Alcuin, Adrian, and The Martyrs

A Triptych of English Catholic Civilization
Stabat Mater Press

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Editor's Preface

There are few peoples in the history of the Church whose relationship with the Catholic Faith has been as complete, as total in its transformation of life, and as violently ruptured as that of the English. In the span of eight centuries, one observes the gradual ascent and sudden fragmentation of a religious identity which had once absorbed the very structure of time, thought, and speech in the land. It is not uncommon or unnecessary to lament the destruction of the monasteries or the sufferings of the martyrs; what is less commonly recalled, however, is the earlier grandeur of a national culture that was, before all else, deeply Roman in dogma, monastic in structure, and Benedictine in its understanding of order.

The present volume collects three historical portraits — that is, Alcuin of York, Pope Adrian IV, and the English recusants of the Elizabethan age — not because they form a continuous narrative, but because their juxtaposition offers the vast and stark range of English Catholic life across the centuries. If read with a due sense of chronology and context, these figures form both a kind of progression and contrast: Alcuin as a man of formation, Adrian as a man of culmination, and the recusants as a Catholic people obliterated. The monk, the pope, and the martyr. Between these three, we catch sight of a Catholic England that once taught, once ruled, and finally bled.

The first of these, Alcuin, has often been borrowed by Continental historians for the purposes of the Carolingian revival, but his roots were English and monastic. His early life at York, under Ælbert, holds the quiet intellectual fidelity that characterized so much of the Northumbrian religious world in the eighth century. His Latin was more than perfunctory — it was foundational. He thought in Roman categories and moved within patristic thought; he prayed in a language already liturgical before it was literary. The man who would advise Charlemagne on questions of education and worship was formed, not in some vague insular piety, but in the Benedictine conviction that lex orandi, lex credendi must precede all reform.

Alcuin's theology was shaped by the understanding that words themselves, when rightly ordered, could participate in the economy of grace. The teaching of grammar was of course preparatory to theology; yet, it was also itself a form of penance, an ascetic ordering of the mind. More than utility, Latin was learned and mastered because it was the tongue in which the psalms resounded, the Councils taught, and the canon of the Mass endured. That this man could become the architect of Charlemagne's intellectual ambitions is evidence of an England in which spiritual formation and intellectual formation had not yet been bifurcated.

It is fitting that Alcuin's world came before the national consciousness of "England" as we now understand it. His loyalties were to the Church first, and then to the Saxon princes who sustained Her. That men like him existed in sufficient number to civilize the Franks is not a minor point; it suggests that the Church in England, already by the eighth century, possessed something of surplus; a fullness of doctrine, language, and liturgical habit strong enough to export. The English were once missionaries to the continent because they had already become thoroughly Roman in form and Benedictine in content.

Three centuries later, that same religious soil produced Nicholas Breakspear, the only Englishman to ascend to the papacy. That he did so as Adrian IV, ruling in an age of consolidation and juridical papal power, is significant. The medieval papacy did not manufacture saints from novelty, nor did it elevate national heroes as a matter of flattery. It was because he fit the role that he was raised to it — an English cleric who had imbibed the discipline of the continent and wielded the Roman ideal of universal order. Adrian was a statesman in the most precise, Roman sense of the term. His Englishness, if it is to be remarked at all, was almost accidental to his office. Yet it is precisely that accident which forces reflection. For there was once a time when an Englishman might become pope without irony, without tension, and without the faint condescension that now haunts Anglo-Roman relations.

Adrian's reign, though short, embodies a particular vision of papal sovereignty that has since become difficult to explain in a world governed by democratic axioms and institutional fragmentation, to say nothing regarding the contemporary debates on ultramontanism. His conflict with Frederick Barbarossa was a question of first principles: is the order of Christendom hierarchical or merely federal? Is the Vicar of Christ to be tolerated as a moral voice or obeyed as a juridical authority? That an Englishman could once answer these questions with clarity and enforce them from the Chair of Peter speaks to a world where the categories of law, power, and grace were not yet unbound from one another.

The third part of this volume is, in some respects, a negation of the first two. Dom Bede Camm's devotional record of the Elizabethan martyrs captures an English world in collapse. At the point in which Dom Camm explores, there is no monastic learning left to speak of; it has been burned, outlawed, or driven underground. There is no

papal dignity accessible to Englishmen; Rome has become, once more, a foreign city. And yet there is in these narratives a residue of both Alcuin and Adrian. The priests who entered England in disguise, who offered Mass in haylofts and cellars, were products of a still-intact intellectual and sacramental tradition. Their Latin was the same, their missals the same, their loyalties unchanged. What had altered was the status of that loyalty — no longer integral to the national life, but punishable by law.

It would be a mistake to view these martyrdoms in purely personal terms. In addition to acts of private devotion, they were entirely public acts of political theology. The Elizabethan regime feared a sacramental priesthood that could challenge its jurisdiction, an altar that could name the throne as disordered. In a large sense, these men were martyred for maintaining a public claim about the nature of grace and the visibility of the Church. That they were hunted is no surprise; that they endured is the genuine mark of continuity.

