



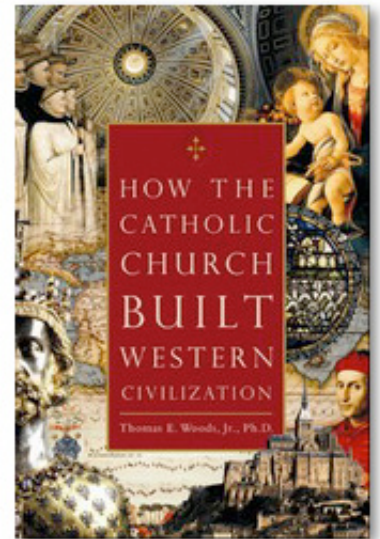
## What We Owe the Monks

THOMAS E. WOODS, JR.

**When Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger took the name Benedict XVI in late April, observers immediately speculated as to what it meant. Papal names often carry great significance.**

The name John Paul, for example, indicated a profound sympathy with the pontificates of John XXIII and Paul VI, the popes of Vatican II. Although Benedict XVI has pointed to his desire to carry on the legacy of Pope Benedict XV (1914-22) as a primary reason behind the name, his choice of Benedict naturally calls to mind St. Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-547), by far the most important figure in the history of Western monasticism. Some have said that just as St. Benedict and his monks rescued Europe during a time of general collapse, Pope Benedict hopes to rejuvenate a Europe adrift from its moorings, overcome by relativism, and unwilling even to reproduce itself.

Although many people know that St. Benedict's monks were responsible for preserving much of the literature of the ancient world, that is where their knowledge of the subject ends. But the more familiar we are with the monastic tradition and its essential if largely unknown contributions to the West, the easier it is to understand why St. Benedict has vied with Charlemagne for the title of Father of Europe.



**Agriculture.** Although it is in scholarly and cultural pursuits where most educated people look to the medieval monasteries for their contribution and influence, we can hardly overlook the monks' important cultivation of what might be called the practical arts. Manual labor played a central role in the monastic life. Although the *Rule of St. Benedict* (c. 529) was known for its moderation and its aversion to exaggerated penances, we often find the monks freely embracing work that was difficult and unattractive, since for them such tasks were channels of grace and opportunities for mortification of the flesh. This is certainly true when it comes to the clearing and reclaiming of land. A swamp was utterly without value, and was only a source of pestilence. But the monks thrived in such locations, and embraced the challenges that came with them. Before long, they managed to dike and drain the swamp. Soon, what had once been a source of disease and filth became fertile agricultural land.

This contribution has not gone entirely unnoticed. "We owe the agricultural restoration of a great part of Europe to the monks," observes one expert. "Wherever they came," adds another, "they converted the wilderness into a cultivated country; they pursued the breeding of cattle and agriculture, labored with their own hands, drained morasses, and cleared away forests. By them Germany was rendered a fruitful country." Still another records that "every Benedictine monastery was an agricultural college for the whole region in which it was located."

Montalembert, the great nineteenth-century historian of the monks,

likewise paid tribute to their great agricultural work. "It is impossible to forget," he wrote, "the use they made of so many vast districts (holding as they did one-fifth of all the land in England), uncultivated and uninhabited, covered with forests or surrounded by marshes." Although they cleared forests that stood in the way of human habitation and use, the monks were also careful to plant trees and conserve forests when possible.

Wherever they went, the monks introduced crops, or industries, or production methods with which the people had not previously been familiar. Here they would introduce the rearing of cattle and horses, there the brewing of beer or the raising of bees or fruit. In Sweden the corn trade owed its existence to the monks; in Parma it was cheese making, in Ireland salmon fisheries — and, in a great many places, the finest vineyards. They stored up the waters from springs, that they might distribute them in times of drought. In Lombardy it was the monks from whom the peasants learned irrigation. The monks have also been credited with being the first to work toward improving the breeds of cattle, rather than leaving the process to chance.

The monks also pioneered in the production of wine, which they used both for the celebration of Mass as well as for ordinary consumption, which the Rule of St. Benedict permitted. In addition, the discovery of champagne can be traced to Dom Perignon of St. Peter's Abbey, Hautvilliers-on-the-Marne. He was appointed cellarer of the abbey in 1688, and developed champagne over the course of experimenting with blending wines. The fundamental principles that he established continue to govern the manufacture of champagne even today.

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**Technology**The Cistercians, a reform-minded Benedictine order established at Cîteaux in 1098, are especially well known for their technological sophistication. Thanks to the great network of communication that existed between the various monasteries, technological information was able to spread rapidly. The Cistercian monastery of Clairvaux in France leaves us a twelfth-century report about its use of waterpower that reveals the surprising extent to which machinery had become central to European life. The world of classical antiquity had not adopted mechanization for industrial use on any considerable scale, but the medieval world did so on an enormous scale, a fact symbolized and reflected in the Cistercians' use of waterpower. The Cistercian monastic community generally ran its own factory. The monks used waterpower for crushing wheat, sieving flour, fulling cloth, and tanning. And as Professor Jean Gimpel points out in [The Medieval Machine](#), this twelfth-century report could have been written 742 times, since that was the number of Cistercian monasteries in Europe in the twelfth century and the same level of technological achievement could have been observed in practically all of them.

