



SACRED WINDOWS

Sunday – November 16, 2025

There Was Nothing Dark About the Dark Ages

Greetings!

If I were to ask any high-school-educated person about **the Dark Ages**, they would probably have heard of the term and think it referred to a period of time after the Fall of the Roman Empire (476 AD) where civilization basically vanished until the Renaissance. In this view, **barbarians roamed the world destroying things** and Western society as a whole came to a screeching halt.

That is actually **a better description** of the *COVID era* in the US than of Europe after the Fall of Rome.

But Rome's demise was not primarily due to the barbarians, who only put the *coup de grâce* on the Empire's incremental decline. It was really **the long-term result** of the moral and cultural collapse of a once-great civilization.

That's an object lesson for our own times, which I'll leave for another article. My purpose is to talk about what happened **after the Fall**—and what we've been told about it.

Montecassino Abbey, Founded by St. Benedict in 529 AD



Dark History or Dark Propaganda?

One of my favorite historians is Rodney Stark, whose book, *The Victory of Reason*, lays

bare **the predominant lie** about the “Dark Ages”. (I put the term in quotes for reasons that will become obvious).

Stark says that all of us have been fed a clever, if unquestioned fairy tale about this period in history since we were in grade school. **It’s revisionist history at its finest.** Here’s how Stark describes it:

For the past two or three centuries, every educated person has known that from the fall of Rome until about the 15th century, Europe was submerged in the “Dark Ages”—**centuries of ignorance, superstition, and misery**—from which it was suddenly, almost miraculously rescued, first by the Renaissance and then by the Enlightenment....

But it didn’t happen that way. The idea that Europe fell into the Dark Ages is a **hoax** originated by antireligious, and bitterly anti-Catholic, 18th century intellectuals, who were determined to assert the **cultural superiority** of their own time....

Instead, during the so-called Dark Ages, European technology, and science **overtook and surpassed the rest of the world!** (Victory, p. 35).

I like his frank assessment: “It didn’t happen that way”. As evidence of that, I’ll list below many of the **world-transforming accomplishments** of the alleged “Dark Ages” and the ways in which that period prepared us for the modern world.

Thankfully, the “Dark Ages” myth has been fully discredited by modern research (i.e., actual facts), which convincingly proves **what a remarkable era** it truly was, but it is a persistent lie that is hard to overcome in the general perception. A few facts always help.

Quick Timeline

What we call the Middle Ages lasted approximately a thousand years (~400-1400 AD), of which the “Dark Ages” were technically the early part (before the Crusades began). It’s more accurate to **call this period the “Early Middle Ages”**.

What followed were the Crusades, the universities, and the building of the great Gothic cathedrals, a period generally **called the “High Middle Ages”**.

The Renaissance began in the mid-1400s and led to our Modern age. This chart shows a **very rough estimate** of the time periods, rounding off the numbers for clarity:

THE MIDDLE AGES, 400-1400 AD

400s	500-1000	1100-1300	1300-1400s
Barbarians	Early Middle Ages	High Middle Ages	Era of Decline
Tribal Societies	Monasteries and Conversions	Crusades, Schools, and Cathedrals	Heresies, Wars, and Black Plague
Greatest Figure: St. Benedict	Greatest Figure: Charlemagne	Greatest Figure: King Louis IX	Greatest Figure: Joan of Arc*

(*You know I had to mention Joan of Arc. Basic chronology from Fr. [William Slattery](#).)

But it’s important to note that during the “Dark Ages”, the foundations of what today we call **science, education, democracy, and modern capitalism** were all laid down by the most unlikely group of movers and shakers in history: Benedictine monks.

For that reason, I think we should call the period **a very bright sacred window** into divine and human ingenuity. Let’s start with...

Conversions

During those supposedly backward times, literally tens of millions of souls came to the light of the Christian

faith. It was a watershed era for the spread of Christianity as missionaries evangelized the barbarian peoples of **what today we call Western Europe**.