There is a temptation to read these three figures — the monk, the pope, and the martyr — as symbols, which they are not. They are concrete men, living in very different times, and shaped by local concerns and political contingencies. What unites them are metaphysical and ideological threads — in that, they each participated in a civilization wherein the Faith was structural and wholly integral. It governed liturgy, prayer, and public devotions; grammar, rank, and law; education, food, and work. In a word, fraternal charity. In Alcuin, we see how it ordered the mind; in Adrian, how it ordered rule; in the martyrs, how it endured dissolution.

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What may be said as well is of contrast the English Catholic loss with that of France or Ireland. The French retained their liturgical culture through monarchy and revolution; the Irish, through poverty and cultural cohesion. But the English Catholic loss was marked by internal displacement. It was very much a metaphysical exile. What had once been the heart of the nation became an alien organ, tolerated at best, often suppressed, and finally spiritualized into a private preference. The shift was sociological and ontological. That is to say, that which once ordered all things was now no longer legible to the world it had once formed.

It would be foolish to suggest that English Catholicism perished with the martyrs. But it would be equally foolish to pretend that it emerged unscathed. Ought I say more of the modern condition of English Christianity — its detachment from its own scholastic roots, its ambivalence toward Latin, its divorce from monasticism? The materials presented here are fragments from the former order — those moments when the wonderous British Isles revealed herself as a true daughter of the Church, loyal to the Roman See, educated by Benedictines, and sanctified through suffering.

If there is a unifying lesson in these three lives, it lies in the sheer incompatibility between the world they inhabited and the world which now surrounds their memory. The past unintelligible to the rotted mind of the modern man. It is not that Alcuin's theology is too difficult to grasp or that Adrian's papacy was obscure or that the martyrs' loyalty was is some way misguided — it is that the metaphysical assumptions which gave their lives meaning have been severed from the public imagination altogether. Submerged in the rough waters of Liberalism, the world that once ordered liturgically, temporally, linguistically, and juridically by the Catholic Church, is now without

a shared vocabulary by which to speak of these things, even among so many professing Catholics.

That which once governed kings now governs no village; that which once educated emperors now instructs no child without caveat; that which once sanctified English blood and her Isles is now remembered in passing, or with embarrassment. The rise and ruin depicted in these pages is wholly a dislocation of cultural memory. This new order in which we live have rendered a vast majority of poor souls incapable of understanding, integrally, what came before.

One might object that this is an old lament, and it is. But there is something peculiar in the case of England, which had once baptized its people and the land, had once housed its political theology within magnificent stone cloisters, and had once permitted the seamless passage between altar and throne. The English Catholic experience is neither that of simple endurance nor that of martyrdom alone. It is the experience of having once been the civilization — and then having been amputated from that fact. This makes the modern condition less a matter of minority status and more a matter of metaphysical exile. No revival of Catholic life in England will succeed that does not account for this loss of grammar, this unmooring of intelligibility.

It is not the purpose and aim of the works collected in this volume to set forth a solution. But they do make clear that the older order once existed, and that it was not theoretical. It had flesh, vestments, office, blood. It produced monks who could govern an empire, Englishmen who could govern the Church, and laity who could offer their limbs to be torn on the rack for the sake of sacramental order. That such things are now unimaginable — or else imagined as medieval embellishment — tells us more about ourselves than about them.

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Alcuin

Ethel Mary Wilmot-Buxton

Charlemagne and Alcuin (1830), Jean-Victor Schnetz, Wikicommons

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The Significance of Alcuin

The position of Alcuin as a Catholic thinker is very much more significant than is generally recognised by the casual reader of history. Most people are aware that he kept alight the flickering torch of Roman learning in Gaul; a smaller number know that by his teaching and his writings he also exercised a quite remarkably appreciable effect upon at least the two succeeding centuries and, in a less apparent form, upon a much longer period. Those who are already acquainted with his singularly modest estimate of himself might hesitate to consider him the most important figure of his century; others frankly state that his chief, if not his only claim to celebrity is his close connection with the Emperor Charles the Great. Most English history books dismiss him with brief reference as the English tutor of the sons of Charlemagne; and one has an uneasy suspicion that but for a nationality that reflects a slight ray of glory on a rather submerged era of our history, he would have escaped mention in most of them altogether.

Yet the fact is true that when we get a close combination of a man of action with a man of learning, the interaction of will and intellect that follows is likely to provide some intensely interesting results. The task of Charles at the time at which he was connected with Alcuin was the preservation of the outward unity of Western Europe, sorely threatened by the tribal conquests of the Northern and Central races.

What the Catholic Church had done and was still doing, by means of her unique spiritual organisation, for the soul of Europe, Charles was engaged in doing for the mass of mingled races that formed her unwieldy body, by means of the sword. Force alone could never have accomplished even an outward and hollow form of unity. Mind and will cannot be bent by sheer weight of conquest, nor the powers of the soul harnessed to a victor's chariot. It was here that Alcuin played his part.

On the Hill of Learning, even on its lowest slopes, all minds are free, though all are bound by the chains of intellectual law. It was by pointing the road thither, as well as by helping lame and laggard souls to climb its heights, that Alcuin gave indispensable assistance to Church and Emperor. He succeeded thereby not only in preserving the international oneness of Europe at that particular time, but in creating, or rather re-creating, a system of education that was to prove a strong bond of unity, and a most effective instrument of civilisation through troubled and chaotic ages, long after his own age had passed away.

