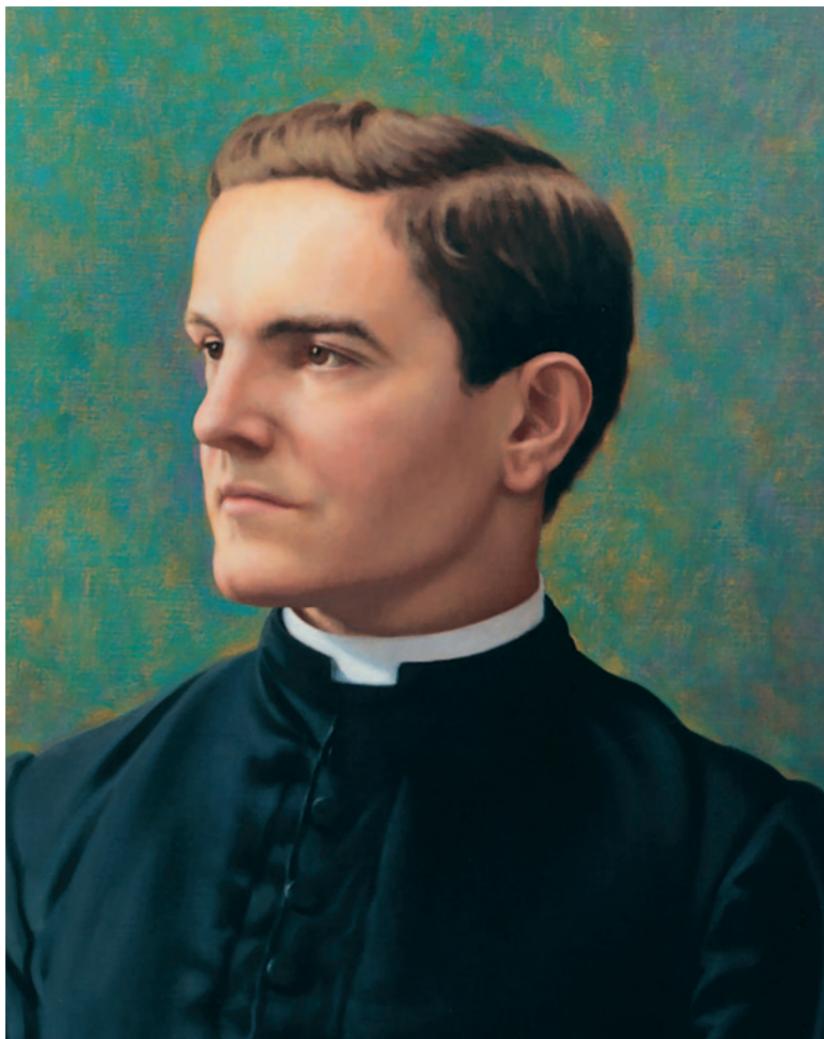


# The Early Church

Mike Aquilina



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# The Early Church

by  
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# THE EARLY CHURCH

## ANCIENT HISTORY AND BREAKING NEWS

There is a certain romance about ancient things. We thrill at the news of archeologists unearthing treasures from long ago. We read on — or we stop our channel surfing — when a scholar promises to decode secrets from some newly discovered parchment.

We get especially excited when the subject is early Christianity. In those first centuries, the Church experienced explosive growth, but left only scattered traces. So all the histories must draw upon the same small set of clues: the same fragments of pottery and calfskin...the same passing references in imperial documents...the same strange symbols left in murals and mosaics...the same few sermons and letters that our spiritual ancestors took care to preserve. In the shapes of those shadows, we try to make out our spiritual “genetic code” to better understand the Christians we are and the Christians we wish to be.

Some opponents of Christianity, however, look to the new discoveries for evidence that Christian doctrine is inconsistent, inconstant, opportunistic and basically untrue.

Thus, when there's a fresh find — a stretch of catacombs or an apocryphal gospel — it's major news. And sometimes, *even when there's no real news*, the media manufacture news.

When the so-called “Gospel of Judas” came to light several years ago, it occupied the major print and broadcast media for weeks. The headlines spoke of “new revelations” that would challenge and change what Christians had always believed about their origins. But it was a bust. There were no new revelations.

At the turn of the millennium, the most talked-about movie and the most-talked about novel — *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Da Vinci Code* — also dealt with Christian origins. The movie's director strove for historical accuracy, and infuriated secularist critics. The author of the

novel drew instead from conspiracy theories, forgeries and frauds, bungling major historical details in almost every chapter, but went largely unchallenged by a credulous media and public.

What the movie and the book had in common was their interest in Christian origins — and their phenomenal success. And they are not alone. A biblical scholar recently observed: “In the last five years, numerous books on early Christian history have made the best-seller lists. Specials on figures like Jesus and Constantine are produced at a rate that could fill historical cable channels around the clock.”<sup>1</sup>

Ancient Christianity is a proven draw at the box office and the bookstores. Our neighbors are curious about the early Church, and more than willing to be obsessed by it.