They converted whole nations (this is a partial list; see the SW website version of this article for a fuller account):

- 509: King Clovis was baptized and the barbarian **Franks** were converted, sowing the seeds of faith in France;
- 540s: St. Patrick evangelized the indigenous tribes of **Ireland**.
- 590: Pope Gregory the Great sent St. Augustine of Canterbury to convert the **Angles** (British Isles).
- 700s; St. Boniface evangelized the tribes in the Netherlands and Northern Germany setting the stage for **Charlemagne** to establish his empire over a Christianized Western Europe in 800.



In **Central and Eastern Europe** the story is the same, having a somewhat delayed effect due to the survival of the Eastern Roman Empire (Constantinople) and the invasions of the Mongols. Here too we see conversions of entire societies (also a partial list):

- 681: Bulgars and Huns convert to Christianity (present-day **Bulgaria and Hungary**).
- 800s: The Greek brothers **Cyril and Methodius** evangelize the **Slavic peoples** of Central Europe.
- 988: The conversion of the Emperor Vladimir and all of the Rus (**Russia and Ukraine**).

This is an utterly amazing story of **heroism and missionary fervor** that rarely gets mentioned in history books. And isn't it remarkable that it all took place in those

bad Dark Ages?

By the time Charlemagne entered the scene (he was crowned in the year 800 AD), Western Europe as we know it had been Christianized. **Below is a map of his empire**, which, as you can see, covers all of what we know today as Europe.

The insert map in the upper right shows how Charlemagne's empire was divided among his three sons after his death, roughly creating the modern nations of **France, Germany, and Italy**:





The Monasteries

Much of this missionary fervor was brought about by the Benedictine monks, whose **monasteries sprang up like mushrooms** throughout the Christian world starting from the 500s. [See my earlier [article](#) about the Benedictine legacy.]

From these Benedictine monasteries came massive and positive changes in the landscape of Europe and ultimately the world. *The vast majority* of the human and cultural developments during the Middle Ages **came from Benedictine monks** and the institutions they established for the good of society (like schools and banks, etc.).



Most importantly, Stark asserts in his book that it was ***the Catholic work ethic epitomized by monks*** that gave us these changes.

Medieval Catholics in general believed that the world *could be improved* beyond **the abject misery that the pagan world** bequeathed to them, and they set about changing things for the better. What a novel idea.

Not only that, but God gave man *stewardship* of the earth in the Book of Genesis (2:15; 9:7) which meant that **man had a moral duty** to investigate and develop the world in order to make it a better place.

Astonishing Developments

So the Catholic monasteries became not only the institutional force for the spread of the Christian faith but also for the **advancement of culture** as a whole.

Those who envision the "Dark Ages" as backward centuries of cultural regression **overlook more than a few societal developments** that all happened in this period. Let's consider some of the most astonishing ones.

Agriculture and Technology



The Romans were an aristocratic, elite-dominated culture that used slaves exclusively to till their fields. In contrast, **poor and celibate monks figured out** how to harness the power of water, wind, and animals to increase the yield of crops and intensify the value of human labor.

In this period, there was not an incremental but *an exponential increase* in **human productivity** through several inventions that we take for granted today:

- The **water wheel and watermill** for grinding grain—this technology was eventually used for everything from pounding cloth to sawing wood to grinding swords to creating paper. It also made it possible to irrigate fields far and wide by means of pumping stations that had never before existed.
- The invention of the **heavy plow** made it possible to get under the exhausted surfaces of overused Roman fields and bring up the more fertile soil underneath for planting. It also made it possible to plow up rocky fields without having to extract rocks by hand. Wow.
- Some monasteries became centers of the **new science of fish farming**, which was quite the important industry for Catholic civilizations that didn't eat meat on any of the Fridays of the year.

Animals and Transportation

They also upgraded the businesses of animal husbandry and transportation in the same manner. Did you know that Catholic monks developed **iron horseshoes** (unknown to the Romans) and the big **harnesses and collars** that allowed horses to travel longer distances and pull heavier loads?

