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THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH

The Fifth Century (cont'd): The Fall of the West and Patrick
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INTRODUCTION

Last week we ended the class with a brief look at Augustine's City of God. You may recall that Augustine wrote this book in serial form over a 13 year period, from the relative safety of Hippo in what is now Tunisia, North Africa, to help his readers, both Christian and pagan alike understand how it could be that Rome, the Eternal City, that marker of civilization which had only adopted Christianity as its sole religion a few decades before, during the reign of Theodosius I, could have fallen. Rome was sacked by Alaric the Goth and his troops in **the year 410**. How could God have allowed this to happen? Augustine wrote that there are two Cities in history, both built on Love: the City of Man, and the City of God, and that they *“always appear mingled with each other; but in spite of this, there is between the two of them an irreconcilable opposition, a war to death. In the end, only the City of God will remain. Meanwhile, human history is filled with kingdoms and nations, all built on the Love of Self, which are no more than passing expressions of the earthly city. All these kingdoms and nations, no matter how powerful, will wither and pass away, until the end of history, when only the City of God will stand.”* (Gonzales, pages 215-216). Augustine finished this work in 426 A.D.

What I did not tell you, is that as Augustine lay dying, in 430, his own beloved city of Hippo where he had taught and preached as priest and bishop for nearly 40 years, was surrounded by 80,000 Vandals. The Vandals were a Germanic Tribe out of northeastern Europe that had fought its way down through Germany and Gaul (France), pushed along by Franks and Saxons into Spain, and at an invitation from rebellious people there, had crossed the straits of Gibraltar into North Africa where they had over run everything in their path. Now as he lay dying, they were negotiating the surrender of Hippo after a 14 month siege. Shortly after his death in the summer of 430, the Vandals and their king Geiseric took possession of it, looted and burned it. Only Augustine's Library and Cathedral were untouched. They made Hippo the capital of the Vandal kingdom until the capture of Carthage nine years later in 439. North Africa remained in Vandal hands, as a Vandal Kingdom for a hundred years until Justinian and the Byzantines re-captured north Africa in 534. Traces of Vandal blood remain in North Africa to this day in the many blue eyed people we find there, among Algerians, Tunisians, and Kabyles.

BARBARIAN INVASIONS AND THE FALL OF ROME AND THE WEST

This invasion of the Vandals, of course, was part of a much larger movement of Germanic peoples that included the Franks, the Saxons, the Visigoths, the Ostrogoths, the Huns, the Alemans, Alans, Suevi, Burgundians, the Lombards and various others. It was a flood that swept through Gaul, Spain, into the British Isles, across northern Africa, across the Baltics, and down through the tip of Italy. The Romans had kept these peoples at bay for centuries to the North and to the East through heavy fortifications along the Rhine and the Danube where

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legions were stationed throughout the year. At one time Rome had attempted to pacify these people north and east of the Rhine, crossing the Rhine and establishing military camps; but they were soundly beaten there during the reign of Caesar Augustus at the Battle of Teutoburg Forest in the year 9 A.D. They returned to fight and defeat various tribes, but ultimately decided that the cost was too great to pacify the area between the Rhine and the Elbe, and that the most natural borders to the empire would be the Rhine and the Danube. So from then on, their efforts were mainly attempts to keep Germanic tribes out of the Empire across the rivers and to defeat invading armies. But this was not to last forever.

406 A.D. On New Year's Eve of the year 406 A.D. the Rhine froze over, and German barbarian tribes, the Vandals, Alans, and Suevi, poured over the river, overwhelming the Roman forts and soldiers, and devastating the cities of northern Gaul. The Roman legions were withdrawn from the Rhine and brought home to Rome to protect it against the Visigoths who were moving west and south into Italy from the Balkans. Vast libraries were destroyed. Learning was all but wiped out in Gaul and northern Italy.

