
Legacy: A Story of Generosity

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"Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back" (Luke 6:38).

"There is a young boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish; but what are they among so many?' Jesus then said, 'Make the people sit down'.... Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted" (John 6:9-11).

Nearly 2,000 years ago, Jesus assured Saint Peter and the other apostles that the Church he was founding upon them—a tiny group of humble, generous people—would never perish, no matter what the obstacles: "Do not be afraid.... the gates of Hell shall not prevail.... I shall be with you always, until the end of the world."

From time to time through history, the Church has seen our Savior keep this promise in remarkable, even dramatic, ways. Just when the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, wounded by the sins and follies of mankind, has seemed on the edge of destruction, some small event occurred to swerve the course and bring new unexpected vitality. And behind each such event stood a handful of ordinary but holy people, just as in the Church's earliest days, whose sole ambition was to please God and serve the Church as well as they could.

In some mysterious way, God multiplied their generous gifts, small though they may have seemed in the eyes of the world—like the humble food-offering of that boy in the Gospel, whose gift Christ transformed to feed the hungry multitudes (John 6:1-13). In most cases, these large-hearted people had no idea how much good God would draw out of their apparently small acts of dedicated service.

In the pages that follow, we shall look at one such story, one of the most extraordinary in the Church's history of salvation. One elderly man's legacy in his last will and testament, motivated by repentance and gratitude to God, served to alter the course of events for centuries and led to the salvation of souls by the millions.

This story demonstrates what the Church has witnessed so often since Christ first set it on its course through history:

- that his powerful intercession suffices to overcome any obstacles whatever, whether within the Church or in human affairs at large;
- that he needs only a handful of prayerful generous people to work his will on human events—and even one person's efforts can serve as his instrument; and
- that when we try to serve God as well as we can with our resources, God multiplies our gifts through the working out of Providence, sometimes in wholly unforeseen and magnificent ways.

The Dark Ages

The story begins almost eleven centuries ago, around the year 910, in western Europe.

The turbulent years spanning the period between the death of Charlemagne and the turn of the year 1000—almost two centuries, eight or nine full generations—have been justly known to history as the European Dark Ages. Never, until the horrifying mass violence of the twentieth century, have western Christians experienced such a complete breakdown of everything we call civilized. Everyone of European descent today had forebears who lived and suffered through this dreadful era.

Virtually the entire European continent reeled under the same forces: armed invasion, political chaos, factional violence and blood-feuds, ever-present danger, and constant fear. From all directions, armed masses invaded the continent. Vikings, Magyars, and Saracens attacked helpless towns and villages, scourging them with massacres, pillage, and slavery. No population center was safe. In their wake, they left the usual scourges of war—broken families, homeless children, epidemics, and famine.

What little government remained from the Carolingian era lay paralyzed through factional and dynastic power struggles. In the four decades before the year 910, there were no fewer than seven Holy Roman Emperors. Several died by violence, and one was blinded by a rival.

On the local level, armed barons and their retainers clashed with each other in struggles for land and dominance. Political clashes were marked by the violent tactics of gangsters. On public roads and highways, one of the legacies of the long-past Roman peace, bands of brigands attacked wayfarers, robbing and murdering virtually at will.

Caught in the middle

Caught in the middle of this lawlessness, common people tried desperately to go about their lives in peace, but always within a state of underlying anxiety and real physical threat. The age was one of despair and helplessness.

As always in the midst of civil disaster, Christians of the time (our ancestors in the faith) looked to the Church for hope and salvation. What they found instead was a scandalous state of widespread corruption, a dismaying disorder seldom witnessed in the history of Christ's Church on earth.

The body of bishops—whom the Church has always relied on for spiritual support—was a mixture of the saintly, the mediocre, and the scandalously un-Christian. Many had bought their offices outright and lived like barons in ecclesiastical attire. A great many, like their lay counterparts, waged petty wars for personal advantage. Numbers of them lived openly with mistresses, bestowing Church properties on their illegitimate children.

Monasteries, which for centuries had shone forth as exemplars of Christian kindness and chastity, degenerated into centers of idleness and dissipation. Monks neglected the Mass and sacraments, and wholly forsook the spirituality of their communities' saintly founders. A great many religious took wives or concubines. Where the lay faithful once had found faith and hope and charity, they now saw religious indifference, spiritual ignorance, and sensuality. The countryside saw convents and monasteries closed down entirely for lack of vocations.

In Rome, the papacy itself stood as a coveted political prize. Leading Roman families, like modern-day Mafiosi, vied for control of the richest benefice in Christendom. During the half-century before the year 910, the Chair of Peter was occupied by 15 popes—an average reign of only three years each. So unsettled were the times that we know little about these men. Four of them were almost certainly murdered, and several others may have been. In one singularly gruesome incident, Roman mobs exhumed the body of Pope Formosus, put it on trial, hacked it to pieces, and threw the remains into the Tiber.

