

## THE THIRTEENTH CENTENARY OF ST. ISIDORE OF SEVILLE

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*HYACINTH ROTH, O.P.*



WHEN in 1722, Pope Innocent XIII declared St. Isidore of Seville a Doctor of the Church, the Holy Father paid homage in the name of Christendom for an inestimable apostolic service rendered to his Church and country. This year the Church is commemorating the thirteenth centenary of this Spanish apostle, the "Schoolmaster of the Middle Ages."

The circumstances that surrounded the life of St. Isidore were entirely unlike those attending other celebrated defenders of the Faith. Spain prior to the reconquest in the fifteenth century could count five cultures quite distinct and even antithetic. Colonized by the Phoenicians and Greeks, conquered by the Carthaginians in the third century B. C., Spain lived under Roman rule when in the fifth century of our era the Teutonic and Germanic elements of the Visigoths took control of the Peninsula. In less than a century, Roman sovereignty became a thing of the past, and Euric, the first Gothic monarch, ruled with a legislation all his own, perverse to society, detrimental to Catholicism.

The Catholic Church had been flourishing under Roman dominion since Apostolic times. Now religious quarrels occasioned by friction with the Arian Visigoths disturbed her serene progress. The Catholic victory in Gaul by the conversion of Clovis made the situation still worse, since multitudes of heretics expelled from Gaul hastened to the Arian cause in Spain. Whatever the Hispano-Roman Catholics gained through the armed protection of the Catholic kings of Gaul, the Goths soon recovered by the help of Greeks summoned from Constantinople. For a while it appeared as if success rested with the Goths, but contention in a victory-mad camp generated the old revenge of civil war. History tells us that by the year 585, seventeen out of thirty-five kings had been condemned to death or exile.

St. Isidore was twenty-five years old when the Arian monarch Leovigild (568-86) achieved the political unification of Spain. His success was shortlived, for a Catholic conversion in the royal family led to open revolt. Hermengild, son of Leovigild, accepted the Catholic religion and paid with his life for a too burning zeal for the truth. Leovigild, laboring desperately for the maintenance of national peace, sought reconciliation with the Catholics by inducing them to accept a profession of Faith proposed by the Arian synod at Toledo. But compromise in dogma was then as impossible as it is now, and Leovigild felt it necessary to use force. Commenting on the situation, St. Gregory of Tours writes: "The persecution of Catholics in Spain is horrible. They endure exile, confiscation of property, imprisonment, torture, death. One of the common means, yet not the least cruel, is that of starving them to death."<sup>1</sup>

The principles involved were better understood as the sessions of the Third Council of Toledo (589) went along. The seventy-eight bishops assembled under the presidency of St. Leander, Bishop of Seville and brother of St. Isidore, convinced Recared (586-601), another son of Leovigild, of the real truth of the Catholic religion, and succeeded in restoring religious unity to Spain. "Now," rejoiced the bishops, "by the mercy of God peace has finally returned unto us; therefore the sacred Council shall declare as re-established in Spain the authority of the ancient canons and of the venerable discipline of the Church. The constitutions of the previous councils as well as the official letters of the holy bishops of Rome shall once more resume their unrestrained rightful power."<sup>2</sup> The conversion of King Recared, his formal acceptance of the council's decrees, his public promise of enforcing the enacted disciplinary laws throughout the kingdom, marked the beginning of an organized Catholic Spain. Now Roman and Gothic elements were bloodlessly amalgamated; Gothic law and politics sustained by Roman social life and religion formed the basis of the nation's culture.

While St. Leander contributed much to the conversion of the royal house, it was left to his brother, St. Isidore, to provide for the education of young Spain. Culture of mind and body harmoniously subordinated to the aspirations of the transcending soul constitutes Catholic education. The conferring of this

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<sup>1</sup> St. Greg. Tur., *Hist. Franc.*, lib. V, c. xxxix.

<sup>2</sup> Labbe, Council. Tolet., III, t. V. c. 1013.

benefit was to be the task of St. Isidore when at the turn of the century the "teacher of medieval Spain" succeeded his brother to the episcopal office in Seville.

It is only with this retrospect in view that we can justly appreciate St. Isidore's position and achievements. Too frequently have historians entirely overlooked or at best vastly underestimated his services to mankind. St. Isidore educated Spain by means of the monastic and episcopal schools. As the Catechetical Schools of old were the Christian weapons in the conflict against pagan philosophy, so did these new schools elevate the standards prevalent in the private and public life of the early Middle Ages.

Peace, we know, is possible only in order, and order rests on justice and charity, but justice and charity are meaningless unless they be grounded on principles infinitely secure of contradictions. St. Isidore's program rested on these. "From all sections of Spain multitudes of young men drawn by the love of study flocked to the immense monastery erected by him a short distance from his episcopal city of Seville, whither the widespread blessing of living under such a benevolent father had most of all attracted them."<sup>3</sup> Obligatory study of Greek and Hebrew as well as of history, geography, astronomy, mathematics and law bridged the chasm of racial difference; thus mutual relations between Romans and those of Teutonic and Germanic lineage perfected the Spanish union. Again other pupils St. Isidore acquainted with Aristotelian philosophy, thereby anticipating the Arabian exponents of the Stagirite by several centuries.

Another important means he employed to preserve national peace was his policy of convoking national councils. From the frequency of such acts, later writers infer the existence of a Spanish church independent of Rome. But research proves the contrary, for there existed a warm friendship between the Bishop of Seville and Pope St. Gregory the Great. In fact, the Roman Pontiff honored St. Isidore with the title "Vicar of the Apostolic See," which he retained by the express approval of succeeding popes. St. Isidore's visit to Pope Boniface V about the year 619 is another criterion of ecclesiastical harmony between Spain and the Mother Church. Frequent national assemblies were at St. Isidore's time of paramount importance, since

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<sup>3</sup> *Vita S. Isid. Hispal.*, cap. v. n. 17.