- These **improvements in horse technology** immensely increased the scope and speed of international commerce.
- Advances in saddles, bridles, stirrups, and harnesses made medieval armies more formidable because **the powerful “war horse”** now became a relevant factor in battles.
- The monks also invented the **three-field system of crops**, where they rotated two fields (active and fallow) each year and left the third field to grow food to feed the animals—so simple yet so clever!



And you thought monks only made beer and sold fruitcakes at Christmas! Anti-Catholic scholars, of course, conveniently overlooked these and other **massive human productivity gains** during those terrible “Dark Ages”.

Arts and Science

I don't have enough time or space to list all the developments that took place in these huge areas of human culture, but I can offer you **a summary that I recently saw on the Internet**, which listed just a few of the contributions those anonymous medieval monks made to human civilization:

Fire engines, **whiskey**, the science of genetics, multiple alphabets, musical notation, the scientific method, **eyeglasses**, the university, double-entry accounting, stained glass, champagne, clocks, cranes, the wheeled plow, heavy armor, soil cultivation, Parmesan cheese (!), algebra, gas lighting,

grammar schools and free education, book chapters, the magnifying glass, among many other developments.

Gutenberg's printing press (1450) came at the very beginning of the Renaissance era and transformed the world. Please realize, however, that **Gutenberg's invention would not have been possible** if multiple centuries of monks hadn't fostered a literate culture that was also capable of producing a technology like that.

Such a cultural advancement **could not have been invented** by the technically-backward Asian, Islamic, or African societies of the time. **(Below: Gutenberg's actual printing press and an early type set.)**



I would add to this list other key social developments that were **outcroppings of monkish activity** but not technically part of a monk's religious mission. Consider these incredible developments that all came from this period:

- International banks and **investment banking**.
- Due to the early monastic banks, Europe went from a primitive bartering culture to cash economies to international systems of financing and **lending on credit**, all within a couple hundred years.
- The international clothing trade and garment industry.
- Significant advancements in **construction technologies and techniques**, despite not having steel, power instruments, modern cranes, or bulldozers.
- Which, of course, is how they built those **magnificent cathedrals**.

What follows is my favorite satirical meme related to our subject.

"PEOPLE IN THE DARK AGES WERE
UNEDUCATED DIRTY PEASANTS"

THE "DARK AGES":



Tradition is a Sacred Window

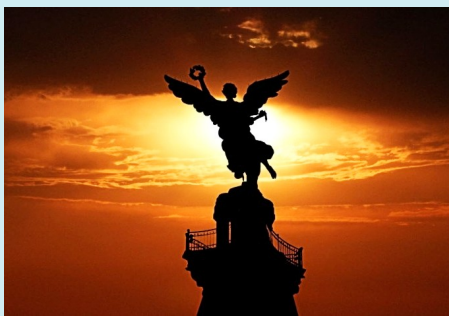
As you can see, this is a subject that fascinates me from a human and historical point of view, but mostly because it has **great relevance for our spiritual lives**. It reminds me that, as Catholics, our pilgrimage of life takes place on the crest of the long, flowing river called the Christian Tradition.

This marvelous legacy of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness has handed down to us not only the teachings that save our souls but also the **religious culture and many marvelous examples of holiness** to emulate. The technological and societal advancements are all *icing on the cake* compared to the spiritual blessings of such a Tradition.

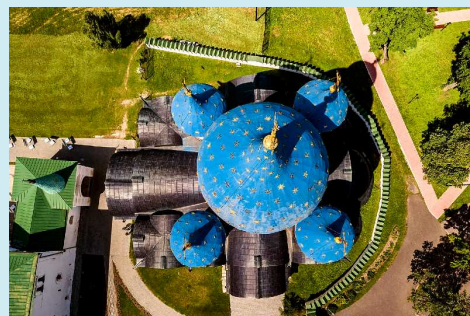
Now I'm sure you can see why I say that the "Dark Ages" were not dark at all. They were actually a bright **sacred window of holiness and human development** that gave us virtually everything we have today. Wow.

Feature

The Medieval Angel of the Apocalypse



Onion Domes Are Not About Onions



Many blessings to you and your families,

Peter Darcy

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