At a superficial glance, these things are not apparent; and those who are content to think that the chief importance of the task of Alcuin lies in the linking up of the intellectual life of England in the eighth century with that of the Continent, will tell us that that task ended with the era of the sons of Charlemagne. Such a view is impossible in face of the fact that, not only did the system of Alcuin and the textbooks he wrote become part of the common life of educated Europe, at least till the days of the Renaissance, but that a far more intangible thing, the *spirit* of the Frankish schools, of which he was the actual founder, permeated mediaeval Europe and modified her whole intellectual history.

It has been said, indeed, that the history of Charles the Great enters into that of every modern European state, and it is equally true to say that all that was most permanent in his Empire – not his conquests, nor his forced conversions, but the high ideal of mental culture in the midst of a most material world, the ideals of knightly chivalry, of domestic purity, of national well-being, as well as of true doctrine and practice of religion, that belong to his era – was inspired by Alcuin, Father in God, Minister of Education adviser and teacher of the most striking figure of mediaeval Christendom.

Curious indeed was that alliance – that of a gentle, self-disciplined English scholar with a gigantic soldier, full of strong passions and violent impulses, whose undoubted attraction to learning must have been half superstitious in origin that respect for the unknown and the mysterious so strong among the Teutons – who, to the end of his days, could with difficulty tame his sword-hardened hand to the cramping servitude of the pen, who but for those gleams of intuition that opened up a new and wider world, might well have been content with his achievement of "creating an army out of a crowd of men," and of calling into existence the Second Empire of the West.

More curious still is the fact that the part of Alcuin in their joint task of upholding civilisation at a critical epoch, and of laying the foundation of future stability in law and government, education and morality, was played by a man who had no gift of originality, who shrank from the idea of innovations, who expressly disclaimed either wish or intention of tempestuous reform.

There are few more striking examples of the motive-power of the "still small voice" in an age of violence. The crying need of that particular epoch was not innovation, nor originality in thought or action, but a clear call to follow the well-marked paths of doctrine and learning already trodden by the Catholic Church of Christendom for

seven centuries. In an age of disruption, of sudden violent conquests, of the mushroom growth of new nations, the one and only bond of peace and union was loyalty to the authority of the Church and her teaching; and without this even the outward manifestations of civilisation were threatened. And the greatest fatality which could have happened would have been the domination of the new races of that age by a master mind of egotistic fanaticism, a Mohammed who might have drawn all Western Europe after him, posing as the Messenger of God and His Prophet.

Fortunately for Christendom the actual master-mind of the time was content to sink his own personality, and to draw men by the cords of love to the old ways, the well-trod roads of inspired authority and methods of intellectual activity.

And if, to modern readers, the methods of Alcuin seem trivial and timid, it should be remembered that during his immediate period of mind history, the northern and extreme western part of Europe, with which he had to deal, was at the kindergarten level of psychology, a level liable to be broken up easily enough by methods of force and daring originality.

Later on, when the foundations had been firmly laid by his initial efforts, came the need for stronger stuff, which awoke in that same quarter of the world the intellectual cravings of Scholasticism.

One may, however, question whether those cravings would ever have arisen – apart from the need of combating Mohammedanism – had it not been for the quiet work of a schoolmaster genius of the eighth century.

The Moral and Intellectual World of the Eighth Century

Some understanding of the moral and intellectual world of Alcuin's day is, of course, necessary in order to realise his position when he landed in Gaul in the year 782. In a succeeding chapter we will take a brief survey of the history of that remarkable people which was to form the medium through which his influence was to spread throughout Western Christendom.

At this point, however, it is important to remind ourselves of the fact that this young and vigorous Frankish race, though permeated, like all others which had once come into touch with Rome, with the military traditions, the ideals, and in some part at least with the civilisation of the Empire, tended by the force of its strong racial instincts, as well as by its mental alienation from the conquered people of Gaul, to break off into isolation and independence, especially in matters of faith and morals. In those days the one bond that could draw together a shattered Europe, in her darkest period of disruption and fierce tribal animosities, was the faith, the moral influence, and the intellectual culture of the Catholic Church, and the importance therefore of bringing the Franks into close touch with her could hardly be over-estimated.

The strength of that bond, however, depended upon the loyalty, the morality, and also to a very large extent upon the intellectual equipment of the ministers and exponents of her Faith; and just at a

time when a singularly material-minded race, whose religion had for centuries been the sword, had, as it were, swung into the forefront of Christendom, the danger was that an ill-equipped priesthood would be swamped by an altogether illiterate laity, to the moral and spiritual confusion of both. To realise the position of the eighth century in this respect, we must take a rapid glance at the history of the educational world of Europe up to that period, with special reference to Frankland.

From the first the Catholic Church had made the question of education, both religious and secular, in a very real sense her own. From the first she had realised that her ideal must be a reasoned faith arising out of trained and disciplined methods of thought, since doctrines imposed upon ignorant minds are apt to degenerate into meaningless superstitions. The real bone of contention was never the *need* of education, but the kind of educational system that would best meet that need; the result was a veritable Battle of the Books, a battle which, under different aspects, has lasted down to the present day.