410: On August 24, Alaric and his Visigoths, another Germanic tribe, sacked Rome. The last of the Roman legions left Britain and were withdrawn first to Gaul, and then to Rome itself. Gradually, Rome assimilated these warriors as mercenaries into their armies, and the legions themselves became predominantly German Visigoths and Ostrogoths. These fought against the Huns, another barbarian tribe originating from the plains of Central Asia. The Huns were known as the scourge of the Empire, burning and devastating as they came, especially the Balkan peninsula and threatening Constantinople itself on several occasions.

451: In 451 Attila was finally defeated at Chalons-sur-Marne by allied Roman, Frank, Burgundian, and Visigothic forces. In 452, threatening to invade Italy south of the Po, a delegation headed by Pope Leo the Great, Bishop of Rome convinced them to turn back. Attila died a year later.

455: Then, in 455, the same tribe that had sacked and burned Latin North Africa, the Vandals, crossed the Mediterranean and plundered Rome once again.

476: Twenty years after that, another German, Odacer, conquered Rome, only to be conquered in turn by Theodoric, a Visigoth who proclaimed himself king. The vast Roman West had ceased to be an empire and become instead a patchwork of kingdoms ruled over by various Germanic tribes. Most of these tribes were Arians, having been converted through the work of Ulfilas. And though some of them, particularly those in Italy and Gaul were relatively lenient with Nicene Christians, the Vandals of North Africa persecuted the Church there unrelentingly, until finally, a hundred years later, the Byzantines re-conquered North Africa and held on there till the coming of Islam in 698.

In the midst of all the devastation and confusion one major force held its ground, at least in Rome itself. The Bishop of Rome had huge moral prestige. In those countries devastated by the Germans, the Church had prestige as well. When governors of towns were killed, the bishops

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stepped in to fill the gap, organizing their parishes and providing relief for the poor. But their lands were now over-run by un-evangelized barbarians.

As time went on, the Church's task became, more than ever before, the re-evangelization of the western world. But God, as we shall see, was not dependent upon Rome. He never ceases to work, even in the midst of enormous devastation and catastrophe. In the waning years of the 5th century, He brought a small Germanic kingdom into his fold through the efforts of a Christian wife. The King was Clovis the Frank. The year was 496. Clovis, who was the first Louis, told his wife Clothilde who was a devout Christian and who gave unceasingly to the poor, that he would convert if God gave him victory the next day in battle. God did, and so Clovis, along with 3000 of his warriors were baptized on Christmas day 496. This was an event which was to have profound consequences. Clovis shortly thereafter defeated the Burgundian tribes and carved out a nice little kingdom for himself around what is now Paris and southern Germany. If the Franks had not converted, it is like that, when the Muslim invaded in the 8th century, the land would not have resisted the temptations of Islam. As it was, Charles Martel held back the Muslim Tide at the Battle of Tours in 732, and another descendant, Charlemagne developed schools and encouraged scholarship, holding the Christian flame alight during the succeeding depredations of the Vikings.

But it is to a more simple man I'd like to turn now, a man through whose piety and learning a world was changed. Here is his story:

PATRICK OF IRELAND: 388-462

In about the year 404, a British boy living in what is now Wales on the west coast of Britain was taken captive by Irish raiders and slavers. He was a young man of about sixteen who had grown up in the wealth and ease of a city where Roman and Celtic customs had grown together into a flourishing British culture. As you'll recall, the theologian Pelagius, one of Augustine's protagonists was from Britain, and London itself was at the time a thriving city. But the boy was from the coastal area on the Irish Sea, and it was to that Celtic land of Ireland that pirates led him and sold him to work as a Shepherd in Slemish County Antrim, near what we now know as Belfast. The young man had been raised as a Christian, and in the six years that followed, suffering hunger, nakedness, isolation, and cold, with no hope of returning home, he turned to Christ in prayer. He wrote later of his experience:

“Tending flocks was my daily work, and I would pray constantly during the daylight hours. The love of God and the fear of Him surrounded me more and more—and faith grew and the Spirit was roused, so that in one day I would say as many as a hundred prayers and after dark nearly as many again, even while I remained in the woods or on the mountain. I would wake and pray before daybreak—through snow, frost, rain—nor was there any sluggishness in me...because then the Spirit within me was ardent.”

