



# INTEGRITAS

Wyoming Catholic College

## **“Constantine, Quixote, and Cowboys”** *By Professor Kyle Washut, Academic Dean*

On May 29th, 1453, barely a week after the Feast of Pentecost, the medieval walls of Constantinople, capitol city of the Roman Empire, fell to the pounding artillery of the Ottoman Turks. Garbed in an ornate armored breastplate and helmet and wielding a sword from the back of his warhorse, Emperor Constantine XI was overcome by the awe-inspiring power of early modern warfare. So it was that the last Roman emperor passed from this earth—one-thousand, four-hundred and eighty years after Caesar Augustus was named first emperor of Rome.

The violent culmination of a fifty-three day siege, with the Venetian Barbaro observing that “blood flowed in the city like rainwater in the gutters after a sudden storm,” Constantinople’s fall was the final ugly chapter in a glorious, millenium-and-a-half story. The most beautiful city in the world, with roots reaching back to the Fall of Troy and the epic songs of Homer, she had blossomed into the brilliant capitol of a deeply Christian empire—a Catholic civilization that promised to realize the hopes and dreams of the Western Tradition. Now the city that stood as a shining



**Professor Kyle Washut**  
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symbol for so many years had finally and forevermore been conquered by the Modern world, ushered out by gunpowder, extremist ideology, and a novel, non-Christian empire built on the belief that faith and reason are ultimately at odds with one another. So it is that historians mark another death on this day, saying that the medieval era passed into the history books on that fateful 29<sup>th</sup> of May.

One hundred and fifty years later, Miguel de Cervantes, scarcely back from his own battles with the Muslims on the doorstep of Western Europe, would pen a story that echoed the very same judgments made by modern historians. According to the initial interpretations of his famous tale, "The Ingenious Gentleman Sir Quixote of La Mancha," those who practiced the noble tradition of knight errantry were powerless in the face of modern Islamic tactics. The once-revered adventurers who upheld the moral and spiritual certainties of Medieval Christianity were now little more than antiquated comedians—the laughingstocks of Modernity.

In many ways, the fall of Constantinople and of knight errantry could be seen as a conclusion, as the end of the glorious arc of the Western Tradition. It was a tradition that had sung Homeric Epics, invented philosophy, founded a Roman Republic, and witnessed God Himself walk among us in human form. It was a tradition that shaped the founding of the Catholic Church and flowered into theology, Christian philosophy, literature, art, music, and government. And then, at last, it was a tradition conquered; a tradition of decline and fall, inevitably, like all traditions before and after it. Now, with Europe cut off from the potent mystic streams of the East, a harsh rationalism developed. This intellectual trend led to the philosophical revolution of Descartes, the political machinations of Machiavelli, and the dual splintering of Christianity and Christendom that followed hard upon the Reformation.

If that was the narrative arc that we believed here at Wyoming Catholic College, these past four years—years spent studying the greatest ideas and minds

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of the Western Tradition—would be a kind of macabre, archaeological nostalgia. On this evening where we celebrate your time with us in Lander, we would award you with broken swords or crumbling bricks from the walls of Constantinople, in memory of “the once-great tradition” you were all privileged to recall during your time at Wyoming Catholic.

But this, in fact, is not the whole story; far from it.

Cervantes, despite his intention to mock the outdated knightly romances that saturated Europe’s literary scene, found himself falling in love with Don Quixote; falling in love with the foolish, sincere old man, in spite of himself. By the end of his novel, he had come to see a nobility in this holy fool—in this man misplaced in time, striving to be a knight-errant in a world that had left such ideals behind. Amidst all Quixote’s foibles and idiosyncrasies, Cervantes realized, there was something truly great. The traditional trappings of the knight were indeed unwieldy in the modern setting, but the author came to hope that the real power and goodness at the heart of Quixote’s quest would ride again one day.

*“We are reminded that the fire of Pentecost is far more creative than destructive.”*

That which was true for Cervantes’ Quixote was true for Western Tradition, as well. The Eastern Roman Empire, despite its final, battered form, had existed long enough for the seeds of a new future to be sown in Western Europe; its fall provided the impetus for those seeds to burst into new life. We are reminded that the fire of Pentecost is far more creative than destructive.

Europe’s merchants, unable to travel safely under the auspices of Constantinople as they sought spices and wealth from the Orient, were forced to seek new pathways westward. In 1492, a new land was discovered. Forty years after that, the Virgin of Guadalupe appeared, claiming an entire continent for her Son—a replacement for the city that had fallen less than a hundred years before, and the promise of new evangelization.

To this virgin land, Spanish nobility sent their young sons in search of fame and fortune. These young men, fleeing the petrification and decay of knight errantry (and the melancholy of their own limited futures in Europe), brought to America the image of a daring Quixote—a horseman roaming the country in defense of the old ways, in search of adventure, and inspired by the hope of a bright new future.

