



CHRISTIAN
MUSICOLOGICAL
SOCIETY OF INDIA

**EXPANDED
EDITION**

The
Fathers
of the
Church

An Introduction to the
First Christian Teachers

MIKE AQUILINA

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ABBREVIATIONS

Abbr.	Series Title	Recent Publisher
ACC	Ancient Christian Commentaries	InterVarsity Press
ACW	Ancient Christian Writers	Paulist Press
ANF	Ante-Nicene Fathers	Hendrickson
APL	Alba Patristic Library	Alba House
CCC	<i>Catechism of the Catholic Church</i>	United States Catholic Conference
CWS	Classics of Western Spirituality	Paulist Press
ECF	The Early Church Fathers	Routledge
FC	Fathers of the Church	Catholic University of America Press
LF	Library of Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church	John Henry Parker
MFC	Message of the Fathers of the Church	Michael Glazer
NPNF1	Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 1	Hendrickson
NPNF2	Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 2	Hendrickson
OCT	Outstanding Christian Thinkers	Geoffrey Chapman
Patr.	Patrology (ed. Johannes Quasten)	Christian Classics
PP	Popular Patristics	St. Vladimir's Seminary Press
SECT	Sources of Early Christian Thought	Fortress Press
SPCK	Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge	SPCK
WSA3	The Works of Saint Augustine, Series III	New City Press



PREFACE

It was a brilliant summer day. My father, then pushing eighty, took me with him on a long drive down a country road. Our local reservoir had been contaminated, and we were going to draw water by the gallon jug from a remote stream.

Usually a silent man, Pop was talkative that day, and as he drove along and as we hiked to the spring, he told me many stories — about his childhood, his father's early death from tuberculosis, my Uncle Leo's paternal care for the family after Grandfather died. These were stories I had never heard in our three decades of casual conversation at home.

I drank in every word — more eagerly, I must admit, than I would later sip the spring water — and when we got back to the house, I wrote down all I could recall, as near to Pop's own words as my memory would allow.

The words of our natural fathers are precious to us. Our fathers are key to a mystery we spend a lifetime trying to solve: ourselves. Their past is our own, given to us in so many silent ways as they guide our childhood steps. The paths we walk are paths to which they led us, or drove us. Their words and deeds are critical details in the story of our own lives and our salvation.

If all that is true of our natural fathers, how much more true of our fathers in Christian faith — the Fathers of the Church that gave us new life in Baptism?

Because of this desire to know my ancestors in faith, and because I believe you share this desire, I wrote this book. I am not a scholar, and this is not a scholarly exploration of the lives or works of the Fathers. For simplicity's sake, I have tried to avoid most of the academic controversies and just tell the story. Readers who



THE WORLD OF THE FATHERS

Introduction

WHAT IS A FATHER?

At the dawn of the age of the Fathers, Luke the Evangelist wrote of the first Christians: “Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul” (Acts 4:32). That single line illumines the history of the first six Christian centuries. As heirs to the Apostles, the leaders and teachers of the early Church — the Fathers of the Church — were intensely concerned with preserving the unity and integrity of the “company of those who believed,” even as that company grew from a small band of several hundred to encompass millions of people speaking dozens of languages and dispersed throughout the Roman Empire. The unity of believers — unity in the Person of Jesus Christ — was the precious inheritance of the Church Fathers.

Many books tell the story of the first Christian centuries as a succession of creeds, councils, persecutions, and heresies. But it was far more than that, and far more interesting. It was the story of a family, and of how the Fathers of that family strove to keep their household together, to preserve the family’s patrimony, to teach and discipline their children, and to protect the family from danger. Only when we understand them *as fathers* can we truly understand the Church Fathers.

The Fathers of the Church are a select group of early Christian teachers, around a hundred in number, depending on the list you consult. The Catholic Church has long revered them and given them a privileged place of doctrinal authority. Many of them are also revered by the Orthodox Churches and the other churches of

the East. The Fathers, generally speaking, meet four criteria, which were established by St. Vincent of Lérins¹ in the fifth century:

1. Orthodox doctrine
2. Holiness of life
3. Church approval
4. Antiquity

The age of the Fathers, sometimes called the Patristic Era, stretched from the middle of the first century to the middle of the eighth, at the death of St. John of Damascus. Some of the earliest Fathers were disciples of the Apostles themselves, and the teaching of these men — called the Apostolic Fathers — has always received special veneration within the Church. Their witness is invaluable, because these Fathers were nearest to the Apostles, who were, in turn, nearest to Jesus Christ. Thus, the Apostolic Fathers are sometimes called the “first echo” of the Apostles. But, even beyond the first echo, the Church considers the Patristic Era in general to be a time of extraordinary graces for the expression and development of Christian doctrine.

In the New Testament, the Apostles clearly see themselves as fathers to the newborn Church. St. Paul reminded the Christians of Corinth that he was their “father in Christ Jesus” (1 Cor 4:15), and he addressed both Timothy and Titus as his true children (1 Tim 1:2; Ti 1:4). St. John also greeted his flock as “my children” (3 Jn 4) and “my little children” (1 Jn 2:1). St. Peter explicitly referred to Christians of his own generation as “the fathers” (2 Pt 3:4).

The custom of calling bishops “Father” continued with the passing of the Apostles’ generation. The word “pope” comes from Latin and Greek words meaning “father,” and in the early centuries it was applied to diocesan bishops as well as the bishop of Rome. Eventually, common usage extended the application of the title “Father” to priests, too, as is today the custom in English-speaking countries.