After six years of this, he had turned from a well-fed patrician's son, into a holy man, obsessed with Christ. On his last night as a slave, during his sleep, he was awakened by a mysterious

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voice that said to him: “Your hungers are rewarded: you are going home.” He sat up, startled. The voice continued: “Look, your ship is ready.”

The farm where he worked was inland, nowhere near the sea, but he set out, not knowing where he was going, and walked some two hundred miles through territory he had never crossed before until he reached a southeastern inlet where he saw a ship. During the whole trip, no one had followed him or tried to stop him, something virtually unknown among fugitive slaves. He found sailors loading a cargo of Irish hounds for sale on the continent, asked to board, and after initially refusing him, they called him back and he was soon aboard ship. He was free. They crossed the channel and landed in Gaul, that is France, where they began to cross the continent in order to sell the dogs, but for two weeks, to their utter amazement, they could find nothing but devastation. Unbeknown to them, they were witnessing the work of German barbarians and the end of Roman Gaul. The year was 407—a year after the Germans had crossed the Rhine. They began to suffer hunger. So they turned on the boy whom they knew to be a Christian and the captain said to him: “How about it, Christian? You say that your god is great and all-powerful, so why can't you pray for us? We're starving to death, and there's little chance of our ever seeing a living soul.”

The shepherd replied: “From the bottom of your heart turn trustingly to the Lord my God, for nothing is impossible to Him. And today, he will send you food for your journey until you are filled, for he has an abundance everywhere.” the young man's sincerity affected them all, they bowed their heads in prayer to give a try at faith in God, and with that the sound of a stampede of pigs racing down the road toward them attracted their attention. This was not just food, but the best food of all! (Cahill, [How the Irish Saved Civilization](#), pages 104-105).

After a few years the lad returned home where his parents were beside themselves with joy at seeing him, and begged him never to leave home again. But one night he had a vision. It was of a man he had known in Ireland who was holding countless letters, one of which he handed to him that had as a heading: VOX HIBERIONACUM, the voice of the Irish, and suddenly he heard a multitude of voices crying out to him: “We beg you to come and walk among us once more.” Stabbed in the heart, he wrote he was unable to read further, and he woke up. He was unable to get the words out of his mind. The visions increased until a voice spoke within him saying: “He who gave his life for you, He it is who speaks within you.”

Shortly thereafter he left for an island monastery just off the coast of Southern France near Cannes, to receive a monk's education. He was ordained first a deacon, then a priest, then a bishop, and shortly thereafter left for Ireland, the first missionary bishop, that is, the first bishop without a church. The year was 432. He was 45 years old. **His name, of course, was Patrick.**

For the next thirty years Patrick evangelized Ireland, going to the pagus (from which the word Pagan is derived, meaning countryside) establishing bishops throughout northern, central, and eastern Ireland. He kept his bishops close to local kings in order to keep an eye on the most powerful raiders and rustlers and to limit their depredations. He hated slavery, and labored

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against it his whole life. Within his lifetime or soon after his death, the Irish slave trade had come to an end. Other forms of violence were vastly decreased, including murder and inter-tribal warfare.

Class : Please take a look at the Lorica or Breastplate Prayer of St. Patrick. What impresses you here? (this is a re-write. The original would have been in Celtic or Latin, and some believe this prayer actually dates to the 8th century, but must bear some if not many elements of an original.)

Lorica or Breastplate prayer of St. Patrick

**I bind unto myself today
The strong Name of the Trinity,
By invocation of the same,
The Three in One and One in Three.**

**I bind this day to me for ever.
By power of faith, Christ's incarnation;
His baptism in the Jordan river;
His death on Cross for my salvation;
His bursting from the spiced tomb;
His riding up the heavenly way;
His coming at the day of doom;***
I bind unto myself today.