For the modern man, accustomed to accept as a matter of course Greek methods of thought as the finest vehicle of literary or scientific expression, it is hard to understand the fierce contest that raged between the pagan world of education in the last centuries of the Empire, and the rapidly growing organisation of the Christian Church. It is impossible to judge the contest by the conditions of today. What one has to keep in mind is the fact that those early centuries saw a constant and absolutely necessary conflict between Christianity and paganism; and every form of literature or philosophy that had a pagan origin was as suspect as the writings, some of them possibly harmless enough, of a modernist of today. Moreover, in dealing with people only just emerging from pagan beliefs, a clear-cut line was as much a necessity as that drawn between a modern "convert" and his previous place of

worship. There must be no playing fast and loose with the old beliefs; they must be rejected once and for all. Later on, when Europe had accepted the Faith, and when paganism, in its old sense, was dead, the Church, as we shall see, turned readily enough to the stores of the classic world, "christened" Aristotle by the hands of Saint Thomas of Aquin, and was among the first to revive the study of Greek literature. But during the first four centuries of the Christian era, although the speech, the civilisation, even a few details of the religious rites of pagan Rome were absorbed and turned by her to the advantage of the Faith, the Church grew steadily more and more antagonistic to the use of pagan literature in her educational system.

To the minds of Tertullian, of Origen, of Jerome, even of Augustine, though he could not altogether condemn his earlier love, classic literature was permeated with evil. "Refrain," cried the voice of Authority, "from all the writings of the heathen. For what hast thou to do with strange discourses, laws, or false prophets, which in truth turn away from the Faith those that are of weak understanding? Dost thou long for poetry? Thou hast the Psalms. Or to explore the origin of things? Thou hast the Book of Genesis."

When this was the opinion of the Christian educators one can scarcely be surprised at the line taken by the Apostate Emperor Julian, who bade them cease to use the works of Homer if they only read him in order to show that his gods were evil spirits, and to leave the schools to pagan teachers and pagan books, requiring them to confine themselves to the Sacred Books of their religion and to the children of their own faith.

This may have been the logical course, but one may be thankful that the Church saw two insuperable obstacles to following it.

In the first place, as Tertullian himself has naively confessed, the pupil was obliged to use the pagan textbook, "since there are no others from which he can learn (*quia aliter discere non potest*)."

In the second, the rapidly developing Church had no mind to have her limits thus circumscribed. Her mission was to the unconverted, and she had no intention of being shut out from the schools. With that remarkable wisdom which had already led her to use so many of the pagan rites and customs in her ceremonial, she decided not to leave the superlative mental training afforded by "grammar" and "rhetoric" to the foe, even if it involved a study of such heathen writers as Cicero, and Horace, and Virgil. As a fifth-century bishop, Sidonius of Lyons, declared, "We must press pagan science and philosophy into the service of the Church, and thus attack the enemies of the Faith with their own weapons."

Already, a century earlier, Saint Augustine had faced the situation, revised the opinions of middle life, and written in his seventy-second year a treatise *On Christian Instruction* which indicates in the clearest way the line he felt should be taken by the Church. "Quisquis bonus verusque Christianus est, Domini sui esse intelligat, ubicumque invenerit veritatem" – let every good and true Christian know that Truth is the truth of his Lord, wherever found. Let the Christian, escaping from the bondage of paganism, spoil the Egyptians. Let him appropriate the "liberal disciplines, well suited to the service of the truth." Let him take the best of the secular culture of the ancient world, and use it in the service of his Faith and to the better understanding of divine truths.

This, then, was the compromise adopted by the early Church. Let us see what its acceptance amounted to.

In the days when the Empire was still a flourishing organisation, "Grammar," the first of the liberal arts taught in her schools, had com-

prised a close and critical acquaintance with the chief Latin writers of the classic age. Gradually, however, as the rage for oratory usurped the place of solid scholarship, grammar had become subservient to "rhetoric" in the schools, and mental training retired before a craze for ingenious forms of speech.

The chief use of the classic writers, in consequence, was as material for memorising long passages, which could be worked up as declamations; a system which naturally cultivated the memory at the expense of the reasoning faculties. Even the art of Composition often became a mere trick – the skillful blending of well-worn phrases and clichés fantastic and unreal as vehicles of thought.

A reformer who would combine enthusiasm for the Faith with zeal for a better system of education was a crying need in that early era; but the Church in her lingering distrust of pagan taints, halfhearted, too, in her condemnation of the classics, failed to produce the man. Many of her foremost men, indeed, favoured more or less openly the empty rhetorical training in which they had themselves been educated. Sidonius confessed the pleasure he experienced from reading Terence, though he half suggests that he regards it as a sin of youth. Saint Hilary of Aries, Felix of Clermont, Saint Remy, all educated in the strictly classic schools set up by Imperial Rome in Southern Gaul, approved of the old system much as a modern public school man of the last generation upholds Euclid and the Eton Latin Grammar against the claims of geometry and the direct method.

The early years of the fifth century, therefore, saw the work of three educational writers who show the result of an attempt to crystallise this rather chaotic system in textbooks which must have exercised a strong influence over the education of their own and succeeding generations, since they became the foundation of those used throughout Europe during the whole mediaeval period.

