

“The Fathers of the Church say...”

How often does one hear these words on the radio, or read them in articles, blog posts, and comments! Usually they amount to an appeal to Christian antiquity, to a time when Christians undivided all shared the Church's teachings, “which [the Church] believes... just as if she had but one soul, and one and the same heart, and she proclaims them, and teaches them, and hands them down, with perfect



St. Gregory

harmony, as if she possessed only one mouth” as Saint Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons in Gaul, wrote in the late second century (*Against Heresies* 1.10.2). Not surprisingly, apologists appeal to the Fathers as a way of showing that what the Church believed in her infancy is what she teaches today. Priests illustrate their Sunday sermons with quotations from the Fathers, who provide a pithy phrase, a striking definition, or an edifying interpretation of Scripture. Yet a quotation

from a Father can be taken out of context and misused to question a doctrine or a traditional practice, or to introduce a novelty into the life of the Church. The Fathers too can be abused.

Even their title, “Fathers of the Church,” can lead to confusion: How are they Fathers? How does the Church make them her own? One can reduce this to one question: “Who are the Fathers of the Church?” Certain names come readily to mind: St. Augustine, St. Jerome, St. John Chrysostom, St. Irenaeus. Let us take a look at what makes a Father of the Church; that is, what defines him.

Traditionally there are four notes — four qualities, if you will — that make one a Father of the Church: Antiquity, holiness of life, orthodoxy of doctrine, and approval by the Church. In this essay we shall deal with the first of these notes: *antiquity*.

By *antiquity* we mean the period during which they lived. The first generation of the Fathers of the Church is that which actually sat at the feet of the Holy Apostles or their disciples; for this reason these are called “Apostolic Fathers.” One such Apostolic Father was St. Clement of Rome, third Bishop of Rome and author of an *Epistle to the Corinthians*; it is regarding him that St. Irenaeus, writing just a few generations later, said: “he still heard the echoes of the preaching of the Apostles, and had their traditions before his eyes... And not only he, for there were many still remaining who had been instructed by the Apostles” (*ibid.*

3.3.2). St. Clement's epistle, whose very title recalls St. Paul, witnesses to the teaching and organization of the Church of the first generations. This time the Corinthians were in trouble for seeking to depose their clergy, including their young bishop! St. Clement, as Pope, reminds them to respect and obey the ecclesiastical authorities delegated to guide and teach them. Among other Apostolic Fathers are also St. Ignatius, who succeeded St. Peter in Antioch and is the first to apply the term “Catholic” to the Church, and his friend St. Polycarp; both had been disciples of St. John the Evangelist.

After this first generation, whose writings were generally intended for fellow Christians, there arose the second-century *Apologists*. This second generation, among them St.



St. Augustine

---

*Traditionally there are four notes — four qualities, if you will — that make one a Father of the Church: antiquity; holiness of life; orthodoxy of doctrine; approval by the Church.*

---

Justin Martyr (famous for first reporting Our Lady's title as the “New Eve”), sought to convince the Roman authorities of the falsehood of antichristian accusations (alleged cannibalism, antisocial attitudes, etc.) and at least of the reasonableness of the Gospel. After them there came those who sought to deal with the many and varied heresies (among others St. Irenaeus). During this period emerges the question of the *true sources of the faith*, namely Scripture and Tradition as taught by the Church as opposed to private revelations or competing groups. By this time the Church was settled enough to warrant reflection on her nature, as the works and letters of St. Cyprian of Carthage in the mid-third century show. The period ends roughly with the Edict of Milan (AD 313), which officially put an end to the persecution of Christians.

The *Golden Age of Patristics* is perhaps the richest in the number of writers, in the precision of Christian doctrine during the period, and in the importance the Church takes on the world stage. To be quite precise it extends from the Edict of Milan to the death of Pope St. Leo the Great († 461), which coincides with the end of the Roman Empire in the West (officially 475, but in fact a good decade earlier). To this age belong such familiar



St. Ambrose

(continued on page 7)

Fathers as St. John Chrysostom, St. Ambrose, St. Augustine, St. Jerome, St. Athanasius, and too many others to enumerate here. Such great issues as the Blessed Trinity, the natures and Person of Christ, proper biblical exegesis, and many others were sorted out in this period, which is also that of the first ecumenical councils (Nicaea, Constantinople I, Ephesus, Chalcedon...). After the golden age come those simply styled the *Later Fathers*. This period extends to Pope St. Gregory the Great ("Founder of the Middle Ages") and St. Isidore of Seville ("Last Schoolmaster of the Ancient World") in the West, and to St. John Damascene, defender of the icons, in the East. It was a different world then: while Pope St. Clement had been the leader of a small Church persecuted by a pagan Roman Empire, Pope St. Gregory reigned in what was a province of the Byzantine Empire, St. Isidore of Seville was born in Arian Visigothic Spain — a situation he helped remedy — and St. John Damascene was a Christian civil servant in Muslim Syria.



St. Jerome

To be a Father of the Church, then, one must have lived sometime in the first seven centuries AD. In the next *Newsletter* we shall consider further notes of the Fathers of the Church. †