**I bind unto myself the power
Of the great love of the cherubim;
The sweet 'well done' in judgment hour,
The service of the seraphim,
Confessors' faith, Apostles' word,
The Patriarchs' prayers, the Prophets' scrolls,
All good deeds done unto the Lord,
And purity of virgin souls.**

**I bind unto myself today
The virtues of the starlit heaven,
The glorious sun's life-giving ray,
The whiteness of the moon at even,
The flashing of the lightning free,
The whirling wind's tempestuous shocks,
The stable earth, the deep salt sea,
Around the old eternal rocks.**

**I bind unto myself today
The power of God to hold and lead,
His eye to watch, His might to stay,**

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**His ear to hearken to my need,
The wisdom of my God to teach,
His hand to guide, His shield to ward,
The word of God to give me speech,
His heavenly host to be my guard.**

**Against the demon snares of sin,
The vice that gives temptation force,
The natural lusts that war within,
The hostile men that mar my course;
Or few or many, far or nigh,
In every place and in all hours,
Against their fierce hostility,
I bind to me these holy powers.**

**Against all Satan's spells and wiles,
Against false words of heresy,
Against the knowledge that defiles,
Against the heart's idolatry,
Against the wizard's evil craft,
Against the death wound and the burning,
The choking wave and the poisoned shaft,
Protect me, Christ, till Thy returning.**

**Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.**

**I bind unto myself the Name,
The strong Name of the Trinity;
By invocation of the same.
The Three in One, and One in Three,
Of Whom all nature hath creation,
Eternal Father, Spirit, Word:
Praise to the Lord of my salvation,
Salvation is of Christ the Lord.**

This extraordinary work of Patrick of Ireland was one which was completely acculturated, close to the peasantry, compassionate of the poor and unlettered. And yet, the work that Patrick began saved a civilization. Why? Because Patrick loved books and he bequeathed this love to all who followed him; and as a direct result in the decades that followed, monasteries would

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spring up by the dozen that would become a home for refugee monks from across the world, bringing their books with them. There in Ireland, not only the works of the Church Fathers were saved, but the writings of Homer, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and many other Greek and Roman classics. They invented a new script in which to copy these books as well as the scriptures, the Irish half-uncial, and the Irish minuscule, and illuminated their scriptures with illustrations that have rarely if ever been equaled. (See, images, the Book of Kells). From Ireland these monks, carrying books from their belts, like their ancestors had carried heads of their enemies, set out for Scotland, England, and the Continent to re-evangelize a land over which darkness had fallen. But all of that brings us into centuries beyond the scope of our hour today.

SOME DATES

406: On New Year's Eve of the year 406 A.D. the Rhine freezes over, and German barbarian tribes, the Vandals, Alans, and Suevi, pour over the river, overwhelming the Roman forts and soldiers.

410: On August 24, Alaric and his Visigothic warriors sack Rome.

430: Fall of Hippo (Tunisia) to the Vandals

432: Patrick returns to Ireland

439: Fall of Carthage (Tunisia) to the Vandals

451: In 451 Attila is finally defeated at Chalon-sur-Marne by allied Roman, Frank, Burgundian, and Visigothic forces. In 452, he threatens to invade Italy south of the River Po, but is turned back by a delegation headed by Pope Leo the Great.

455: The Vandals, cross the Mediterranean and plunder Rome once again.

462: Patrick dies

476: Another German, Odacer, conquers Rome, only to be conquered in turn by Theodoric, a Visigoth who proclaimed himself king. Visigothic kingdom set up in Italy.

496. Clovis, who was the first Louis, tells his wife Clothilde who was a devout Christian that he would convert if God would give him victory the next day in battle. God does, and Clovis, along with 3000 of his warriors are baptized on Christmas day 496.