

FOURTH TO SEVENTH CENTURIES

Part Two: Church Fathers, Liturgical Developments and Missionaries of the Era

In Part 2 of this era of Christianity, we will look at:

- **Fathers of the Church**
- **Liturgical developments**
- **Missionaries of the era**

Fathers of the Church

Following Constantine's legalization of Christianity in the Roman Empire, the Church enters a new period in her history known as the *Age of the Fathers*, so called because of the men whose holiness and intellectual contributions will greatly shape the direction of the Church for the future. The body of writings produced by these great teachers is called *patristic* ["father" in Latin] *literature*, and the study of these writings and their authors is called *patristics*. The Church Fathers are some of the most learned people of their time. They devote much of their lives reflecting and writing about the meaning of life and the ministry and teachings of Jesus. Their writings are especially important because they live close to the time of Jesus. They are integral to the conversion of some famous personalities like Blessed John Henry Newman, an Anglican and Oxford professor in the 1800s, and of a good many Protestant ministers in recent decades. In his book *The Fathers of the Church – Expanded Edition*, Mike Aquilina writes:

The church Fathers were a varied lot, ethnically, stylistically, and temperamentally. Tertullian, from North Africa, was a hothead. Origen of Alexandria, in Egypt, was cool and cerebral. St. Jerome, from what is today Croatia, was irascible, almost perpetually annoyed. St. Martin of Tours, in modern-day France, was a military man who adopted pacifism, became a bishop, then took to destroying pagan temples. St. Benedict of Nursia, Italy, was contemplative; St. Justin, from Samaria in Palestine, could be called activist; St. Augustine, another North African, managed to be both extraordinarily active and extraordinarily contemplative.

The Fathers could be further distinguished according to their work. Some were preachers. Some were popes. Some were orators and lawyers. Some

were academic theologians, others monks and hermits. Some wrote "apologies," explaining and defending the Christian faith before hostile or skeptical pagans and Jews. Others were "exegetes," analyzing and expounding the Scriptures. (p.19)

The earliest Fathers of the Church are usually called the *Apostolic Fathers* because they are believed to have known the Apostles or to have been taught by their immediate successors. (In Article 2, we read a small piece on several of the *Apostolic Fathers*.) The fourth and fifth centuries are regarded as the Golden Age of the Church Fathers. Their great intellect and holiness of life are major influences during their time and on the future direction of the Church. The Fathers of these centuries are usually divided into two groups: the "Greek Fathers" from the Eastern church and the "Latin Fathers" from the Western church. Here is an introduction to a few of these 'big guns.'

Fathers of the Church

Holy teachers whose writings extended the tradition of the Apostles. Readings of the Church Fathers have led many Protestant ministers to convert to Catholicism.

St. Basil the Great (324-379), a Greek Father, is the grandson of a martyr and the son of devout parents. Basil is highly intelligent and educated in some of the best schools of his time. As a young adult, he undergoes a profound conversion which he describes in a letter.

Much time had I spent in vanity, and had wasted nearly all my youth acquiring the sort of wisdom made foolish by God. Then once, like a man roused from deep sleep, I turned my eyes to the marvelous light of the truth of the Gospel, and I perceived the uselessness of 'the wisdom of the princes of this world, that come to naught.' I wept many tears over my miserable life, and I prayed that I might receive guidance to admit me to the doctrines of true religion.

Basil goes on to be a hermit and then the founder of many monasteries in the East. The Monks of the Eastern church live according to the Rule written by Basil. Basil is not afraid to take on controversy even if it means taking on the emperor. In his book, *The Fathers of the Church – Expanded Edition*, Mike Aquilina writes:

Named bishop of Caesarea in 370, Basil again took up the work of a founder, this time establishing hospitals, poorhouses, and hostels. He taught and preached prodigiously, fighting the stubborn heresy of Arianism of constant persuasion. Thus, he was a thorn in the side of the Arian emperors, who desperately tried to make him recant. Basil sent home all the imperial emissaries with the message that the bishop of Caesarea was not afraid of the "confiscation of goods"; he had already given up everything. Nor was he afraid of exile or "fire, sword, beasts, and instruments of torture." Amazingly, the emperors backed down and left Basil alone. (ibid, p.144)

