There can be no doubt that the central claims of the Christian faith are deeply intertwined with historical events—a Christian ignorant of history is a Christian without any sense of his own identity. Nevertheless, ignorance of our past has never been more widespread among educated Westerners than it is today; despite the technological marvels of modernity, the post-Christian West has lost its memory and thus stands in danger of losing its very soul.

As with all educational problems, this crisis has its foundations in childhood education, which has moved resolutely over the past three decades away from teaching “history” in the traditional sense, substituting the social sciences and mere cultural exposure in history’s place. In many school curricula for children, the only appearance “history” makes is as a form of trivia—arbitrary facts about far-away times and places that are unlikely to make
a radical impact on the young student’s understanding of the world and his place in it. Catholic children are left without a robust sense of identity as Catholics; instead, the media and prevailing culture fill the vacuum, providing students with, at best, a poor understanding of their Church’s history and of the civilizations and societies shaped by Catholic culture.

Thus there is a tremendous responsibility imposed on the Catholic parents and educators of today. I would even argue that they are tasked with providing historical training as surely as they are tasked with providing moral and religious formation. Without the former, the latter will always rest on an imperfect foundation, for a young person without a proper historical education is liable to be swept away when confronted with false or tendentious narratives or with slanders against the history of his Church.

False historical narratives are not far to seek; in fact, many of them are embedded in the fabric of our culture, saturating our minds with prejudices and preconceptions that are hostile to our Church and its traditions and hostile to historical fact. The prevalence of anti-Catholic historical narratives is especially marked in the English-speaking world, where the legacy of Reformation-era propaganda and confessional history is enduringly anti-Catholic. The crude slanders of John Foxe in his sixteenth-century Book of Martyrs gave way, over the centuries, to the more sophisticated (and more decidedly anti-Christian) rationalism of Edward Gibbon in the eighteenth century and to the casual, socially respectable anti-Catholicism of Henry Charles Lea in the nineteenth. English-language historiography is thus leavened with anti-Catholicism in a way that has unavoidably influenced English-speaking Catholics. One can detect the echoes of this tradition even today, as many otherwise fine school textbooks retain an
anti-Catholic tone, even to the point of including myths that have been long since debunked by professional historical scholarship.

Outside the English-speaking world, moreover, the aggressive secularism of our time has taken a similar toll, even in countries that were devoutly Catholic in their former days. Famously, the 2004 proposed constitution for the European Union neglected to mention Christianity at all, even among the historically shared values of Europeans. Thus we live in a time of great need; parents and educators have to be able to turn somewhere for materials to educate their children on the history of the Western world.

Into this gaping breach steps TAN Books, which for decades has been fighting a lonely and increasingly desperate battle against the misinformation about the Church that dominates the press and the airwaves. Over the years, TAN has sought to publish both new works and reprinted classics on Catholic devotional life, dogma, liturgy, theology, and history. Now TAN has accepted a new challenge in response to the needs of the time: providing the materials that homeschooling parents desperately need. I can personally attest to the timeliness of TAN’s new mission; as a homeschooling father, I know how hard it can be to find materials that are trustworthy, intellectually stimulating, and engaging for children. Phillip Campbell’s *The Story of Civilization* series is all of the above and more. Both he and TAN deserve enormous praise for bringing this project to fruition. More so than any other academic field, history has had an unfulfilled need for materials of this kind for many, many years.

Here in volume 2, Phillip Campbell presents a sophisticated, integrated narrative of late antique and medieval history. This is no small undertaking—he explains the
creation of a Christian civilization on Roman and Greek foundations, the fall of the Roman Empire in the west, and the rise of medieval Europe alongside its Byzantine and Islamic counterparts.

