



## Who Invented Charity?

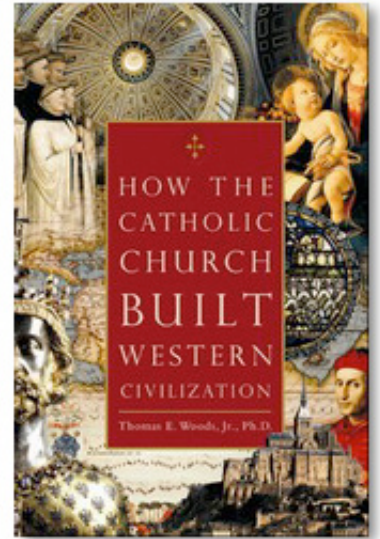
**THOMAS E. WOODS, JR.**

**In the early fourth century, famine and disease struck the army of the Roman emperor Constantine. Pachomius, a pagan soldier in that army, watched in amazement as many of his fellow Romans brought food to the afflicted men and, without discrimination, bestowed help on those in need.**

Curious, Pachomius inquired about these people and found out that they were Christians. What kind of religion was it, he wondered, that could inspire such acts of generosity and humanity? He began to learn about this faith — and before he knew it, was on the road to conversion.

This kind of amazement has attended Catholic charitable work throughout the ages. Even Voltaire, perhaps the most prolific anti-Catholic propagandist of the eighteenth century, found himself in awe at the heroic spirit of self-sacrifice that animated so many of the Church's sons and daughters. "Perhaps there is nothing greater on earth," he said, "than the sacrifice of youth and beauty, often of high birth, made by the gentle sex in order to work in hospitals for the relief of human misery, the sight of which is so revolting to our delicacy. Peoples separated from the Roman religion have imitated but imperfectly so generous a charity."

It would take many large volumes to record the complete history of Catholic charitable work, carried on as it was by individual faithful, parishes, dioceses, monasteries, missionaries, friars, nuns, and lay organizations. Indeed book-length studies have been written just on the charitable work of a particular order of nuns in a particular area of the United States. Chapter 6 of my new book, [\*How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization\*](#), tells the story all too briefly.



Just as important as the sheer volume of Catholic charity was the qualitative difference that separated the Church's charity from what had preceded it. It would be foolish to deny that some noble sentiments were voiced by the great ancient philosophers when it came to philanthropy, or that men of wealth made impressive and substantial voluntary contributions to their communities. The wealthy were expected to finance baths, public buildings, and all manner of public entertainment. Pliny the Younger was far from alone in endowing his home town with a school and a library.

Yet for all the benefactions thus offered, the spirit of giving in the ancient world was in a certain sense deficient when set against that of the Church. Most ancient giving was self-interested rather than purely gratuitous. The buildings that the wealthy financed featured their own names in prominent display. Donors gave what they did either in order to put the recipients in their debt or in order to call attention to themselves and their great liberality. That those in need were to be served with a cheerful heart and provided for without thought of reward or reciprocity was certainly not the governing principle.

Stoicism, an ancient school of thought dating back to around 300 B.C. and still alive and well in the early centuries of the Christian era, is sometimes cited as a pre-Christian line of thought that did indeed recommend doing good to one's fellow man without expecting anything in return. To be sure, the Stoics did teach that the good man was a citizen of the world who enjoyed a spirit of fraternity with all men, and for that reason they may appear to have been messengers of charity, but they also taught the suppression of feeling and emotion as things unbecoming of a man. Man should be utterly unperturbed by outside events, even of the most tragic kind. He must possess a self-mastery so strong as to be able to face the worst catastrophe in a spirit of absolute indifference. And that was the spirit in which the wise man should assist the less fortunate: not one of sharing the grief and sorrow of those he helps or of making an emotional connection with them, but in the disinterested and emotionless spirit of one who is simply discharging his duty. Thus Seneca could write:

The sage will console those who weep, but without weeping with them; he will succor the shipwrecked, give hospitality to the proscribed, and alms to the poor,...restore the son to the mother's tears, save the captive from the arena, and even bury the criminal; but in all his mind and his countenance will be alike untroubled. He will feel no pity. He will succor, he will do good, for he is born to assist his fellows, to labor for the welfare of mankind, and to offer each one his part.... His countenance and his soul will betray no emotion as he looks upon the withered legs, the tattered rags, the bent and emaciated frame of the beggar. But he will help those who are worthy, and, like the gods, his leaning will be towards the wretched.... It is only diseased eyes that grow moist in beholding tears in other eyes....

It is true that, simultaneously with the development of Christianity, some of the harshness of earlier Stoicism began to dissolve. One can hardly read the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, the second-century Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher, without being struck by the degree to which the thought of this noble pagan resembled that of Christianity, and it was for this reason that Saint Justin Martyr could praise later Stoicism. But the ruthless suppression of emotion and feeling that had characterized so much of this school had already taken its toll. It was certainly alien to human nature in its refusal to acknowledge such an important dimension of what it means to be human. We recoil from such examples of Stoicism as Anaxagoras, a man who upon learning of his son's death merely remarked, "I never supposed that I had begotten an immortal." It was only natural that men so insulated from the reality of evil would be slow to alleviate its effects on their fellow men. "Men who refused to recognize pain and sickness as evils," notes one observer, "were scarcely likely to be very eager to relieve them in others."