And so the seeds of a new myth were planted in American soil. But it was a myth steeped in the trappings of the past. In this new myth, heraldic crests were laid aside, yet the new horsemen rode “for the brand,” as before. Instead of swords, they bore firearms and lassos; instead of helmets, they

*“In the Cowboy, we see ourselves shouldering the weight of history, succeeding like the great men and women who came before us, and carrying our story into a youthful and unstoried land.”*

wore wide-brimmed hats. And so emerged a hero where past and present were wonderfully melded: a knight who carried the romantic nobility of the great Don Quixote, but in a modern guise; a paladin who was not of Arthur or Charlemagne’s court, but who sprang from the richness of this new, American land. The Cowboy was born—

modernity’s revival of the goodness that was lost when the knight errant fell out of favor. This was noble, aged wine, but in new and vigorous wineskins.

Despite his haunted past—despite the great tragedy and devastation that is his only true birthright—the Cowboy offers the West a hopeful vision rather than a tragic one. His is the world of happy endings. Through the Cowboy, this New West has become the world of myth and of heroism. In this most profoundly American of epics, we find a new landscape to serve as backdrop for the grandeur and scope of the Western Tradition. In the Cowboy, we see ourselves shouldering the weight of history, succeeding like the great men and women who came before us, and carrying our story into a youthful and unstoried land.

This cowboy hat we give you tonight, therefore, while certainly a

recognition of your achievement over these past four years, is first and foremost, a sign of our hope. Like the Cowboy, you have been immersed in the grandeur of the West—both in the wilds of the Rocky Mountains and in the majesty of the Western tradition. And you have drunk deeply of its tragedies: the fall of Troy, of Rome, and of Constantinople and Christendom. Yet despite carrying the weight of these many falls, you ride forth with the loving enthusiasm of Don Quixote, with that pure desire to personify and protect the tradition and land that has nurtured and guided you for these last four years.

May you, unlike the Don, embody this tradition in a manner well-suited to this new Western landscape of challenges and opportunities. And like the Cowboys before you, may you boldly defend and promulgate this inheritance anew. †

***Kyle Washut, S.T.L., S.T.M.***

*Kyle Washut, a Wyoming native, has had a long association with the College. Initially hired as the inaugural Assistant Dean for Student Life, Kyle now serves as acting Dean of the College.*

*Kyle has a licentiate in Sacred Theology, with a focus on the Byzantine theological tradition, and is doctoral candidate for the Pontifical Theology Faculty at the University of St. Mary of the Lake.*

*During his time at WCC, Kyle has taught a variety of courses in theology, philosophy, mathematics, Latin, Trivium, and Humanities.*



## *Ode to Constantine XI*

**By Professor Adam Cooper**

WCC Instructor of Humanities and Trivium

O last of Rome, among small-minded citizens,  
The bickering children of your mother's house,  
Your gaze was calm and grave and kind  
As is the glowing lamp  
Upon the holy ikon's deep-set brow.  
Time and again the hubbub of your folk  
Grew still beneath the saddened query  
In your eye, the high and clear command.  
Mild as a Levite, in dignity  
Not overlord but minister,  
Unbowed by all the majesty on your back,  
Though draped in Augustus' toga,  
Shouldering Aeneas' shield,  
Bearing the standard-cross your namesake bore—  
Son of your mother's namesake, Helen, Saint—  
Raising the golden staff Achilles, chidden,  
Gave back to humbled Agamemnon  
(And Zeus the watcher thundered,  
Glad to see us mortals kiss the rod  
That measures out our limit in the dust)  
All for the last time.  
Unbowed by all that majesty,  
You went with warrior-grace,  
The poise of one who does not miss or flinch,

Because he makes his peace with all his own,  
And death.

Spite of your railing citizens, you had stooped  
Before the haughty vicarage of Rome,  
A suppliant, and blushing royalty  
Redoubled in your veins;  
But kings and chevaliers  
In England, France, and Spain—  
Though your white cape, your white Arabian charger  
Blazed and flitted in their dreams—  
Ignore the summons of a Caesar pleading  
Not coercing.  
Only from Venice, Genoa  
Free captains of ebullient Republics—  
Adventurers of a young and bright  
And almost alien Europe—  
Clasp hands with you,  
And an Italian Justinian  
Arrives to man your gate.  
But petty lords of France and England,  
Hurling titles at each other,  
Debase their ancient lines,  
And turn the name of Christian king  
Into a widow's curse.  
They cannot spare a horse  
For the queen of starlit cities and her prince—  
For centuries the bulwark of the West—  
For Hagia Sophia,  
Court of heaven upon earth.

Young man, you rose from where you knelt  
Before Eternal Wisdom's earthly altar,  
Set aside your crown,  
And everything that signified your state—  
Though steady step and penetrating eye  
Still for your mind's anointing spoke.  
And so, like any citizen, you go  
Against the swords and cannon of your foe,  
To be clothed in your heart's purple for a robe.



*Dr. Bob Carlson, Wyoming Catholic College's Founding Dean, holds up a black Stetson at the College's inaugural Matriculation.*

## *Why the Black Stetson?*

At the annual Senior Dinner, each member of the graduating class receives a black Stetson cowboy hat from the College's president. It is a tradition that began with the very first class in 2011, and thanks to the generosity of Paul and Carrie Guschewsky, it continues to this day. In this month's edition of *Integritas*, Dean Kyle Washut explains the historical and poetic basis for the tradition.



*Wyoming Catholic College Graduating Class of 2021*