St. Ambrose (340-397). When Constantine's *Edict of Milan*, sometimes called the *Edict of Toleration* (313), ends centuries of intermittent persecution of the Church, the question arises: What should be the relationship between Church and State, emperor and bishop? What authority does the emperor have in judging doctrinal issues? Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea represents one view of the Church-State relations, one that ever more closely identifies the throne with the altar. Eusebius' view becomes the dominant model in the East, one that allows the eastern emperor the right to appoint and remove bishops. When Ambrose becomes bishop of Milan, he is determined not to give the emperor control over Church matters. Ambrose's attitude comes to embody the Western church's attitude toward the State.

Born into a Roman noble family, Ambrose is brilliant and wealthy. In his early thirties, during the height of the Arian heresy, he is appointed governor of Milan by the emperor. When a riot breaks out in the city over who is to succeed the Arian bishop who has died, Ambrose comes to the cathedral to restore peace. In a remarkable turn of events, a child's voice shouts out, "Ambrose for bishop!" He is later elected bishop, winning the votes of both Arians and Catholics. But Ambrose refuses the honor because he is only a catechumen and has not yet been baptized. The emperor persuades Ambrose to accede to the wishes of his people. In rapid order, Ambrose receives the sacraments of Initiation (Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist), is ordained a priest, and consecrated a bishop. Ambrose immediately gives away his wealth to the Church and the poor of the city, and applies himself to the study of Scripture and theology. In a short time, he is able to argue effectively against the Arians who wield great influence in the imperial court. Mike Aquilina writes:

An aristocrat, Ambrose operated with ease in influential circles. He did not hesitate to speak his mind to emperors. After Theodosius ordered the massacre of seven thousand people in Thessalonica, Ambrose refused him the sacraments, demanding of the emperor a severe and humiliating public penance. Theodosius complied.

Another challenge presented itself when the emperor Valentinian's mother, who was Arian, moved to Milan and asked her son to give her control of several churches. The emperor complied, issuing the order. But Ambrose incited the people to fill the churches and occupy them, singing, until the emperor saw the error of his ways. Ambrose, of course, prevailed. (ibid p.166)

Concerning the relationship between the Church and the emperor, Ambrose states: "*The Church is God's and it must not be pledged to Caesar.... For the emperor is in the Church, not over the Church; and far from refusing the Church's help, a good emperor seeks it.*"

St. Jerome (342-420) grows up in a part of Italy that is today Croatia and is baptized at eighteen. He is a master of Latin, Greek and Hebrew and delights in studying the classics. A life changing event occurs when Jerome has a vision of himself at heaven's throne, accused of being more in love with Cicero than with Christ. Immediately, he puts aside the Greek classics and concentrates on the study of the gospels. After spending some time as a hermit, he returns to Rome and becomes secretary to Pope Damasus. The Pope commissions him to translate the Hebrew Bible into Latin, a task that takes him and his disciples about 20 years to complete. His translation is known as the *Vulgate* [Latin word for "common people"] and becomes the official translation of the Bible for the Catholic Church for the next thousand years. Jerome is also known for his explosive temper, often using his sharp pen to write fierce letters to his opponents. But he is also quick to show remorse. A pope is said to have remarked, on seeing a picture of Jerome striking his breast with a stone, "You do well to carry that stone, for without it the Church would never have canonized you" (*Butler's Lives of the Saints*).

St. Augustine (354-430), born in Tagaste, North Africa, of a pagan Roman official and a Christian mother, is regarded as the greatest of the Church Fathers. He is raised in the Christian faith without being baptized, and is a student of law, literature and

philosophy. In his late teens, Augustine gives up his faith and cohabits with a woman who bears him a son. The situation lasts for the next 17 years. In his search for meaning, Augustine joins a heretical group called the Manichaeans, who reject the Old Testament, live an austere life and hold a very negative view of the material world and human nature. As Augustine travels from place to place, his mother, St. Monica, keeps chasing him and praying for his conversion.