One of these, Boethius (481-525), became the link between the classic literature of Greece and the mediaeval learner, since he translated, or adapted, versions of Aristotle for use in schools, and thus furnished the standard textbook on logic for one generation of schoolboys after another. He ranks among the last of the pagan philosophers rather than as a Christian writer, though succeeding copyists managed to tinge his works with Christian hues. His book, *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, tells the old myths of Greece and Rome with much grace and charm, and was among those translated by our English Alfred, as being "one of the most necessary for all men to know," for use in his Anglo-Saxon schools. His contemporary, Cassiodorus, was a Roman senator who, in his old age, became a monk, and gave his whole time, apart from his religious duties, to writing a Compendium, designed to cover the whole educational system of that day.

Therein is grammar, adapted from the textbook of the Roman Donatus; rhetoric, based on Cicero; "dialectics," borrowed for the most part from Boethius. These three departments were now definitely labelled as Arts, and became the *Trivium* of the mediaeval world.

He also deals with four *Disciplines* – the *Quadrivium*, comprising arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music, the first three treatises being largely derived from Boethius.

To a century later belongs Isidore, a Spanish bishop of whom Alcuin speaks with admiration rather beyond his deserts, as "lumen Hispaniae."

The *Origines* of Isidore form an encyclopaedia of information on every subject under the sun, much of which is naturally very vague and inaccurate. His account of the seven liberal arts is borrowed wholesale from Cassiodorus, but his book is valuable chiefly as a collection – a kind of anthology – of passages drawn from both classical writers

and the Fathers of the Church, dealing with every department of knowledge.

This scanty store of textbooks represented all of classic lore and Christian comment thereupon that the Church proposed to teach her pupils, as far as the secular State schools were concerned, up to the end of the sixth and during part of the seventh century. Before that time, however, we find a new influence at work, and the gradual disappearance of the secular school from the scene, as far as Gaul was concerned. This new influence came originally from the Eastern Deserts, the dwelling-place of those hermits whose ascetic ideals had made deep impression on the imagination of one Cassian, pupil of Saint Chrysostom and friend of Saint Germanus, the missionary of Gaul.

As the founder of the monastery of Saint Victor at Marseilles, Cassian may claim to have been the founder of monastic discipline in that country as early as the end of the fourth century, and to have pointed out the road travelled by the sons of Saint Benedict in later days. His rule of hard, unremitting toil, the energetic work of his monks as farmers, teachers, students, made powerful appeal to the active instincts of the as yet but half civilised Franks, and the walls of several monasteries began to rise throughout the rapidly extending Frankland. Saint Martin founded his society at Tours and spread his influence throughout the valley of the Loire. Saint Honorat made his island monastery at Lerins the centre of religious life for the valley of the Rhone. So that Southern Gaul, at least, was already familiar with the monastic ideal when Saint Maur introduced the Benedictine rule in the latter years of the sixth century.

Now where a monastery was built or a bishopric founded, there was also a school, monastic or episcopal, in working order; and the respect

shown for these institutions by the ever-advancing Frank assured their stability in a time of great chaos and confusion.

Before the invaders the old state or municipal school founded by Imperial Rome in Gaul had fallen to pieces; sometimes because the city which formerly supported them ceased to do so under the stress of conquest or loss of trade wealth; sometimes because pupils simply ceased to attend them. For the Frank in those days, though he approved and absorbed much of the military organisation of the Empire and was but half a Christian in the early days of his conversion, was yet very much less than half a pagan in the Church's sense of the word, and neither knew nor cared anything for Roman culture, even when filtered through Christian channels. But he recognised and respected the self-denying work of the monks and clergy; and where education survived at all in that era of darkness covered by the fifth and sixth centuries, it was to be found in the school of the monastery or the cathedral.

The character of the education given there can be found in the Rule of Discipline drawn up by Cassian for the monks of the West. Where the Church of an earlier day had compromised in the matter of teaching and reading classic literature, the stern rule of Cassian was explicit.

For the children of the school as for the monks of the choir, there was to be but one aim, one ideal. Study and manual toil alike were to be used as a preparation for the life to come; work for material advantages, and love of learning for its own sake, were to be equally discouraged. As a youth, sitting at the feet of Saint Chrysostom, Cassian himself had soaked his mind in the incomparable literature of Greece. But in other years, in his famous *Collationes* he makes his friend Germanus deplore the memories of the literature which, he said, dragged his soul from heavenly contemplation. Consulting the Abbot Nestorius as to

the remedy, he was drily recommended "to read the Sacred Books with the same ardour that thou once didst those of heathen writers – then shalt thou be freed from their influence."