We do know that several of these pontiffs were well-intentioned and even saintly men. They tried, like earlier popes, to enforce the laws of the Church and discipline the clergy. But their orders were either lost en route, through brigands and pirates, or were ignored by their subordinates.

This uncontrollable situation was not merely an organizational or structural problem; it was fundamentally moral. Few would obey the Roman Pontiff, or saw any reason to.

If the papacy itself suffered such disintegration, what could save the Church? How could the Holy Spirit breathe new life into the savagely wounded Mystical Body? Indeed, one cynical observer of the era summed up a widespread belief: "One more generation and the Church will be finished."

As the tenth century unfolded toward the year 1000, ordinary Christians wondered if the end of the world were imminent. Social and religious decay of this magnitude could not continue much longer. On all sides, events pointed toward some sort of spiritual crisis. But where would it come from, and what form would it take?

Renewal of faith

Around the year 910, in a part of France called Burgundy, an elderly nobleman arrived at a personal decision.

We know little about him apart from the single act of pious generosity he performed toward the end of his life when he drew up his last will and testament, setting up a legacy that would alter the course of history.

He is known to us as William, Duke of Aquitaine. Like many other nobles of his day, he had committed a homicide in his younger years, an act of passionate violence that he repented deeply, especially in his declining years. He had no heirs to receive his legacy since he was childless.

For more than a year, Duke William and his household had received personal spiritual direction from a holy monk named Berno (later to be canonized a saint). Until a few years earlier, Berno had been abbot of a small monastery in Baume, Switzerland, one of the few religious communities in Europe that still retained the holy rule of St. Benedict in full and was known for its piety. William had heard of Berno's holiness and had requested the priest to come and serve as his spiritual director. They became warm friends.

After much prayer and reflection, William determined to establish a small monastery on his own lands, a place where men sincerely dedicated to God would pray for his soul and for the needs of the Church. To this end, he would leave his personal fortune, such as it was.

No doubt he was moved in part by the examples in the Gospels of people like himself, blessed with material wealth, who put their goods at the service of God, thus becoming "poor in spirit." Joseph of Arimathea was one, who gave his own expensive tomb ("hewn out of rock") to Christ and who used his political influence with Pilate to give our Lord a prompt, decent burial. Nicodemus was another, who risked his social standing by coming to the aid of Our Blessed Mother and Saint John when they stood in sorrow before the dead body of Jesus on the cross. And there was the Roman centurion, who begged Christ to come heal his servant (Lk 7:1-10) and who had built the synagogue where our Lord first revealed his own great gift of self in the Eucharist (Jn 6:35-71).

Duke William, distressed as he was by monastic corruption, decided that his foundation would differ from all other communities in two respects. First, the abbot and monks would report directly and exclusively to the Roman Pontiff, whoever he might be; no barons or local ecclesiastics would lay claim on or otherwise interfere with the community's life. Secondly, he would see that his foundation was staffed only with men of prayer, monks who took their divine vocation seriously.

He determined that Berno, his holy confessor and friend, would be abbot of this foundation. Berno suggested that an adequate site would be William's favorite hunting lodge nearby, a place called Cluny.

Duke William's fateful bequest, so crucial to the centuries that would follow, is worth quoting in detail. Its combination of prayerful piety and practicality was to characterize the spirit of Cluny itself in the years ahead. The document said:

To all those who live in the unity of faith and who implore the mercy of Christ, to all shall who succeed them and shall be living so long as the world endures, I make known that for the love of God and of our Savior Christ Jesus, I give and deliver to the Apostles Peter and Paul the village of Cluny, on the river Grosne, with its curtilage and its house, with the chapel that is dedicated in honor of St. Mary Mother of God and of St. Peter, prince of the Apostles, with all of the property that depends thereon... I, William, with my wife Ingelberga, give these things to the aforesaid Apostles, first for the love of God... and for the maintenance and integrity of the Catholic faith.... May the monks and all aforesaid possessions be under the power and dominion of Abbot Berno, who shall rule according to his knowledge and power so long as he shall live. After his death may the monks have the power and liberty to elect as abbot and ruler the monk of their order whom they shall prefer, according to the good pleasure of God and the rule laid down by St. Benedict, with no contradiction or impediment of this election by our power or that of any man. Nevertheless every five years they shall pay to Rome twelve pieces of gold for the upkeep of the candles of the Church of the Apostles. May they have as protector the Apostles themselves, and for defender the Pontiff of Rome.

Shortly after establishing this legacy, Duke William passed away to his heavenly reward. And Saint Berno set to work.