There was yet another usage for the term. At the very beginning of the Christian Church, bishops and teachers used “the Fathers”



and “our Fathers” as terms encompassing *all* their ancestors in the faith. When St. Irenaeus of Lyons, at the end of the second century, speaks of “the Fathers,” he is referring not only to the Apostles and Apostolic Fathers, but also to the patriarchs and prophets of ancient Israel. Gradually, however, “Fathers of the Church” came precisely to mean only those Christian teachers who were designated as Fathers by long tradition.

Like the rabbis of early Judaism, these teachers took care to demonstrate that their teaching was not their own, but rather stretched back to the beginning. We see this already in the generation after the Apostles. St. Clement of Rome (writing well before A.D. 100) showed that his pedigree came from not one, but two Apostles, Sts. Peter and Paul. Papias of Hierapolis, writing a few decades later, also staked his authority on the fact that he was a “hearer” of the Apostle John. As the generations passed, it became increasingly important for a teacher to demonstrate his continuity with the apostolic teaching. St. Irenaeus explained that he had learned the faith from St. Polycarp of Smyrna, who in turn had learned from St. John the Apostle. In the following generation, St. Hippolytus of Rome was careful to make his own connection to St. Irenaeus.

It was St. Irenaeus who first (as far as we know) showed how apostolic succession had been *institutionalized* in the line of bishops in every Church. His list of the popes is the earliest witness we have to the immediate successors of St. Peter.

In the third century, more teachers began to justify their doctrine by showing a *catena* (Latin for “chain”) of unbroken teaching stretching, from Father to Father, back to the Apostles. By the fifth century, this practice had become almost a requirement for theologians and teachers.

As disputes multiplied, however, it became necessary to designate which ancient teachers were authoritative and which were not. Thus, in the fifth century, we find, in a decree attributed to Pope Gelasius I, history’s first list of Church Fathers designated as such. In the same century, St. Vincent of Lérins sketched out the ground rules for the field known today as “patristics” or “patrology,” the

But away with the idea of a divine sect avenging itself by human fires, or shrinking from the sufferings in which it is tried. . . .

One All-Embracing Commonwealth

Ought not Christians, therefore, to receive not merely a somewhat milder treatment, but to have a place among law-abiding societies, since they are not chargeable with any crimes? . . . For, unless I mistake the matter, the prevention of such associations is based on a prudential regard to public order, that the state may not be divided into parties, which would naturally lead to disturbance in the electoral assemblies, the councils, the courts, the special conventions, even in the public shows by the hostile collisions of rival parties — especially when now, in pursuit of gain, men have begun to consider their violence an article to be bought and sold.

But as those in whom all ardor in the pursuit of glory and honor is dead, we have no pressing need to take part in your public meetings; nor is there anything more foreign to us than affairs of state. We acknowledge one all-embracing commonwealth — the world. We renounce all your spectacles. . . . Among us nothing is ever said, or seen, or heard, which has anything in common with the madness of the circus, the immodesty of the theater, the atrocities of the arena, the useless exercises of the wrestling-ground. Why do you take offense at us because we differ from you in regard to your pleasures? If we will not partake of your enjoyments, the loss is ours, not yours — if there is any loss. We reject what pleases you. You, on the other hand, have no taste for what is our delight. The Epicureans were allowed by you to decide for themselves one true source of pleasure — I mean equanimity. The Christian, on his part, has many such enjoyments — what harm in that? . . .

See Those Christians

We are a body knit together as such by a common religious profession, by unity of discipline, and by the bond of a common hope. We meet together as an assembly and congregation, that, offering up a united prayer, we may wrestle with Him in our supplications.



This violence God delights in. We pray, too, for the emperors, for their ministers and for all in authority, for the welfare of the world, for the prevalence of peace, for the delay of the final consummation. . . . In the same place also exhortations are made, rebukes and sacred censures are administered. For with a great seriousness is the work of judging carried on among us, as is proper to those who are sure they are in the sight of God. And you have the most notable example of judgment to come when anyone has sinned so grievously as to require his severance from us in prayer, in the congregation and in all sacred worship.

The tried men of our elders preside over us, gaining that honor not by purchase, but by established character. There is no buying and selling of the things of God. Though we have our treasure chest, it is not made up of purchase-money, as of a religion that has its price. On the monthly day, if he likes, each puts in a small donation; but only if he wishes it, and only if he is able: for there is no compulsion; all is voluntary. These gifts are piety's deposit fund. For they are not taken thence and spent on feasts and drinking bouts, but to support and bury poor people, to supply the wants of boys and girls destitute of means and parents, and of old persons confined now to the house; those who have suffered shipwreck; and any who are in the mines, or banished to the islands, or shut up in the prisons for nothing but their fidelity to the cause of God's Church. They become the nurslings of their confession.

But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. "See," they say, "how they love one another," for they themselves are animated by mutual hatred; "how they are ready even to die for one another," for they themselves will sooner put to death.

— ANF 3:45-46

ATHENS AND JERUSALEM

Tertullian wrote a comprehensive Prescription Against Heretics. To him, "heresy" included all non-Christian thought, including classical philosophy. Tertullian represents the extreme of Christian resistance to the



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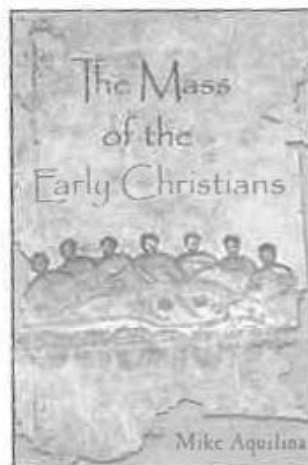
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