From this standpoint it naturally came about that the system of education laid down by Cassian's rule was extremely limited in extent. No provision whatever was made for boys who were not destined to become monks. All learnt to read in order to study the Scriptures and to follow the Breviary and Missal, to write that they might copy the Psalter, and to sing that they might do justice to plain chant as interpreted by Saint Ambrose. A modicum of arithmetic was allowed – based upon the calculations determining the dates of Easter and the feasts dependent upon it. Of mental training – the *gymnasia* of Greece – there was little trace. Yet one is bound to confess that the men produced by such a system were those to whom the conquering Teutons looked with awe and deference for their effect of moral force, strong organisation, and social weight. Neither pagan remnant nor Arian heretic, popular as the latter was elsewhere, attracted the new-comers; and when Clovis, finding himself conqueror of Gaul, looked round him for a worthy ally, it was to Saint Remy, the Gaulish bishop, representative of Christian Rome, that he turned.

At that particular time, then, the monastic and cathedral schools of Gaul, by their upholding of a striking, though narrow ideal, fulfilled the particular needs of their own day. The system in itself, however, possessed elements of weakness too marked for long endurance. Neglect of the part played by the intellect in soul development weakened the powers of thought and reasoning; theological learning began to disappear; all but the most far-fetched and fanciful interpretation of the Scriptures ceased; literature and philosophy alike vanished from the schools. It seemed, indeed, as though the old gibe of Julian the Apostate, that when men exchanged the study of the Ancients for

that of the Evangelists, they would descend to the mental level of the slave, was to be fulfilled. Education, in the real sense, no longer existed; instruction on the most narrow and elementary lines took its place. The only scope for originality of any kind survived in the rage for fantastic parallels and curious metaphors by which well-nigh every passage of the Sacred Books was illustrated.

The condition into which the learning of Gaul, once so celebrated, had fallen by the end of the sixth century, is described, vividly enough, though in very bad Latin, by Gregory, Bishop of Tours (544-595), in his *Historia Ecclesiastica Francorum*. Rightly enough, he connects its decay with the political condition of the time, a cause of weakness inevitable in the wild days of the Merovingian dynasty.

"Inasmuch as," he says, "the cultivation of letters is disappearing, or, rather, perishing, in the cities of Gaul, while goodness and evil are committed with equal impunity, and the ferocity of the barbarians and the passions of kings rage alike unchecked, so that not a single grammarian skilled in narration can be found to describe the general course of events, whether in prose or verse. The greater number lament over the state of affairs, saying: 'Alas, for our age! For the study of letters has perished from our midst, and the man is no longer to be found who can commit to writing the events of the time.'

"These and like complaints, repeated day by day, have determined me to hand down to the future the record of the past; and though of unlettered tongue I have nevertheless been unable to remain silent respecting either the deeds of the wicked or the life of the good. That which has more especially impelled me to do this is that I have often heard it said that few people understand a rhetorician who uses philosophical language, but nearly all understand one speaking in the vulgar fashion."

The somewhat peevish complaints of this bishop "of unlettered tongue" effected no reform, and during the seventh and eighth centuries a great darkness descended upon the schools of Gaul.

Their guardians were themselves in sorry case. The monasteries, weakened by the fact that they stood outside episcopal control, were held in lessening honour and respect as the power of the bishop increased. And the bishops, once the guardians of both spiritual and temporal law and discipline, the protectors of their flock, had unfortunately shaken themselves free, to a large extent, of the jurisdiction of the Pope, and, unfettered by religious responsibility to a central power, tended to develop more and more into feudal magnates, or warriors, gaining in wealth and temporal power what they lost in spiritual prestige.

Hence the half-civilised Frankish chiefs who ruled them, often with clash of temper and of sword, saw no reason why they should not interfere even in religious matters. One of these, Chilperic I, even proposed to the Church in Gaul a new Confession of Faith, in which all distinctions between the three Persons of the Blessed Trinity were to be omitted. Another tried to impose a new alphabet, or, rather, an extended version of the original – an innovation which would have involved the destruction, as no longer "up to date," of all manuscripts before his time. Even in the days of the Carlovingians, and in the time of Charlemagne himself, such tendencies were by no means uncommon, were indeed inherent in the character of the Frankish rulers, with their naïve egotism and mingled ignorance and intelligence. It is scarcely necessary to point out the pitfalls thus threatened, and the dangers of future heresy, dangers which it was in great part the work of Alcuin to avert.

While Gaul was in this parlous state, the torch of learning had been rekindled elsewhere in a striking manner. On Monte Cassino, in the

year 528, the first Benedictine monastery had opened its doors; by the end of the sixth century the sons of Benedict were ready to go forth into the world and to "instruct all nations." Study, both as a duty and a privilege, played a conspicuous part in the Benedictine Rule; and though it made no explicit mention of the classics of antiquity, there was strong recommendation of "such expositions of the Holy Scriptures as the most illustrious doctors of the orthodox faith and the Catholic Fathers had compiled." This, at any rate, sent the student to originals instead of to a "Compendium," in theory, if not in practice. Moreover, such studies were to be undertaken for the refutation of errors; which suggests that books containing such "errors," be they pagan or more strictly "heretic," must be read in order to be condemned.

The most important reform, however, lies in the fact that the high place accorded to study by the Benedictine Rule, raised education, with its methods, from the mire, and set it among the seats of the mighty.

Not for many a long day was its benign influence to touch directly the land of the Franks. Yet many years before the coming of the Benedictine Alcuin, there had appeared in Frankland a reformer from another quarter, representing a School that in the future was to affect both Charlemagne and his tutor in a curious fashion.