The abbot gathered together twelve other monks, carefully selected for their sincere piety, and they moved into the lodge. One of these was a young monk named Odo (also later canonized), who only four years before had joined Saint Berno at Baume after wandering Europe looking for a monastery that lived the spirit of St. Benedict. The two of them, freed from extensive manual labor by Duke William's devise, established prayer and almsgiving as Cluny's principal order of business.

The monks lived Saint Benedict's rule to perfection. Silence was absolute, broken only by collective prayer. They said Masses in turn from sunrise to midday. They spent hours in spiritual reading and devotions, and distributed help generously to the poor of the district. The handful of young monks were beloved for their kindness, hard work, and spirit of Christian joy. Like all people imbued with Christian humility, they were exquisitely considerate of others and deeply happy.

It has been said that love is life—the greater and more selfless the love, the greater the vitality. This small community appeared alive with love for God and souls. Its rich vitality of spirit contrasted so sharply with the prevailing monastic languor that soon, remarkably soon, events began to happen.

Over the next several years, youths in their teens and 20's arrived at Cluny's gates, drawn by ambition for holiness and for service to the Church. In the decades that followed, all through

the violent times of the tenth century, the monastery swelled with young vocations, expanding into a large, vibrant community. The name Cluny became synonymous with a life of prayer and sacrifice, a place where men sought to serve God with all their heart and soul, mind and strength.

Cluny's first six abbots, spanning 200 years, were all canonized saints. All of them put the entire community's resources at the service of the pope, seeking to serve the Church as he directed. So many vocations came that the monastery expanded into others scattered throughout the continent, all of them united—in spirit and by rule—to the abbot of Cluny.

Monks in other establishments, inspired by Cluny's renowned holiness, petitioned its abbot to help them set their own communities in order, to reform abuses, reinvigorate discipline, and reinstitute prayer. Still other communities, though unassociated with the Cluniac system, imitated their example of sanctity.

Putting God first

Steadily Cluny's numbers and influence expanded. By the eleventh century, Cluny was at the head of a well-organized system embracing more than 300 communities spread throughout France, Italy, Germany, England, Scotland, and Poland. Each abbot of Cluny traveled extensively, overseeing the spiritual vitality of each associated community. The whole system's success lay not in its organizational structure but in its spiritual priorities: the love and service of God came first, and each monk was to dedicate himself to the imitation of Christ. Whatever task was undertaken—be it farming or teaching or copying of manuscripts, among other labors—the principal purpose was that each monk become a saint. Cluny's life lay inside the minds and hearts of the monks themselves.

By the twelfth century, Cluny's network comprised 1,450 communities with more than 10,000 consecrated religious. The lodge constructed by William of Aquitaine had grown into a large monastic complex; its central church alone was more than 550 feet long, the largest church in Christendom until St. Peter's was built in Rome in the 1500's. Its library grew to become one of the most extensive and precious collections in the world. (This entire magnificent complex was sacked and burned to the ground by a Revolutionary mob in 1790, one of the worst and least-known atrocities in modern history.)

With the holy men of Cluny leading the way through their teaching and example, the spirit of reform infiltrated throughout the rest of the Church, gathering momentum with each generation.

Between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, four great reforming popes came from the Cluniac ranks: Gregory VII, Urban II, Paschal II, and Urban V. Each of them worked to clear out the abuses, now centuries old. They removed and appointed bishops, reshaped canon law and had it enforced, and insisted that secular rulers respect the Church's rights.

Other clerics, formed from their youth in the Cluniac spirit, served the Church as bishops, abbots, spiritual directors, and energetic assistants to the Holy See. Directly or indirectly, Cluny's confident spirit of wholehearted service to God touched every aspect of Christian life.

A burst of activity

This zeal for souls, combined with Europeans' natural restless energy, led to a burst of religious activity. Missionaries spread through the forests of northern and eastern Europe, baptizing descendants of the barbarians who, only two or three generations before, had spread such devastation. Cluny's exemplary devotion to the Mass and Church liturgy led to new emphasis on building churches worthy of the Eucharistic Presence, places whose very setting would give greater glory to God. Nothing was too beautiful for honoring Christ among us.

Under the leadership of the great reformist popes and the bishops they appointed, new institutions of Christian service arose where none had been before—schools, hospitals, and orphanages. The great universities slowly formed places of serious scholarship dedicated to transmission of truth; within their lecture halls scholars grew enthusiastic for the new learning brought from the East, the works of Aristotle and Plato among other ancients, recently translated by monks dedicated to scholarly labor.

The great Crusades were launched as a confident offensive, advancing Europeans outward to the rest of the world in a stream of activity that would last for centuries, up until our own time.