The Cistercians were also known for their skill in metallurgy. Although they needed iron for their own use, Cistercian monasteries would come in time to offer their surplus for sale; in fact, from the mid-thirteenth through the seventeenth century the Cistercians were the leading iron producers of the Champagne region of France. Ever eager to increase the efficiency of their monasteries, the Cistercians

used the slag from their furnaces as fertilizer, thanks to its concentration of phosphates.

No wonder the monks have been called "the skillful and unpaid technical advisers of the third world of their times — that is to say, Europe after the invasion of the barbarians." A French scholar writes:

In effect, whether it be the mining of salt, lead, iron, alum, or gypsum, or metallurgy, quarrying marble, running cutler's shops and glassworks, or forging metal plates, also known as firebacks, there was no activity at all in which the monks did not display creativity and a fertile spirit of research. Utilizing their labor force, they instructed and trained it to perfection. Monastic know-how [would] spread throughout Europe.

The extent of monastic skills and technological cleverness is still being discovered. In the late 1990s, University of Bradford archeometallurgist Gerry McDonnell found evidence near Rievaulx Abbey in North Yorkshire, England — one of the monasteries that King Henry VIII ordered closed in the 1530s as part of his confiscation of Church properties — of a degree of technological sophistication that pointed ahead to the great machines of the eighteenth-century Industrial Revolution. In exploring the debris of Rievaulx and Laskill (an outstation about four miles from the monastery), McDonnell expected to find, based on the documentary evidence he had consulted, that the monks had built a furnace to extract iron from ore. And he did.

The typical such furnace of the sixteenth century had advanced relatively little over its ancient counterpart, and was inefficient by modern standards. The slag, or byproduct, of these relatively primitive furnaces contained a substantial concentration of iron, since they could not reach high enough temperatures to extract all of the iron from the ore. The slag that McDonnell discovered at Laskill, however, was low in iron content, similar to slag produced by a modern blast furnace.

McDonnell believes that the monks were on the verge of building dedicated furnaces for the large-scale production of cast iron — perhaps the key ingredient that ushered in the industrial age — and that the furnace at Laskill had been a prototype of such a furnace. "One of the key things is that the Cistercians had a regular meeting of abbots every year and they had the means of sharing technological advances across Europe," he said. "The break-up of the monasteries broke up this network of technology transfer." The monks "had the potential to move to blast furnaces that produced nothing but cast iron. They were poised to do it on a large scale, but by breaking up the virtual monopoly, Henry VIII effectively broke up that potential."



**Charitable work.** Another of the glories of the monastic tradition was the monks' attention to charitable activities, a subject worthy of lengthy treatment in itself. Here we may note simply that Benedict's *Rule* called for the monastery to dispense alms and hospitality to the extent that its means permitted. "All guests who come shall be received as though they were Christ," it said. Monasteries served as gratuitous inns, providing a safe and peaceful resting place for foreign travelers, pilgrims, and the poor. An old historian of the Norman Abbey of Bec wrote: "Let them ask Spaniards or Burgundians, or any foreigners

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whatever, how they have been received at Bec. They will answer that the door of the monastery is always open to all, and that its bread is free to the whole world."

In some cases the monks were even known to make efforts to track down poor souls who, lost or alone after dark, found themselves in need of emergency shelter. At Aubrac, for example, where in the late sixteenth century a monastic hospital had been established amid the mountains of the Rouergue, there rang a special bell every night in order to call to any wandering traveler, or to anyone overtaken by the intimidating forest darkness. The people dubbed it "the bell of the wanderers."

In a similar vein, it was not unusual for monks living near the sea to establish contrivances for warning sailors of perilous obstacles or for nearby monasteries to make provision for shipwrecked men in need of lodging. It has been said that the city of Copenhagen owes its origin to a monastery established by its founder, Bishop Absalon, which catered to the needs of the shipwrecked. In Scotland, at Arbroath, the abbots fixed a floating bell on a notoriously treacherous rock on the Forfarshire coast. Depending on the tide the rock may be scarcely visible at all, and many a sailor had been frightened at the prospect of striking it. The waves caused the bell to sound, thereby warning sailors of danger ahead. To this day the rock is known as "Bell Rock." Such examples constituted only a small part of the concern that the monasteries showed for the people who lived in their environs; the monks also contributed to the building or repair of bridges, roads, and other such features of the medieval infrastructure.

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**Preserving and appreciating the classical tradition.** The monastic contribution with which many people are familiar involves the copying of manuscripts, both sacred and profane. This task, and those who carried it out, were accorded special honor. A Carthusian prior wrote, "Diligently labor at this work, this ought to be the special work of enclosed Carthusians... This work in a certain sense is an immortal work, if one may say it, not passing away, but ever remaining; a work, so to speak, that is not a work; a work which above all others is most proper for educated religious men."