Spain was then a newly organized nation composed of contrasting cultures.

As "Vicar of the Apostolic See" St. Isidore's filial obedience to Rome was conspicuous, yet without blemish, honorable, sincere. From his clergy he demanded faithful observance of canon law; his people he continuously admonished to respect the apostolic regulations, the writings of the Fathers, and the wise institutions established by the Church. His own example led the way. "Never," says he, "do I exercise any authority in the Church of Christ except I first render humble, devoted, reverential obedience to the Roman pontiff in all things as to the vicar of God. Whoever raises up in protest against it I proclaim a heretic; unhesitatingly I would expel him from the communion of the faithful. In doing so I would not act by my own will but rather under a resolute, unalterable precept commanded by the very authority of the Holy Ghost."<sup>4</sup>

Throughout his entire life St. Isidore promoted the monastic life, not only for the sanctification of the monks, but also for the welfare of the Spanish commonwealth. In the tenth canon ("*De monasteriis non convellendis*") of the Second Council of Seville, 619, he calls down divine wrath upon those who by either a "sentiment of violent cupidity, or fraud, or treacherous hypocrisy" should aim at the annihilation of the monasteries. At the same council, too, he adopted measures against the Acephali, the last Arian remnant in Spain, by his "scriptural and patristic erudition, profound argumentation and natural eloquence."<sup>5</sup>

The liturgy, too, received careful attention, not by the addition of provincial practices but by firm adherence to antiquity. "The order of Mass and of the liturgical prayers whereby divine oblations are offered to God has at first been regulated by St. Peter and is, in like form, to be carried out throughout the whole universe."<sup>6</sup> At the Fourth Council of Toledo (633), three years before his death, this liturgical reform was made obligatory upon all Spanish churches. The counsel that the Saint addressed to this national assembly is worthy of mentioning here. "As long as you observe with an unreserved mind all the ecclesiastical and civil laws which you have wholeheartedly accepted herewith, your life upon earth will be a contented one; you shall enjoy prosperity and peace. But the day you abandon the

<sup>4</sup> S. Isid. Hispal., *Epist.* vii.

<sup>5</sup> Catholic Encyclopedia, "Acephali," I.

<sup>6</sup> S. Isid. Hispal., "*De Officiis Ecclesiasticis*," lib. i, c, xv.

precepts of the Lord, unprecedented catastrophies will befall you, the Gothic race will tumble under sword, famine, and pestilence.”<sup>7</sup>

Of greatest consequence, however, was St. Isidore's literary activity. Every true historian pays him honest tribute for having transmitted “the treasures of the sinking Roman civilization to the rising Teutonic world.” It is impossible to offer more than an indication of his works, since he wrote on practically every subject then known to man: on theology, philosophy, jurisprudence, literature, and all phases of science. But he is best known for his *Etymologiae*, a work in which he discusses the highest and the lowest, God and the tools of everyday labor. St. Thomas in the thirteenth century had frequent recourse to the *Etymologiae*, especially for definitions. While it is true that the derivation of some of the words studied appears far-fetched nowadays—for instance, “the vulture gets its name from its slow flight (*a volatu tardo*), and . . . horses are called equine (*equi*) because those harnessed together in spans are *equal*, being a pair and maintaining the same gait”<sup>8</sup>—yet his contribution to culture is none the less superb considering the enormous span of thirteen hundred years between St. Isidore and the student of today with all the tools of criticism at his elbow. The Saint is charged too with lack of originality. But an honest and painstaking scrutiny of the time reveals that “after the time of St. Augustine, the condition of Christian Europe was not favorable to speculation, and it was not until the dawn of the era of Neo-Latin civilization that in new circumstances, and in a different social and political climate, the schoolmen completed the task begun by the Fathers.”<sup>9</sup> St. Gregory of Tours lamenting over the restless times wrote: “*Vae diebus nostris quia periit studium litterarum a nobis.*”<sup>10</sup> St. Isidore, who drew dialectic and rhetoric from Boethius, medicine from Caelius Aurelianus, cosmology from Lactantius, Pliny, Solinus and Suetonius, may be compared to a general who by his judicious foresight saves invaluable lives from destruction.

When St. Isidore died in 636 he had accomplished much. He had inoculated a pagan civilization with Christian thought, he had established national and spiritual unity, he had raised his

<sup>7</sup> *Vita S. Isid. Hispal.*, cap. ix.

<sup>8</sup> L. Thorndike, *History of Medieval Europe* (Boston, 1928), c. vii.

<sup>9</sup> Turner, *History of Philosophy* (Boston, 1929), p. 235.

<sup>10</sup> Migne, *Patr. Lat.*, Vol. lxxi, col. 159.

countrymen's ideals from the level of the mere political to the heights of the supernatural. The nation's tribute was paid by the Eighth Council of Toledo in 653 and unanimously re-affirmed by the Fifteenth Council of Toledo thirty-five years later: "The extraordinary doctor, the latest ornament of the Catholic Church, the most learned man of the latter ages, always to be named with reverence, Isidore."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Catholic Encyclopedia, "St. Isidore of Seville," VIII.

### THE SHEPHERDESS

*(St. Catherine of Alexandria)*

CAMILLUS LILLIE, O.P.

A Shepherdess she walks before  
And leads by Wisdom's staff the flock  
Of erring sheep into the fold,  
That both might go to sacrifice—  
The Flock and Maid of eighteen years—  
And win alike the crown of gold.