As a symbol of this spiritual resurgence, bishops and their faithful labored for generations to construct the great cathedrals of Europe—unprecedented monuments of sculptured stone built to house the Eucharistic liturgy, the center of Church worship, and to give honor to the mother of God. These vast houses of God, breathtaking in grandeur even today, stand as witnesses to the spiritual strength of the High Middle Ages.

Thus, only a few generations after the Church was pronounced near death, its vitality shone forth brilliantly once again—"bringing forth from its treasure new things and old"—in what would be known to history as the Age of Faith.

Like the foundation of the Church itself, these splendid achievements had small, inauspicious beginnings. The repentant and pious Duke William of Aquitaine had no notion how much good God would draw forth from his generous, prayerful legacy. In all likelihood he may have wondered wistfully, as he lay praying on his deathbed, why God—in his loving, all-knowing Providence—had left him to die alone.

Lessons

This story of Duke William's munificent and far-reaching devise bears striking lessons for all Christian people in all ages, including our own. What may we learn from it that we can apply to our own era and to our individual lives?

We can learn, first of all, to have greater confidence in God.

Throughout the pages of the gospels, in his words and actions, in his miracles and teachings, in scores of explicit or subtle ways, our Lord beseeches us down through the ages: trust me. God does not lose battles; he has overcome sin and death, he remains with his Church forever.

In the midst of serious trials, therefore—in our own lives, in society, or even in the Church itself—we can place all our confidence in God's loving power. All he asks of us is that we trust him and that we try our best to serve him here on earth. He will do the rest.

Secondly, and related to this, is the lesson of holy example, of sanctity's power in the lives of ordinary people.

Duke William's spiritual progress followed the same line we see in the gospels and in the lives of countless saints: repentance, prayer, generous giving. "Repent" was the initial message of Christ as he began his public life. Sorrow for sin is the beginning of every great redirection of life; we start life anew, like children, with every sincere confession. Then, proceeding from this renewed friendship comes a love for prayer, for loving conversation with God. From this oneness of heart comes gift of self, ambitions to serve God with all the good and great things he has given us—our minds and wills, our talents, our time here on earth, and those material goods he has given us on loan, those things we formerly considered as "possessions."

A saint knows that every good thing on earth has come from the hand of God, and our task is to return all things to him, for his glory. This is what it means to be "poor in spirit," as William of Aquitaine saw in the twilight of his life.

Holiness, love for God, a sense of our divine mission in life as adopted children of God—these are what make us God's instrument for working his will on mankind. As Saint Josemaría Escrivá, the founder of Opus Dei, said: "These world crises are crises of saints." The evil currents of history, what Pope John Paul II has called "structures of sin," will be overcome by ordinary people who take their Christian vocation seriously, who are moved with love to give all they have and all they are for the service of God. This has happened before, many times. It will happen again. Indeed, it is happening now.

Little things

Finally, the story of Cluny can teach us the value of small things given with a generous spirit. When we try to do good for God and others, on purpose, we will always underestimate the good that is done.

Neither William nor Saint Berno had any notion what forces for good they were setting in motion through the founding of their tiny monastery. Their ambition was merely to serve God as well as they could here and now, at this time and place. But that was enough. Their small gift, humble in men's eyes, fit into God's plans for the salvation of multitudes in the ages to come. In our own time, therefore, we as Christians should open our eyes to the possibilities inherent in our gifts to God's service. Each sacrificial gift to others for the love of God has a place in God's Providence. We may not live to see it here on earth, but we can trust that God will make use of it and magnify it in his mysterious working out of salvation.

The example of prayerful faith that we teach our children can, with God's grace, steer the course of their lives toward heaven, and the "hundredfold" of happiness in this life. And the lessons will pass on to their children, and to theirs. Thus the faith will pass from generation to generation, like the flames passed from hand to hand, row to row, in the Easter Vigil liturgy.

The classes of Christian doctrine that we teach to fidgeting children can lead, decades hence, to straightened-out lives, holy and stable marriages, children raised in the love of God—and perhaps among them the greatest saints of the coming century.

A conversation, friend to friend, that leads someone back to repentance and the sacraments can have effects for generations to come. Who knows what plan God has for that friend's grandchildren? When we sustain the faith in a single soul, we are preserving it for his or her descendents, whose own eternal destiny is tied mysteriously to our sacrifices here and now. And when we give financial support to holy people in the Church, we are joining our sacrifice with theirs, with Christ's, for the salvation of souls. It is the spirit of the gift that counts, as with the poor widow whose Temple offering so moved the heart of our Savior. It is our love that God wants, not merely a portion of our "possessions."

Trusting abandonment to the will of God—this was the real gift of William and Saint Berno, the largeness of spirit that made Cluny great. When we give what we have with that same spirit, with the selflessness of Christ in the Eucharist, then we become his instruments for the conversion of mankind.