The monks appreciated the classical inheritance far more than modern students realize. Describing the holdings at his library at York, the great Alcuin (c. 735-804) — the polyglot who worked closely with Charlemagne in restoring study and scholarship in west-central Europe — mentioned works by Aristotle, Cicero, Lucan, Pliny, Statius, Trogus Pompeius, and Virgil. In his correspondence he quotes still other classical authors, including Ovid, Horace, and Terence. Alcuin was far from alone in his familiarity with and appreciation for the ancient writers. Lupus (c. 805-862), the abbot of Ferrieres, can be found quoting Cicero, Horace, Martial, Suetonius, and Virgil. Abbo of Fleury (c. 950-1004), who served as abbot of the monastery of Fleury, demonstrates particular familiarity with Horace, Sallust, Terence, and Virgil. Desiderius, described as the greatest of the abbots of Monte Cassino after Benedict himself, and who became Pope (Blessed) Victor III in 1086, specifically oversaw the transcription of Horace and Seneca, as well as Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* and Ovid's *Fasti*. His friend Archbishop Alfano, who had also been a monk of Monte Cassino, possessed a similar fluency in the works of the ancient writers, frequently quoting from Apuleius, Aristotle, Cicero, Plato, Varro, and Virgil, and imitating Ovid and Horace in his verse. St. Anselm, while abbot of Bec, commended Virgil and other classical writers to his students, though he wished them to put aside morally objectionable passages.

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logic; he also brought his students to an appreciation of Horace, Juvenal, Lucan, Persius, Terence, Statius, and Virgil. We hear of lectures being delivered on the classical authors at places like St. Alban's and Paderborne. A school exercise composed by St. Hildebert survives to us in which he had pieced together excerpts from Cicero, Horace, Juvenal, Persius, Seneca, Terence, and others; John Henry Cardinal Newman, the nineteenth century's great convert from Anglicanism and an accomplished historian in his own right, suggests that St. Hildebert knew Horace practically by heart.

It was the monastic library and the scriptorium, the room set aside for the copying of texts, to which much of ancient Latin literature owes its transmission to us today, though at times the libraries and schools associated with the great cathedrals would play an important role as well. In the eleventh century, just as a variety of forms of monastic life were poised to eclipse the traditional Benedictine, the mother monastery of the Benedictine tradition, Monte Cassino, enjoyed a sudden revival. It has been called "the most dramatic single event in the history of Latin scholarship in the eleventh century." In addition to an outpouring of artistic and intellectual endeavor, Monte Cassino also displayed something of a classical revival, as a new interest in ancient texts emerged:

At one swoop a number of texts were recovered which might otherwise have been lost for ever; to this one monastery in this one period we owe the preservation of the later *Annals* and *Histories* of Tacitus (Plate XIV), the *Golden Ass* of Apuleius, the *Dialogues* of Seneca, Varro's *De lingua latina*, Frontinus' *De aquis*, and thirty-odd lines of Juvenal's sixth satire that are not to be found in any other manuscript.

**Education. Although the extent of the practice varied over the centuries, there can be no question that instruction was imparted in the monasteries, and not simply to future monks. St. John Chrysostom tells us that already in his day it was customary for people in Antioch to send their sons to be educated by the monks. St. Benedict himself personally instructed the sons of Roman nobles. St. Boniface established a school in every monastery he founded in Germany, and in England St. Augustine (of Canterbury, not St. Augustine of Hippo) and his monks set up schools wherever they went. St. Patrick is given credit for encouraging Irish scholarship, and the Irish monasteries would develop into important centers of learning, dispensing instruction to monks and laymen alike.**

**Most education for those who would not profess monastic vows would take place in other settings, and eventually in the cathedral schools established under Charlemagne. But even if the monasteries' contribution to education had been merely to teach their own how to read and write, that would have been no small accomplishment. When the Mycenaean Greeks suffered a**

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catastrophe (the nature of which is still disputed by scholars) in the twelfth century B.C., the result was three centuries of illiteracy that students of classical antiquity refer to as the Greek Dark Ages. Writing simply disappeared amid the chaos and disorder. The monks' commitment to reading, writing, and education ensured that in their own dark age, when barbarian invasions and the collapse of civilized order portended complete cultural collapse, the same terrible fate that had befallen the Mycenaean Greeks in a similar situation would not be visited upon Europeans.

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But they did much more than simply preserve literacy. Even an unsympathetic scholar could write of the monks, "They not only established the schools, and were the schoolmasters in them, but also laid the foundations for the universities. They were the thinkers and philosophers of the day and shaped the political and religious thought. To them, both collectively and individually, was due the continuity of thought and civilization of the ancient world with the later Middle Ages and with the modern period."

Perhaps Benedict really was the Father of Europe after all.

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*"How the Monks Saved Civilization", chapter three from How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization, is available online [here](#).*

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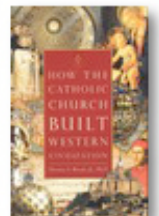
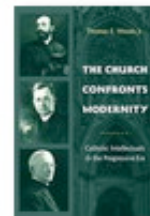
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