For many centuries, unfortunately, the Middle Ages were presented to students in a one-dimensional fashion, as a time of ignorance, barbarism, superstition, and general decline. Yet as more enlightened scholarship has recognized, the medieval period was a time of tremendous creativity and vibrancy in the arts, philosophy, theology, law, politics, economics, and religious life. In these pages, therefore, the student will discover a living, breathing medieval period in which the papacy, monasteries, universities, guilds, and mendicant orders exercised a formative role alongside the perennial endurance of older ideals inherited from classical antiquity. King and peasant, monk and crusader, heretic and sinner all find their place here, on the eve of the Age of Discovery and the dawn of the early modern era.

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INTRODUCTION

The Journey Continues

Have you ever read a story that was divided up into several different volumes? Perhaps you have journeyed through Middle Earth with J. R. R. Tolkien in his epic trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, or visited Narnia with C. S. Lewis in his seven-volume series, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Or maybe you’ve seen the movies from the *Star Wars* franchise. These are all examples of one long story broken up into smaller parts.

The story of history, the story of our civilization, works much the same way. Although it is a long story with lots of different people, scenes, places, and events, it is still just one long narrative. But because it is so long, it helps to break the story up into smaller sections, or volumes.

What you have here is the second volume in *The Story of Civilization*. Through this book, your journey through the past continues. We last left off with the Roman emperor Constantine and his battle against the forces of
Maxentius on the banks of the Tiber River in the year 312 A.D. Here, Constantine, who at the time was a pagan ruler, had a dream the night before battle where he saw the Chi-Rho symbol—a symbol for the Christian God. Below this, he saw the words “In this sign, conquer.” Constantine had all his soldiers paint the Chi-Rho on their shields and marched them into battle. His forces won, prompting him to convert to Christianity. This was one of the most important moments in the history of mankind because from there, Constantine would go on to pass the Edict of Milan in 313, which made Christianity legal.

Before Constantine, we went back a long way, all the way to the earliest nomads and through the ancient kingdoms of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and Greece. We also told the story of the Israelites, whom so much of the Old Testament is focused on, and the story of Jesus coming as our Savior. We covered the three centuries after the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, which took us into the spread of the early Church under the rule of the Roman Empire. It was a tumultuous period for the first Christians, with much persecution and even martyrdom in some cases, but that all changed when Constantine had his dream.

**In This Volume**

In the years following Constantine’s victory and his passing of the Edict of Milan, Christianity began to spread. Without mass and organized persecutions by the Romans, Christians were able to practice their religion without fear of death or imprisonment. A culture, or civilization, based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ began to form—this civilization became known as Christendom.

We will see how Christendom began to spread all across Europe and how this brought about a better way
of life for millions of people. We will encounter many
great historical figures in the Church, men like Benedict,
Patrick, and Ambrose and women like Joan of Arc and
Catherine of Siena. We will be introduced to great kings
and fight alongside their knights as they rush into battle.
We will study the architecture of the medieval world,
specifically the Gothic and Romanesque styles that the
massive cathedrals of Europe were built in during this
time. And we will learn about the struggles civilization
faced, including the spread of the Black Death, the Hun-
dred Years’ War, and the Wars of the Roses.

Along the way, you’re sure to learn all sorts of new and
exciting things. For example, did you know that monks
were the first to make use of clocks? Did you know that
St. Patrick was once kidnapped by pirates and St. Bernard
of Clairvaux once excommunicated a swarm of flies? Did
you know the pope lived in France for a time instead of
Rome or that St. Michael once burned a hole in a bishop’s
head for ignoring his command to build a monastery on
a rocky island? Did you know a plague spread out across
Europe and killed millions of people? Did you know
that knights fought with all sorts of weapons, including
swords, lances, maces, and crossbows? Did you know
Marco Polo was one of the most famous explorers who
ever lived and Leonardo da Vinci one of the most famous
painters?