After accepting a professorship in Milan, Augustine starts to listen to the sermons of Ambrose. This leads to his conversion and baptism. Soon after his mother and son die, Augustine returns to North Africa and settles in the town of Hippo. He is ordained a priest, and some years later becomes the Bishop of Hippo. He spends the rest of his life living in a contemplative community from where he pastors his flock, attacks heretics and writes great books. His most famous works are *The Confessions* (a spiritual autobiography) and *City of God*, which he writes as the Barbarians attack and sack Rome. One of his most famous and most often quoted reflections from *The Confessions* is the following:

*Too late have I loved you, O Beauty of ancient days,
yet ever new!
Too late I loved you! And behold, you were within,
and I abroad, and there I searched for you;
I was deformed, plunging amid those fair forms,
which you had made.
You were with me, but I was not with you.
Things held me far from you—things which, if they
were not in you, were not at all.
You called, and shouted, and burst my deafness.
You flashed and shone, and scattered my blindness.
You breathed odors and I drew in breath—and I pant
for you.
I tasted, and I hunger and thirst.
You touched me, and I burned for your peace.*

(For a lot more on the life and times of St. Augustine, see *The Catholic Church, A Brief Popular History*, Chapter 5.)

What about Church Mothers? In his book *The Fathers of the Church*, Mike Aquilina writes:

“Fathers of the Church” is not just a title, but a metaphor as well. And to many modern minds it raises the question: Were there “Mothers of the Church”?
To which the answer is: yes and no.

We possess very few writings by women from the ancient world. Christian women are probably slightly better represented than their pagan counterparts. Even in Christian societies, however, women faced fewer educational opportunities than men. If women were not in a position to teach and write, then they were not performing the duties usually associated with the Fathers of the Church.

*This does not, however, mean that women were passive members of the Church. The sociologist Rodney Stark, in his compelling study of the first three Christian centuries, **The Rise of Christianity**, concludes that women made up a disproportionate number of converts, that Christianity improved the lives of women in the world, and that women played active roles in the running of the Church. Women were never ordained to the priesthood, but the ordained priesthood was hardly the only—or even the primary—mode of Christian leadership.*

Women made up a great number of the early martyrs, and their stories and their cult of honor were often more popular than those of their male companions. This was true in every part of the Christian world. In Gaul (what is today France), the Christians esteemed St. Blandina as the most courageous of all. In ancient Africa, they honored Sts. Perpetua and Felicity. The Roman Mass, from the Patristic Era till now, has invoked the names of Perpetua and Felicity along with other women of the ancient Church: Agatha, Lucy, Agnes, Cecilia, and Anastasia.

Women were just as active in the monastic movement. The many collections of “Sayings of the Desert Fathers” actually include proverbs by women ascetics, who were addressed as “Amma,” or “Mothers.” (pp 251-252)

Developments in the liturgical life of the Church

The liturgical life of the Church that we experience today has developed during the twenty centuries of the Church’s history. The first several centuries of the Church did not have seven sacraments or a liturgical year with seasons and special feast days. In fact, the liturgy was not celebrated in churches for there were not churches as we know them today. Following is a very brief outline of some of the major developments in the liturgical life of the Church in the early centuries.

Place of worship. The first Christian Jews gather in synagogues for worship. Then they meet in what becomes known as “house church,” some of which

had been built prior to the Edict of Milan in 313. But when Constantine becomes emperor and favors Christianity in his empire, many beautiful churches and basilicas (a particular style of Roman building) are built all over the empire.

Baptism and Eucharist are the principal sacraments in the early Church. It will be the Middle Ages before the Church speaks of seven sacraments. While some infants may have been baptized in the first and second centuries, Baptism is normally reserved for adults. After the *catechumenate* (today's RCIA) is created, the unbaptized usually spend three years preparing for entrance into the Church. By the fourth century, infant baptism with godparents makes its beginning. Christian parents with babies do not want to wait for their infants to become adults before they can receive this very important sacrament. Initially, there are no set texts for the celebration of the Eucharist. It is celebrated in the context of an 'agape' (love feast) meal. Gradually, liturgical texts are written which in time will become the "Roman Rite" and later adopted as the standard Mass text in the Western world. In the meantime, the Eastern Church is developing its liturgical rites. The Eucharist, then called the 'Breaking of the Bread' and the 'Lord's Supper,' starts to be called the "Mass" [from the Latin for "send"]. The people are sent to live in their daily lives what they celebrate at Mass.

