

# Isidore of Seville and the Birth of Europe as the Regnum Christi

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In 1997, Pope John Paul II declared that the Internet needed a patron saint. He chose St. Isidore of Seville. The reaction of the majority of Roman Catholics – and not only Roman Catholics – around the world was, “Huh? Who’s that?” Not much is known about Isidore of Seville. And yet, he is one of the most important minds in the birth of Europe, and of Christendom in general. We can safely say that Europe was born as a political, social, and legal entity based on the work of Isidore and on his understanding of the practical applications of the redemption in Jesus Christ.

Isidore was born in AD 560 in Spain. He was raised by his older brother, Leander, bishop of Seville. The second half of the sixth century was time when Spain was effectively cut off from the main Christian centers of learning so Leander took upon himself the task to revive and develop Christian learning in Spain, and give his two younger brothers, Isidore and Fulgentius, and their sister Florentina, a superb intellectual training. Leander was also very active in defending the orthodox Christian faith; his influence was such as to make the Arian Visigothic rulers of Spain convert to the Trinitarian Christian faith. He used his own funds to send people out to procure rare ancient manuscripts and created for his brothers and for the church in Spain a library that could have easily been the third largest library in the world at the time. Leander also established dozens of scriptoria (centers for copying manuscripts). Copying manuscripts was considered a worthy vocation in Spain, and two generations after Leander Spain was still replete with libraries – private and in monasteries – with thousands of volumes.

This is the background in which Isidore lived and learned. Predictably, after the death of Leander, Isidore was elected to the See of Seville to succeed his brother. But the glory of the Church in Spain didn’t end with the death of Leander. In fact, it was just beginning to shine. Leander only laid the foundation for Isidore’s work. It was Isidore’s part to lay the intellectual foundation for the future Christian civilization in Europe; to give the practical implications of the theology outlined by that other great apologist of the Christian faith, Augustine.

It has become fashionable, in the last few decades, among theologians, historians, [and even economists](#), to portray Augustine as some sort of dualist who radically separated Christian salvation from the practical

questions of society – economics, politics, social issues, government, etc. Augustine, they claim, believed that Christians are supposed to be concerned with heaven only, and therefore the Word of God is concerned only with the Kingdom of Heaven. This world is an entirely different kingdom that is regulated by a “natural law,” and the Kingdom of God will never be in this world. In his *City of God* Augustine showed the contrast between the political “salvation” of the pagan Roman state and the true salvation through the Gospel, in the Church. By this model our modern intellectuals from the position of their 20<sup>th</sup>-century prejudice, they contend that Augustine told Christians not to try to change the world according to their Christian faith. “Natural law,” which is common to both Christians and non-Christians, governs this world.

But Augustine’s immediate intellectual and ideological heirs did not understand him so. And Isidore certainly didn’t see such dualism in Augustine. He based his life’s ministry on Augustine’s theology by accepting Augustine’s six-ages view of history. Isidore was sure that the “sixth age” was the time when he lived, and that was a special age, the age following the Redemption of Jesus Christ, under the power of Jesus Christ, *regnum Christi*. All previous ages existed only to provide the background for that most important age in history. All previous human achievements in knowledge, wisdom, technologies, social development, philosophy, existed only to be used in the right way in the *regnum Christi*. The whole world found its fulfillment only in the Incarnation of Christ, and now it was a Kingdom of Christ, under Christ’s royal rule, destined to become one Christian civilization, under Christ, where all authorities and powers will submit to the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

This total authority of Christ in this age of *regnum Christi* will make all the nations become *membra Christi*, limbs of Christ. Nations, proposed Isidore, would be judged by a moral standard, just like individuals, and the greatest of them would be those that live – as societies – most clearly in accordance with the Christian faith. All aspects of the life of a nation must become harmonized with the teachings of Christ, from the personal life of the individuals to the government policies and international relations of the rulers. Those that fail to abide by the Law of Christ will be judged in history. Those that obey will prosper and grow.

Therefore Isidore saw the role of the Church in teaching everyone – from the lowest peasant to the highest court officials – their duties in the new age of *regnum Christi*. Under Leander and then Isidore, Spanish monks developed a curriculum for instructing peasants and their families in the basics of the Christian faith. (See the life of the monk Valerio of Bierzo.) The very idea of monasticism in Spain, under the vision of Isidore, was completely different from the Eastern monasticism: monks were supposed to be teachers of the local communities in the matters of faith, practical morality and even social organization, not hermits living in remote places dealing with their pseudo-spiritual hallucinations. Judging from the works of Isidore himself, similar curricula were developed for the other social classes of Visigothic Spain, including merchants, architects, and local community leaders. In the Kingdom of Christ, every facet of life was to be brought under Christ and His moral law. But Isidore didn’t stop at that.

In the Kingdom of Christ, even the earthly monarchies were to be redefined to serve the purposes of the Kingdom of God. Isidore rejected the Byzantine model of Eusebius of the monarchy as a semi-divine state, having full power in the name of God over every aspect of life. Contrary to it, and following the resistance of Augustine’s mentor Ambrose against Emperor Theodosius, Isidore developed a view of the state as constitutionally limited under the law of God. The king was now part of the Church, not a head over it. He could intervene in the church to support church discipline, but he was also himself subject to that same discipline. A Christian king and his Christian subjects were equal before God’s eyes. They only had different functions and callings in life. Tyranny had no place in a Christian nation. Kings must be counselors and a source of good example to their people. Their subjects’ personal life, belongings, and faith were sacred before God, and none of the business of the kings. So adamant was Isidore against tyranny, that he even condemned the attempts of the Visigothic rulers to convert the Jews of Spain – a courageous act at the time.