Hopefully you see that you’ll be learning about all sorts
of wonderful people, places, and events, as well as some
things that might even be a bit scary. By the time you get
through reading this volume, you’ll know exactly what life
was like in the Middle Ages, including what people ate
and did for fun, how they fought wars, what books they
liked to read, and how they constructed massive cathe-
drals and castles without any modern technology. You’ll
learn about what sort of professions were common in the villages and cities and what inventions were brought about then that we still use today. You’ll also learn about the spread of the Church and the holy men and women who came before you, people whom you are more connected to than you think because of your own place in the Body of Christ.

So prepare yourself for another journey back in time. Soon you’ll be fighting alongside knights and navigating the hidden corridors of castles, praying with monks in desert caves and standing before the altars of immense Gothic cathedrals. Soon you’ll discover that living in the medieval world was an adventure unlike any other.
CHAPTER 1

The Christian Empire

Christendom

Have you ever noticed the resemblance between children and their parents? Often a child will look like his parents—he will have the same hair color or maybe the same facial structure. Sometimes a son will behave like his dad or a daughter like her mother.

But although children look and act like their parents, they will develop their own unique personality as they grow. They will remain an image of their parents but will have their own character traits and ideas and will eventually become their own man or woman.

This is not unlike the relationship between the Roman Empire and Christian Europe. In this book, we will see how Christian Europe was like that child, how it came from the Roman Empire. In the beginning, it retained the laws, culture, and organizational structure of the Roman Empire. But as centuries passed, Christian
Europe began to develop a character of its own. It never lost what it inherited from Rome, but it grew into something newer and greater than Rome could ever be—a civilization built entirely on the teachings of Jesus Christ.

We use the word Christendom to refer to the times and places where society was based on the Christian religion. During this time, Christian kingdoms were united under the spiritual leadership of the pope, the bishop of Rome and successor of St. Peter. This book is largely the story of the origin and growth of Christendom.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. When our story begins, there were no Christian kingdoms. There was only the Roman Empire.

**Constantine Versus Licinius**

In the year 313, the empire was split into eastern and western halves. The emperor of the west was Constantine, who had recently converted to Christianity. The emperor of the east was a man named Licinius, who was a pagan. Licinius and Constantine did not like each other but agreed to come together to issue the Edict of Milan, an important document making Christianity a legal religion in the Roman Empire. Up until this point, it had been outlawed.

The Roman Empire in the west was under the control of a Christian emperor, but Christianity was not the official religion of the empire. In fact, probably fewer than one in every ten people were Christians. Most Christians lived in cities, and most cities were in the east, under the rule of Licinius.

Since Licinius and Constantine did not get along well, they kept invading each other’s territory and fighting with one another. In the year 324, Constantine marched an army east and defeated Licinius once and for all. Licinius
was killed and Constantine became the sole ruler of the Roman Empire.

**A New Day for Christianity**

One Roman emperor defeating a rival was nothing new, but Constantine was the first Christian emperor. Under Constantine and his successors, the empire gradually began to change. Over time, its laws and customs came to be based on Christian principles. For example, Constantine passed laws prohibiting gladiatorial combat and feeding criminals to wild animals. He also passed laws improving the treatment of slaves.

One of the greatest changes in the Roman Empire was the construction of new churches. During the age of persecution, Christian churches were often built inside private homes; whole sections of a house would be remodeled and turned into a worship space, complete with altars and baptismal fonts. Public churches were not unknown—many cities in the east had large public churches—but they were not as common.

After the legalization of Christianity, Christians began building large, magnificent churches in public. Some of these churches were called *basilicas*; a basilica was a very large or important church. Constantine himself gave large sums of money to fund the building of these wonderful basilicas, many of which still stand to this day.

The biggest change Constantine made was to move the capital of the empire. The emperors had not lived in Rome for many decades; they spent their time on the frontiers fighting barbarians, or they lived in the east. The east was where the major cities and wealth of the empire were. So for his capital, Constantine chose the city of Byzantium on the Hellespont, at the point where Europe and Asia meet. It was closer to the east, almost in the center of
Roman territory, not far from the spot where the Persian king Xerxes once marched his armies into Greece centuries earlier. It stood on high ground and was protected by the sea on three sides.