But how should we proceed to study ancient Christianity when the media accounts themselves have been shockingly misinformed?

I believe that the key to understanding the early Church is a fresh familiarity with the ancient sources. In this book we'll encounter many of the most important figures of the first centuries of Christianity. We will read their words. We will hear their side of the story. It is my hope that many readers will continue studying the works of these ancient authors in more complete editions and in more detailed histories. (I have made several suggestions for further reading at the end of this book.)

What we find in the early Church we should rightly call “classic Christianity.” In its first generations, the Church already had a certain discernible shape. It had well established structures of authority, a canon of sacred writings and ritual patterns of worship. More precisely: It was a Church that had bishops, priests and deacons. It had a pope. Its people venerated the Blessed Virgin Mary and sought the intercession of the saints. It was a Church that prayed for the dead who suffered in purgatory. It was a Church that anointed the sick with sacred oils, that called the Mass a sacrifice and that blessed its people with holy water.

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<sup>1</sup> Darrell Bock, “When the Media Became a Nuisance,” *Christianity Today*, December 2007.

And it had a name that delighted its followers: It was *Catholic*.

When Catholics today look back into those fragmentary remains of the first centuries, we cannot help but recognize something very familiar. And we cannot help but hope to make that *something* more familiar to others as well, especially those millions who share our interest in the ancients, but lack the faith we have inherited.

### Thumbnail profile: Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260 to c. 340)

Pope Benedict XVI said that Jesus Christ “encounters us ever anew” in the pages of history.<sup>2</sup> The early Christians believed this, and so they took care to preserve the memory of those who had gone before them in faith. In the third century, a man from Palestine named Eusebius set himself the task of recording Christian history in an encyclopedic way. He started out by making a timeline, a *chronicle*, but the project soon grew into a massive *history* of the Church’s first three centuries, from the time of the Apostles until the end of the Roman persecutions. Eusebius drew from the works of earlier historians. He traveled to distant churches to use their archives. He liked to quote ancient sources verbatim and at great length. In many cases, it is only through Eusebius’ quotations that we know about these ancient sources at all. The older originals have been lost. On the very first page of Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History*, he indicates that the authentic churches are those who trace “lines of succession from the holy apostles”—that is, they have legitimately ordained bishops. It is those churches that make up the Catholic Church. We recognize in Eusebius the fascination with antiquity that we still share today, for he wished to demonstrate that the faith was “not modern or strange, but...primitive, unique, and true.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Deus Caritas Est* 17.

<sup>3</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.4.1.

## ONE AND CATHOLIC

In the creed we profess our belief in a Church that is *one, holy, catholic, and apostolic*. That particular formula dates back to Council of Constantinople in A.D. 380, but all four of those “marks of the Church” have been vitally important to Christians since the time of the Apostles. In the book of Acts we read that “the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul” (4:32) and that “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (2:42).

Jesus had prayed for unity — “that they may be one, even as we are one” (John 17:11) — and he decreed that “there shall be one flock, one shepherd” (John 10:16). The early Christians took great care to preserve that unity, even as the Church spread “to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). It is almost certain that, by the close of the apostolic generation, Christianity had reached beyond the Roman Empire’s eastern frontier, to India. Given the ease of travel and communication in the empire, it seems likely that the faith reached the western frontiers as well, helped along by Nero’s brutal persecution, begun in A.D. 64. Efforts to suppress the Church only served to spread the Gospel further abroad. When the sword fell, believers “fled...to the surrounding country; and there they preached the gospel” (Acts 14:5-7).

The Gospel reached the ends of the earth, but the Gospel proclaimed in Rome was the same as that proclaimed in Antioch, Alexandria, Ephesus, Corinth and Philippi. The Apostles preached “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all” (Ephesians 4:5-6).

In the ancient world, religion was largely a local phenomenon. People worshipped local gods who exercised power over certain lands or tribes. Even Judaism, which recognized only one God, held that divine revelation had been given only to one favored ethnic group. Christianity’s universality, paradoxically, set it apart from other religions.

Christians distant from one another — and, in many ways, *different* from one another — could draw from vocabulary, experiences, rituals and beliefs that all of them held in common. Such unity and universality shine

through in the earliest Christian writings. The *Didache*, written in first-century Syria, presents a liturgy whose details jibe with the rites described by Saint Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians. A little later in the first century, Saint Clement of Rome wrote a long letter to the faraway Church of Corinth, touching on many doctrinal and disciplinary matters — again, assuming they held all these things in common. Around A.D. 107, Saint Ignatius of Antioch wrote to churches in places as far flung as Ephesus, Smyrna and Rome — thousands of words, drawing from the faith they shared in common. His friend Saint Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, wrote a letter of exhortation to the Christians of Philippi. In all these letters there is a basic assumption that the faith remains the same even as it travels to new places.