This was Saint Columban, who, in the early years of the seventh century, appeared as a monastic zealot among the Vosges mountains which bordered the country then known as Austrasia. Columban hailed from Ulster, famous for the learning of its monasteries and schools, though the source of its erudition is still something of a mystery, as is the fact that the one country of Western Europe which never came under the discipline of the Empire, yet received with joy

the Faith as taught by Saint Patrick, and never swerved from it in spite of storms and stress.

The monastic system of Ireland was a legacy from the teaching of the fourth-century Cassian, as taught in the school of Saint Martin at Tours, the future home of Alcuin, and carried thence to the Irish by Saint Patrick during the fifth century. The Rule in force there closely followed that laid down by the ascetic Cassian, and as taught by Columban was even more austere, and still closer to that of the Desert Fathers of the Thebaid.

For the moment the enthusiasm of the Irish Saint bore good fruit in Gaul, as his flourishing institutions at Luxeuil and Saint Gall bore witness; but the temperament of Northern Gaul was not suited to great austerity, and the rigid rule of the Celtic monk was quickly exchanged for that of the sons of Benedict, with its greater elasticity, when the latter came first into touch with Gaul.

In days to come the school represented by Columban was to reappear in a curious connection with Alcuin and the Imperial Court, in connection with a suspicion of unorthodoxy, which seems to have hung about the skirts of the Church in Ireland in those days, and was, perhaps, a result of that country's early lack of discipline at the hands of Imperial Rome. Even during the seventh century Columban himself was summoned before a synod of Frankish bishops on a charge of heresy with regard to the observance of Easter. For the Franks, after the conversion of Clovis, were strictly orthodox in details, and saw in an apparently trivial matter the underlying principle that was to be so strongly emphasized in England by Saint Wilfrid and the Venerable Bede. The keeping of Easter at the date appointed by Rome signified a loyal acceptance of papal authority; and the holding to local traditions in this matter, even when combined with enthusiastic acceptance of Catholic doctrine as a whole, weakened the position of the Celtic

Church both in Britain and Ireland, and became a cause of contention and suspicion for many a year.

In the end, good sense and loyalty combined to make Ireland one of Rome's most faithful daughters; but the position of Columban, as representing the Irish Church of the seventh century, sufficiently accounts for the swift passing of his influence in Gaul.

As far as classical education was concerned, the teaching of the Celtic school was, in some respects, more liberal than that of the rest of monastic Europe. Saint Patrick and his followers taught the remnant of classic lore that had survived the schools of Cassian – something of Greek, a trace, at least, of Aristotle, Cicero, Virgil. They used, too, the textbook of Martianus Capella of Carthage, speculative and tinged with pagan theories, though interpreted by Christian teachers and edited by them. The need, moreover, of justifying their views as to the correct date of Easter by reference to the stars had made the Irish monks astronomers of a kind, though the science they practised would more correctly have been called astrology. Altogether, save for the one point of difference with Roman discipline, the spirit of Irish learning contrasted most favourably with the dull and ossified system then prevalent in the schools of Gaul.

Now before this time, the torch of the Faith had been handed on from Ireland by way of Iona, to England, by Celtic teachers such as Saint Aidan and Saint Cuthbert, only to be extinguished by the shock of Anglo-Saxon invasions and conquests, save in Holy Island and among the mountains of the West. Yet before the day when Columban appeared in Gaul, the flame had been rekindled in this land, and straight from the central and undying fire of Christendom.

A few years after the decay of learning among the Franks had called forth the wail of Gregory of Tours, another Gregory, well named the Great, had set on foot the work, not only of conversion but also of

education, among the uncivilised and unlettered settlers in Britain (A.D. 597). With Gregory a new life was infused into education, all the more important because it was to permeate the system and Rule of Saint Benedict, which he so ardently upheld, and which was soon to supersede all the other monastic ideals of Europe.

The character of the education approved by Saint Gregory will be easily understood if we realise the circumstances of his time. Given a chief bishop full of enthusiastic zeal for religion, burning with love of souls, living at an epoch when social disorganisation, anarchy, and the desolation inseparable from the constant invasion and harrying of the Lombards, had reduced Italy almost to ruins, it was inevitable that his aims must be strictly and unswervingly directed towards one end. What did the art of rhetoric matter when souls were perishing for lack of the Gospel message? What were the niceties of logic when the lambs of the Church were starving spiritually and physically in the midst of universal woes?

That Church, then, must be fortified by every means in her power, as being the one and only weapon of contention against heathendom and social ruin. Nothing that would aid in the campaign was too trivial to be neglected. Ritual and music were but stones in the sacred fort, but each must be well and truly shaped and fitted into place. And as the one safe and speedy means of training his workmen in the task of conversion, monasteries on the model of Monte Cassino must be built and established far and wide throughout Europe, from which missionaries could be sent forth to all quarters of the Continent.

It is clear that in the early years of the mission of Saint Gregory and his enthusiastic followers, for men who shrank from no danger and who carried their lives in their hands, the only study of importance or value would be the Gospels, or the universal heart-language of the Psalms.