In 330, Constantine founded his new capital and renamed Byzantium Constantinople, meaning “City of Constantine.” Due to his moving the capital there, from this point onward we will refer to the old Eastern Roman Empire as the Byzantine Empire.

In Constantinople, Constantine constructed many wonderful churches and public buildings. He built the Hippodrome, the biggest chariot-racing arena in the empire. He founded a new Senate in imitation of the old Roman Senate. Many of the wealthy and important people of the empire moved to Constantinople to be close to the imperial government. Constantinople became the most important city in the Roman Empire.

With the legalization of Christianity, Christian writers began publishing their works and arguing publicly for
the Gospel. Many Romans had the opportunity to hear eloquent bishops preaching in magnificent new churches, thousands of Roman people began converting to the faith, and people started abandoning the old pagan temples.

**Putting Down Heresies**
But with the rise of Christianity came more arguments too. Wherever Christianity spread, there were always destructive heresies that corrupted some aspect of the faith. The most popular heresy of Constantine’s time was Arianism. Arianism was named for Arius, a priest who taught that Jesus Christ was not divine, meaning He was not the Son of God.

Before long, the Christians of the empire were divided on the question of Jesus’s nature. Was Arius right about Christ? Was He less than divine? When Emperor Constantine saw how confused Christians were on this question, he encouraged all the bishops of the Church to gather together at a city called Nicaea to discuss the question.

It was the biggest gathering of Christian bishops until that time. Constantine himself attended, as did representatives of the pope. The bishops of the Church all agreed that Arius was in error; Jesus was divine, of the same nature as God the Father. Arius was condemned as a heretic.

This meeting at Nicaea was called an *ecumenical council*. An ecumenical council is when bishops from the universal Church, in union with and under the pope, gather in a meeting to discuss matters of doctrine and discipline. An ecumenical council is bigger than a *synod*; a synod is only a regional meeting, but an ecumenical council is attended by bishops from everywhere.

The Council of Nicaea was the first ecumenical council, but it would not be the last. Perhaps you’ve never heard
of Nicaea before, but you owe more to Nicaea than you know. The council wrote a statement of belief called the Nicene Creed. The Nicene Creed professes the faith of the Church about God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the doctrines of the Church. You say it every Sunday in Mass after the homily. For almost 1,700 years, the Church has continued to profess her faith with the Nicene Creed.

**Julian the Apostate**

Paganism was not dead yet, however. After the death of Constantine, there was rivalry among his heirs. Eventually Constantine’s nephew Julian came to the throne in 361. Julian was raised a Christian, but he abandoned Christianity and returned to paganism. A Christian who abandons Christianity is called an *apostate*. Julian is known to history as Julian the Apostate.

Julian tried to reduce the influence of Christians
in the empire. He forbade Christians from teaching, funded the construction of pagan temples, and even tried to help the Jews rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem because he thought it would offend Christians. But these efforts did not succeed. There were too many Christians in the empire to restore paganism. Julian died in battle in 363 after fewer than two years as emperor. Julian was the last pagan emperor of Rome.

**Emperor Theodosius**

That’s not to say that Christian emperors could not also give the Church a hard time. Sometimes Christian emperors tried to push the Church around. Other times they thought they could get away with behaving badly. A great example of this is Emperor Theodosius.

Theodosius reigned from 379 to 395. Like all emperors of that time, he was a Christian, and a very devoted one at that. But sometimes he let his temper get the better of him. In the year 390, after one of his officers was killed in Thessalonica, Emperor Theodosius ordered his soldiers to slaughter the people of the city. It was a dreadful thing—around seven thousand people were killed by the emperor’s men.