According to W. E. H. Lecky, who was frequently a harsh critic of the Church, there can be "no question that neither in practice nor in theory, neither in the institutions that were founded nor in the place that was assigned to it in the scale of duties, did charity in antiquity occupy a position at all comparable to that which it has obtained by Christianity. Nearly all relief was a State measure, dictated much more by policy than by benevolence, and the habit of selling young children, the innumerable expositions, the readiness of the poor to enroll themselves as gladiators, and the frequent famines, show how large was the measure of unrelieved distress."

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also love one another. By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another" (John 13:34–35; cf. James 4:11). Saint Paul explains that those who do not belong to the community of the faithful should also be accorded the care and charity of Christians, even if they should be enemies of the faithful (cf. Roman 12: 14–20; Galatians 6:10). Here was a new teaching for the ancient world.

Early in Church history there developed the practice of offering oblations for the poor. The faithful's offerings would be placed on the altar within the context of the Mass. Other forms of giving included the *collecta*, in effect on certain fast days, in which just prior to the reading of the epistle the faithful donated some portion of the fruits of the earth. Financial contributions to the church treasury were also made, and extraordinary collections were solicited from richer members of the faithful. Much evidence exists of early Christians imposing fasts on themselves in order that they might make a sacrificial offering of the money that they would have spent on the food they would otherwise have eaten the day of their fast.

One could go on at great length citing the good works of the early Church, carried out by the lowliest and most simple to the most brilliant and elevated minds of the day. Even the Church Fathers found time to devote themselves to the service of their fellow men. Saint Augustine established a hospice for pilgrims, ransomed slaves, and gave away clothing to the poor. (He warned people not to give him expensive garments, since he would only sell them and give the proceeds to the poor.) Saint John Chrysostom founded a series of hospitals in Constantinople. Saint Cyprian and Saint Ephrem organized relief efforts during times of plague and famine.



The early Church also institutionalized the care of widows and orphans, and saw after the needs of the sick. The latter concern showed itself with particular drama during epidemics. During the pestilences that struck Carthage and Alexandria, the Christians earned respect and admiration for the bravery with which they consoled the dying and buried the dead, at a time when the pagans abandoned even their friends to their terrible fate. In the north African city of Carthage, the third-century bishop and Church Father Saint Cyprian rebuked the pagan population for not helping victims of the plague, preferring instead to plunder them: "No compassion is shown by you to the sick, only covetousness and plunder open their jaws over the dead; they who are too fearful for the work of mercy, are bold for guilty profits. They who shun to bury the dead, are greedy for what they have left behind them." Saint Cyprian summoned followers of Christ to action, calling on them to nurse the sick and bury the dead. Recall that this was still the age of intermittent persecution of Christians, so the great bishop was asking his followers to help the very people who had at times persecuted them. But, he said, "if we only do good to those who do good to us, what do we more than the heathens and publicans? If we are the children of God, who makes His sun to shine upon good and bad, and sends rain on the just and the unjust, let us prove it by our acts, by blessing those who curse us, and doing good to those who persecute us."

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In the case of Alexandria, which also fell prey to the plague in the third century, the Christian bishop Dionysius recorded that the pagans "thrust aside anyone who began to be sick, and kept aloof even from their dearest friends, and cast the sufferers out upon the public roads half dead, and left them unburied, and treated them with utter contempt when they died." He was able to report, however, that very many Christians "did not spare themselves, but kept by each other, and visited the sick without thought of their own peril, and ministered to them assiduously...drawing upon themselves their neighbors' diseases, and willingly taking over to their own persons the burden of the sufferings of those around them."

Saint Ephrem, a hermit in Edessa, was remembered for his heroism when famine and pestilence struck that unfortunate city. Not only did he coordinate the collection and distribution of alms, but he also established hospitals, cared for the sick, and tended to the dead. When during the reign of Maximius a famine struck Armenia, Christians lent assistance to the poor regardless of religious affiliation. Eusebius, the great fourth-century ecclesiastical historian, tells us that as a result of the Christians' good example many pagans "made inquiries about a religion whose disciples are capable of such disinterested devotion."

No wonder even the Church's opponents — not only Voltaire but also Julian the Apostate and Martin Luther — praised her extraordinary work on behalf of her fellow men.

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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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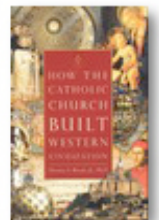
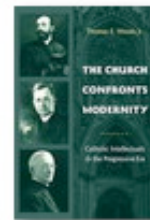
## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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Thomas E. Woods, Jr. holds a bachelor's degree in history from Harvard and his Ph.D. from Columbia. His books include the *New York Times* (and LRC) bestseller [The Politically Incorrect Guide to American History](#), [The Church and the Market: A Catholic Defense of the Free Economy](#), [The Church Confronts Modernity: Catholic Intellectuals and the Progressive Era](#), and the just-released [How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization](#).



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