Yet, as the work of conversion progressed, it became evident that something more of the nature of mental training was necessary if the teacher were to hold his own. Less than seventy years after Saint Augustine had landed on British shores, we find Theodore of Tarsus, the Greek, sitting as seventh Archbishop in the episcopal seat of Canterbury, and introducing the study of his native language and literature into the Cathedral school. Within a few years this "Canterbury learning" had become as famous as that of Gaul, and Ireland, and Rome, and, rapidly spreading, had been welcomed in the school at York, soon to rank as one of the most famous in England.

And now we can see the beginnings of Alcuin's spiritual and literary genealogy. Among the renowned schools of the North were those founded at Wearmouth and Jarrow by Benedict Biscop; and the pupil of Benedict was Bede, the *Venerabilis*, our first annalist, who claims for Saint Gregory the title of "Apostle of the English." Bede had among his pupils at Jarrow one Egbert; and this Egbert became in later days the teacher of the boy Alcuin, in the school of York. Twenty years after the death of Bede in 735, there perished in a pagan outburst against the Faith one who was to prepare, in a very special manner, the path of Alcuin in the land of the Franks. Saint Boniface, the Apostle of Germany, had gone forth from his Benedictine monastery near Exeter in the early years of the eighth century, to convert the heathen tribes of that land – an ascetic figure, with eager voice and burning eyes, urging, persuading, living and dying a martyr to the Faith.

"In that part of Germany which the Eastern Franks inhabit," wrote Rudolf, a century later, "there is a place called Fulda, from the name of a neighbouring river, which is situated in a great forest. The holy martyr Boniface, who was sent as an ambassador from the Holy See into Germany and ordained Bishop of the Church of Mayence, obtained the woodland, inasmuch as it was secluded and far removed from the

goings and comings of men, from Carloman, King of the Franks, and by authority of Pope Zachary founded a monastery there in the tenth year before his martyrdom."

The school connected with this monastery was destined to be the spiritual and intellectual home of one of Alcuin's most famous pupils, and to be closely affected by his influence. At the time of its foundation, however, Boniface was more concerned with the reform of life than of learning, as far as the Franks were concerned. To him, full of zeal for the Benedictine rule of loyalty to the Holy See, the condition of the Church in Gaul at the middle of the eighth century was a scandal and a shame. He wrote to Pope Zachary imploring him to draw men together by his rule, now there was no deference paid to canon law, and now matters of practice and doctrine were neglected owing to there having been no Ecclesiastical Council called for over eighty years. Bishops were accused of being "drunken, injurious brawlers, bearing arms in regular battle, and shedding with their own hands the blood of their fellow men – heathen or Christian." "The law of God and the religion of the Church had fallen to pieces."

Although much of this state of affairs might have been traced to the demand of the Frankish kings that bishops should shoulder the feudal burdens and give military service in their own person, if they could not provide substitutes, the keen eye of the English monk had pierced the surface and seen the underlying cause to be the lack of responsibility to the Head of Christendom, the want of correlation with Rome. This, then, was made his immediate object of reform. At the Council of Saltz, in 742, the Frankish bishops were induced by him to give in their complete allegiance to the Holy See; and the Abbey of Fulda, founded by him, was the first monastic institution among the Teutons to be placed directly under papal jurisdiction. As a direct result. Church and King made holy alliance. The Frankish chieftain, Pepin, protected

the seat of the Papacy from the rough hand of the Lombard; his own solemn consecration at Rheims secured for the royal power the whole weight of the Church.

Before his death as a missionary martyr among the heathen tribes of Friesland, Boniface had not only succeeded in reforming a Church and a State. He had roused in the breast of a boy of thirteen an ideal of civilisation, of discipline, and of learning, that was to bear fruit in later years in the joint work of Alcuin and of this lad, Charles, the young son of Pepin. It is, perhaps, not too fanciful to think that the reason for the deliberate choice made by Charles of an English monk, as his future adviser and minister of education, was his. boyish remembrance and admiration of the strong and authoritative personality which had then captured his youthful imagination. For hero-worship belongs to the earliest as well as the most modern days; and it was the admiring memory of Boniface that led to the call of Alcuin to Frankland.

The Palace School

The success of the Model School of the Palace, under such a teacher as Alcuin, was assured. The next step was to extend the influence of that centre throughout a wider sphere. For the Gallic civilization, often rightly identified with education, had suffered dire things under the early Frankish rule. Victories there had been in plenty, but of peace and order scarcely a trace. A rule of plunder and lynch law had undermined the ideals of Gallo-Roman days, and an utter lack of sympathy with the conquered or of adaptation to their ways and manners cut at the root of progress.

It had been the honest desire of Charles, long before he fitted on the imperial crown, to amend these things; but it seems to have been the influence of Alcuin that set the ideal of reform into practical working.

With true insight, the Minister of Education, as we may now call him, convinced the King that the only effective means of restoring an old and creating a new civilization in the Frankish world was the Catholic Church. Yet the Church, as represented by the Frankish bishops and clergy, was at that time at its lowest ebb, scarcely, indeed, emerged from that melancholy condition of affairs described by Gregory of Tours two centuries earlier. The reason was evident. Two hundred years of devastation had almost submerged the light of learning in the land. The Gallo-Roman Schools had vanished, those of the monasteries were few and feeble. When the gate of the mental