The most influential bishop of the day was St. Ambrose, bishop of Milan, in northern Italy. When Ambrose heard about this, he refused to celebrate Mass in the emperor’s presence. Theodosius tried to enter the basilica of Milan, but Ambrose stopped him at the door and forbade him to enter. Theodosius, realizing that he was being excluded from the sacraments, went back to his palace and wept.

Ambrose intended to keep this up until the emperor publicly repented of the killings. But Theodosius was stubborn and would not repent. This went on for eight months.
Let’s step inside the basilica of Milan and hear St. Ambrose discuss this very matter. He has just sent out a letter to the emperor in hopes that he will have a change of heart:

The readings from Mass have just concluded. The deacons, presbyters, and acolytes take their seats as the congregation prepares for the homily. A venerable old man clothed in robes and wearing the bishop’s miter—a tall hat worn by Catholic bishops—ascends toward the pulpit. He has bushy eyebrows and penetrating dark eyes. This is Ambrose, bishop of Milan, one of the best preachers in the Church.

The congregation is eagerly anticipating Ambrose’s homily. They are hoping he will have some word of the crisis with Emperor Theodosius.

“My brethren,” Ambrose begins, “no doubt many of you are wondering about the situation between myself and our beloved emperor, Theodosius. I do not normally like to preach on such matters, but the issue has gotten so out of hand that I feel I must speak.”

The congregation shifts in their seats. They lean forward with attentive expectation.

“As you know, eight months ago, in a fit of rage, our Emperor Theodosius ordered the massacre of the people of Thessalonica, in which seven thousand persons were killed. Men. Women. Children. A horrible slaughter.”

The congregation mumbles in disapproval. “Hardly a Christian sort of thing to do!” one woman says under her breath.

“I do not deny that the emperor has a zeal for the faith,” the bishop continues. “But he has a natural temper that, if stirred up, is difficult for him to restrain.”

Ambrose’s voice rises. He moves his arms as he speaks.
The people smile. This is the sort of preaching Ambrose is famous for.

“I have never heard of anything being done like what the emperor did in Thessalonica. And I have told him so. As soon as I heard about the bloodshed, I wrote these sentiments down in a letter and sent it to the imperial court. May the good Lord move our beloved Theodosius to repentance for this rash deed!”

A loud slam suddenly silences the bishop as the doors of the basilica fly open. The congregation turns to see what the commotion is. A messenger stands panting at the door, clutching a crumpled piece of parchment in his hands that bears the imperial seal.

“It’s from the imperial court!” some of the deacons murmur.

“Do not delay, lad! Bring me the message,” Bishop Ambrose says, motioning the messenger forward. The young messenger catches his breath and runs up to the altar, handing the parchment to the holy bishop. Ambrose’s eyebrows furl. His eyes dart back and forth, scanning the writing carefully. The congregation waits in hushed anticipation.

Ambrose holds the parchment aloft and waves it in triumph. “Praised be to Jesus Christ, who moves men’s hearts! Our emperor has received my letter and he desires penance! He repents of the slaughter at Thessalonica and pledges to do penance for his sin!”

Cheers erupt in the basilica. Ambrose smiles as he shuffles down from the pulpit toward the altar to begin the Eucharistic liturgy. He glances up at the cross that hangs over the altar.

“Thank you, Lord,” he whispers.
Theodosius cared about his salvation and was humble enough to listen to the advice of Bishop Ambrose. Good Christian emperors and kings like this, who would try to follow the Gospel in their actions, would arise. But there were also many rulers who ignored the Church or even tried to harm her. We will see many of those in our journey through Christendom.
By the time of Theodosius, Christians made up the majority of people in the empire. In 380, a law was passed making Christianity the official religion of the empire. A few years later, Theodosius passed other laws outlawing the pagan cults and prohibiting pagan sacrifices. Though he was quick to anger, Theodosius ended up doing much good for the Church. When he died, St. Ambrose composed a funeral speech in his honor, praising the help he had given Christians.

Roman society was turning more and more Christian, while Roman power was in the process of dying.