established in the city of Caesarea on the coast of Palestine in the third century. Begun during the lifetime of Origen, the first outstanding biblical scholar, it was expanded after his death by the gift of a wealthy patron who cherished Origen’s writings. Over time it became a large collection of pagan, Jewish, and Christian writings, and a scholarly center for the copying of books. One of the beneficiaries of the library was Jerome, who lived in Palestine at the end of the fourth century. Jerome was unusual in the early Church in that he knew Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. By drawing on the library in Caesarea, he bequeathed to later generations the idea of “trilingual scholarship” that lives on to this day among learned Christians.

Isidore thus inherited a keen awareness that preserving the right use of language was integral to preserving both sacred and secular learning. His language was Latin, which in the West had become the language of learning and law, of civil administration and royal decrees, and of

the Church’s principal rituals. And it was the Latin cultural tradition that Isidore labored to perpetuate. But Latin is only one among many different Christian languages.

As the example of Isidore shows the close relation of language, learning, and faith in the Latin West, so a similar interplay emerges in the eastern expansion of Christendom. In the early centuries of the Church, the three most important languages were Latin, Greek, and Syriac (the language of Christians in the Middle East), each of which had a long literary tradition. But when Christian missionaries arrived in some parts of the world, native languages lacked alphabets and written texts. Christian faith, however, requires books, so one of the first tasks of missionaries was to create an alphabet and provide grammars and other aids so the new language could be written down and read.

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Such was the case in Armenia, an ancient land in a mountainous region west of the Caspian Sea. In contrast to the urban culture of the Roman Empire with its rich literary traditions, Armenia was largely rural and its literature made up of heroic oral epics. If Christianity was to put down deep roots among the Armenian people and create an Armenian Christian culture, a written language was essential. But because there was no Armenian script, the Scriptures, liturgical texts, and lives of the martyrs and saints could not be written down. In Armenia the language of the liturgy and of the Scriptures was Syriac or Greek, neither of which the people could understand.

The lack of a written language was felt most keenly by an extraordinary fifth-century Armenian named Mashtots. Learned in Greek, Syriac, and Persian, he eventually became involved in a project to produce an Armenian alphabet. After two years working unsuccessfully with a

group of students to capture this language in writing, Mashtots devised new letters while caught up in ecstatic prayer – so Armenian tradition has it. With the help of a calligrapher and two students, he then began to translate the Scriptures into Armenian.

The creation of an Armenian alphabet made it possible for Armenian Christians to read the Scriptures and to celebrate the liturgy in their own language. Over time scholars produced commentaries on the Bible, translated the lives of the saints, and eventually wrote original works in Armenian, such as those of tenth-century mystical theologian St. Gregory of Narek, recently named a Doctor of the Church.

Besides Mashtots, the most famous Christian linguists in the East were two brothers, Cyril and Methodius, the apostles to the Slavs. Born into a Greek-speaking family in Thessalonica in the early ninth century, the two boys received a thorough education in grammar, rhetoric, dialectic, philosophy, geometry, and mathematics. At the time there were many Slavs living in Thessalonica, and the boys also learned the Slavic tongue, which had never been written down. On reaching maturity they became monks, and the Byzantine emperor eventually sent them to the Slavic-speaking peoples living north of Greece in the Balkans.