For centuries, the **Sacrament of Confirmation** is administered together with Baptism. It later becomes a separate sacrament because the local bishop cannot be present at every baptism. However, to this day in the Eastern church, infants are confirmed when they are baptized.

The history of the **Sacrament of Penance** is complex. The first Christians believe that the baptized will not commit serious sin again since baptism wipes away all sin. But human nature has proven otherwise. Even the baptized are liable to commit serious sin. Serious sin can only be forgiven by the bishop after a very long and hard penance. Around the seventh century, Irish monks bring the practice of individual confession to Europe and it is gradually adopted as the normal way to deal with sin.

Anointing of the Sick is one of several anointings that take place in the early centuries.

Ordination of Clergy involves a simple laying on of hands. The **Sacrament of Marriage** likewise involves a simple blessing but Christians will not have to have their marriage blessed by a priest for many centuries later.

It will also take many centuries for what we call a **Liturgical Calendar** or Church Year to develop. When Christianity separates itself from Judaism, Sunday replaces Saturday as the Sabbath. Also, Sunday is the day Jesus rises from the dead. In 321, Constantine proclaims Sunday a day of rest.

Christmas
**December 25 is a
Roman holiday
in the winter solstice.**

Holy Week begins in Jerusalem around the fourth-century. By the end of that same century, we find Lent as a forty-day period of preparation for catechumens preparing to enter the Church.

Christmas. Nobody knows when Jesus was born, but in the fourth century Christian leaders choose December 25 to celebrate Jesus' birth. Why? December 25 is a Roman holiday in the winter solstice, marking the shortest day of the year of the invincible sun-god Helios. It is natural and logical for Church leaders to turn the sun-god's festival into the Son of God's birthday. In 529, Emperor Justinian declares December 25 not only an official public holiday, but a Christian holy day too. Advent, as a period of preparation for Christmas, has its roots also in the fourth century.

Devotion to Mary and the saints

The early Christians believe that holy men and women who have died in God's grace can intervene before God for those on earth. We find evidence of this on the walls of the *catacombs* (underground burial chambers). These Christians scrawl one-liner prayers on the walls, such as "Vincent, you are in Christ, pray for Phoebe." Around the fourth century, prayers to the saints are included in the official liturgy of the Church. Mary is regarded as the greatest of the Saints, and from early on, Christians have sought her intercession.

Missionaries of the era

The evangelization of Europe. At this time America is not yet discovered, and Africa and Asia are mysterious places that are difficult to reach. Hence, Europe becomes the focus of the Church's evangelization.

The monks living in the countryside convert many of the barbarian tribes (more on this in the next Article).

- The big moment in France's conversion comes with the conversion of King Clovis.
- The history of Catholicism in Spain starts in 589. However, when the Muslims invade Spain, it will be several hundred years before Christianity becomes strong again in Spain.
- Augustine, a Benedictine monk, brings Christianity to England.
- St. Boniface is known as the apostle to Germany.
- St. Patrick brings Christianity to Ireland and establishes numerous monasteries. In a short time, the country is dubbed "Island of Saints and Scholars," many of whom are responsible for bringing Christianity to other parts of Europe.

Further Reading

The Fathers of the Church – Expanded Edition by Mike Aquilina gives a brief biography of 31 Church Fathers and three Mothers. The book also has writings from the Fathers and Mothers.

Surprised by the Truth, edited by Patrick Madrid, tells the stories of eleven Protestant ministers who share with us biblical and historical reasons why they entered into full communion with the Church. For many of them, reading the Church Fathers was a key event in their journey into the Catholic Church.

Reflection Questions

1. What spoke to you most in this article?
2. Which of the Church Fathers appeal to you most?
3. What, if anything, surprised you, confused you or shocked you about this era in church history?
4. Do you have any questions about this period in Church history?