The culmination of this influence of Isidore on the view of Christian government in the *regnum Christi* came at the Fourth Council of Toledo in 633, three years before Isidore’s death. The council was attended by sixty-two

bishops summoned by King Sisenand. The King opened the first session by prostrating himself, requesting the bishops to intercede for him before God, to maintain the laws of the church and to destroy abuses. After this symbolic act of subjection under God, the Council proceeded to discuss and regulate *both* ecclesiastical and secular issues, in 75 canons. The Visigothic ruling class duly cooperated in enforcing the canons of the Council.

But the greatest contribution of Isidore was not his activism in the transformation of the Visigothic Kingdom into a complete Christian civilization. However important it was, it would not be good unless he made sure he left a legacy for the future generations to follow. With the vast library of ancient knowledge accumulated by his brother, acting on his belief that all knowledge was given by God to serve the cause of the Kingdom of Christ, Isidore set out to create a comprehensive body of knowledge for the future builders of the Christian civilization to follow. The result was the first encyclopedia in history, Isidore's *Etymologies*. *Etymology* means "study of the true meaning." In its 20 volumes he compiled in an abbreviated form all the knowledge passed down from the ancient world. Nothing was outside of the scope of the Christian civilization: methods of education, geography, botany, political units, war, games, international relations, architecture. The *Etymologies* were meant to help a Christian nation build a civilization from scratch. He wanted to leave this legacy for the Visigothic Kingdom, believing that it was the closest to a Christian civilization of the new age, *regnum Christi*.

The Visigothic rulers did not live up to the expectations of Isidore. Two generations after his death, weakened by internal strife, Spain was conquered by the Muslim general Tariq. The kingdom of the Visigoths, for which Leander and Isidore spend their lives to transform into a Christian civilization, disappeared from history.

But even before that, copies of the *Etymologies* were taken out of the boundaries of Spain. The oldest extant manuscript today was copied in Ireland. From Ireland, Isidore's work went to England. By land, the *Etymologies* traveled to Germany. Translated copies in Old High German were to be found in every monastery in Germany. Scholars learned from Isidore and applied his learning and his ideas in practice in their local communities. About a hundred years after his death, among political and social chaos, internecine wars and threats from outside, the church grew to accept his vision of a Christian civilization, the Kingdom of God – the *Christendom*.

Therefore, when the Carolingian dynasty produced Charlemagne – that brightest of all rulers, humble and wise before God, ambitious to expand the Kingdom of God for the glory of God – it was no coincidence that his advisers were all educated by the *Etymologies*. Suddenly faced with the task of governing a Christian civilization, the leaders of the new Christian society knew what to do as mayors and lawyers, as entrepreneurs and generals. Isidore's ideas gave them the vision, and Isidore's encyclopedia gave them the practical knowledge for action. Local peasant communities knew how to organize themselves, towns and cities knew how to protect and govern their populations of traders and artisans. With the imperial power stripped of its divine status, the empire of Charlemagne was a decentralized, vibrant, self-governing society under the royal power of Jesus Christ. Everyone had a stake in the new civilization, and everyone knew what his place was, thanks to Isidore. Charlemagne himself was just a servant of God, and a servant of his people.

And of Charlemagne, Europe was born. He is called today the *Father of Europe*, but seldom is this discussed beyond his political conquests. The common European identity that Charlemagne created was not based on genetics or nationality, neither was it based on a centralized state. It was based on Isidore's vision of the reign of Christ, the *Christendom*, as a comprehensive expression of the Kingdom of God on earth. Contrary to the claims of modern thinkers, Europe was born not out of the dualism of "heaven vs. nature." It was born out of Isidore's comprehensive vision of *regnum Christi* as the consummation of history *before* the Second Coming of Christ.

After the discovery of printing, between 1470 and 1530 only, at least ten *printed* editions appeared of the *Etymologies*, more than 800 years after Isidore's death. So powerful was his thought, and so great was his influence during those 800 years that modern historians blame him for the disappearance of many great manuscripts of antiquity. Medieval scholars just believed that if an ancient source was not quoted or mentioned by Isidore in his *Etymologies*, it was not worth keeping in the libraries. With the exception of the Bible, there was no author that was so influential over the minds of so many people over such a long period of time.

Unfortunately, the lesson is lost today. Europe is losing its identity, and it knows not where to look to find it again. The answer lies – as usual – in returning to one’s roots. Europe was created as an identity by the work of Isidore, the Bishop of Seville. He laid the foundation for the Christian civilization by his view of history, his view of the Kingdom of Christ, and his work to create a comprehensive worldview to build a Christian civilization. Without returning back to this root, Europe will be lost. And America too.

(For this article I am thankful for the research of Dr. Judith Herrin of King’s College in London and her superb book, [The Formation of Christendom](#).)

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