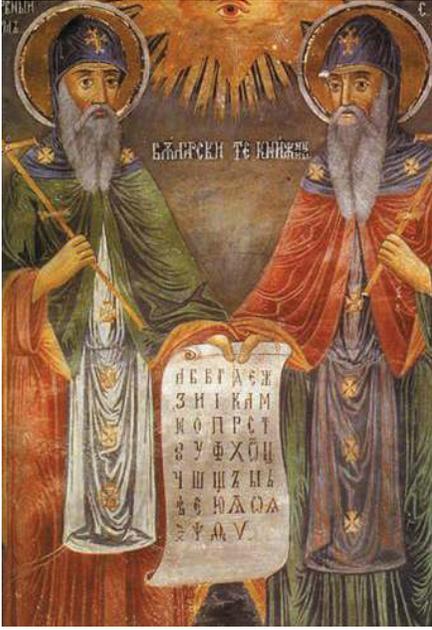
Earlier missionaries had worked on a Slavic alphabet with little success, and Cyril became interested in this effort. Before leaving on the mission to the Slavs, he created what is known as the Glagolitic script, an original and distinctive alphabet able to express Slavic sounds accurately. By any measure Cyril was a linguist of the first order and a pioneer in the development of the Slavic languages, but his Glagolitic script did not take hold. Others had the idea to work with Greek letters and to invent a number of new letters suited to the peculiarities of the Slavic tongue. Because of its simplicity

and familiarity to Greek speakers, this alphabet quickly caught on and was eventually adopted by the Slavic peoples living in Bulgaria, Serbia, and among the Rus in Kiev and along the great rivers emptying into the Black Sea. Though the Greek-based Slavic alphabet was the work of disciples of Methodius, it came to be known as the Cyrillic script and is used to this day in many Slavic-speaking countries.

The creation of a new alphabet is an extraordinary intellectual accomplishment. William Friedman, one of the great cryptographers of the twentieth century, once wrote: “The greatest and the most powerful instrument or weapon ever forged or improved by man . . . is the weapon of literacy . . . and the most important invention, the one that made the weapon of literacy practical, was the invention of the alphabet.” Though the aim of Cyril and Methodius was to make available the Scriptures and the liturgy in the Slavic language, they were engaged in a cultural as well as a religious enterprise. The conversion of the Slavs inaugurated a new era in the history of Christianity. A vast new territory, larger than the Byzantine Empire itself, was now poised to build a new Christian civilization distinct from that of the Latin West and that of the Middle East.

A shining example of the cultural significance of these two Christian saints is an icon painted at the Troyan monastery in Bulgaria in the nineteenth century. The artist, Zahari Zograf, portrayed the two missionaries facing front, garbed in liturgical vestments, holding simple wooden crosses, one in the right hand, the other in the left. With their other hands Cyril and Methodius hold a large page of a manuscript on which are written Slavic letters. At first one might think the inscription was a biblical text, but on closer examination one realizes that the letters are simply the Slavic ABC’s. Clearly Zograf had done more than paint an icon

of two Christian saints. He had created an allegory on the relation between Christianity and Slavic culture: without the alphabet, Christianity would have been a passing moment in the history of the Slavic peoples.



Forging a Vibrant Christian Culture Today

Christianity is a culture-forming religion, and language is an instrument of culture. The beliefs, sentiments, and feelings of Christians are carried by words, images, and stories formed by the Scriptures. But language is primary. For words have the miraculous power to stir the imagination and give form to Christian beliefs and feeling—which brings us back to Isidore. For he recognized that his generation had received a deposit from classical antiquity, the Scriptures, and early Christian tradition, and his vocation was to hand it on, fashion it anew, and make it accessible to those who would come later.

Civilization is the work of many centuries. It is not nature’s doing; it was created and built, one brick on another, by human beings over many generations. But it is a fragile thing and can be dismantled piece by piece. Without constant vigilance, it can be destroyed. Christians have a large investment in the survival of the humanistic traditions of our civilization. If our Western culture is to survive, adapt, and flourish, Christians must take up this work. The society at large is not neutral. Once secular humanism was an ally, but that day is long past. Today the mantle falls on educated Christians.

Culture is a living thing. It is not a genteel legacy to be admired; it is something to be contested, adapted, revised, and renewed, not simply held in high regard. As Christians our task is not only to receive and hand on, but to engage anew; to criticize reverently; and, building on what has been given, forge a vibrant Christian culture unimagined in earlier times. Only in that spirit can we be faithful to Christ and to Christians who have gone before us. Long before a Christian culture had been formed, St. Paul put it best in his letter to the Philippians: “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think on these things.” 

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