Yet, in spite of this overwhelming evidence, some modern scholars argue that there was not one *Christianity* in those early years, but rather many “Christianities.” They claim that there were many groups vying with “proto-orthodoxy” for supremacy and survival.

There are many difficulties with this claim. First of all, we have little evidence of these groups except what we find in the writings of the Apostles and apostolic fathers, and there they appear mostly as a minor local nuisance. Not until the late second century do we find a heretic (Marcion) claiming universality for his doctrine. Even then, Marcion did so by mimicking the Catholic Church, setting up his base in Rome and adapting the established liturgies and customs of church decoration.

Advocates of the “many Christianities” hypothesis say that we have very little evidence of the heresies because they were brutally suppressed by the dominant proto-orthodox movement. This is simply not true. The Church in those centuries had no power to enforce doctrine. The Church itself was persecuted by civil authorities — though the heretics rarely were. Even the pagan persecutors did not recognize these “alternative Christianities” as Christian.

From the start, the Christian Church was *one*, and it was *apostolic*. Writing around A.D. 190, Saint Irenaeus (a very old man by then) said that

his master Saint Polycarp “taught only what he received from the apostles, what the Church transmitted, and what alone is true.”<sup>4</sup> When speaking of biblical interpretation, Saint Polycarp himself wrote of the necessity of testing any doctrine against the doctrine of his predecessors, the Apostles: “Whoever interprets according to his own perverse inclinations the words of the Lord...is the firstborn of Satan.”<sup>5</sup>

The apostolic faith was also *universal* — in Greek, the word is *katholikos* — that is, Catholic. The earliest Christian writers delighted in that term. “Wherever the bishop appears, there let the people be,” wrote Saint Ignatius of Antioch, “as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.”<sup>6</sup> As Saint Polycarp died, he prayed for “all the Catholic Church,”<sup>7</sup> and even his accusers described him as “the bishop of the Catholic Church of Smyrna.”<sup>8</sup> Polycarp’s church was the “Church of Smyrna,” and yet it was Catholic. It was united with the true Church everywhere.

In those early years there were no printing presses, and most people could not afford to own the Scriptures. Very few could read them anyway. The heart of the Christian proclamation was the so-called “rule of faith,” a brief, creed-like summary of doctrine. Though the wording varied from place to place, the formulas were remarkably consistent in content. They proclaimed that God became man in Jesus Christ, whose life had been foretold by the prophets; and that Christ died, rose from the dead and was now glorified. Eventually, these formulas developed into the uniform baptismal creeds that we recite even today.

The early Church Fathers considered themselves to be guardians of this deposit of faith. What the Apostles had handed on to them — the Scriptures, the liturgies, the rule of faith, the succession — they held

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<sup>4</sup> St. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.3.4.

<sup>5</sup> St. Polycarp, *To the Philippians* 7.

<sup>6</sup> St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 8.

<sup>7</sup> *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 8.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 16.2.

as stewards, proclaiming it ever new in new lands, in new ages, down to our own.

### Thumbnail profile: Saint Ignatius of Antioch (died c. 110)

Saint Ignatius was the third bishop of Antioch, the place where the disciples were first called “Christians” (Acts 11:26). Arrested for his faith, he was transported to Rome to be condemned. His impending martyrdom made him a celebrity as he passed through cities along the way. He wrote letters to the churches. Seven have survived, and they give us rich details about the life of the early Christians. From Ignatius we learn that in each Church a bishop presided in the place of God. We learn that the Eucharist was the center of Christian life, and that the doctrine of the Real Presence was already taught with great clarity. Belief in the Real Presence was, for Ignatius, one of the marks of true faith: “Take note of those who hold heterodox opinions.... They abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, flesh which suffered for our sins and which the Father, in his goodness, raised up again.”<sup>9</sup> Ignatius also witnessed to the primacy of Rome, calling the Roman Church “worthy of God, worthy of honor, worthy of the highest happiness,” the Church that “presides over love, is named from Christ, and from the Father.”<sup>10</sup>

### THE ORDER OF THE CHURCH

The New Testament bears ample testimony to the ancient faith of the Roman Christians. Rome marks the final destination of the Acts of the Apostles. Rome was the postal address of the first of Saint Paul’s canonical letters.

The ancient Romans treasured their heritage. They knew, with unerring Christian instinct, what the African Tertullian would say so

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<sup>9</sup> St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 6.2–7.1.

<sup>10</sup> St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Romans*, prologue.

eloquently in the third century: The blood of the martyrs is seed. If that is so, the Romans were blessed to count among their martyrs the apostles Peter and Paul.

There is no legal document — not even a forged one — that names the successors of Saint Peter as title-holders to the Church, bearers of the keys. But the ancient Christians required no other proof than the Scriptures and the apostolic tradition.

Saint Clement of Rome, the third successor to Peter, felt secure enough in his office to chastise a faraway congregation in Corinth, Greece. Clement could do this because he spoke with Peter's authority, which was granted by Christ himself. As he concluded his letter, he urged the Corinthians to "render obedience unto the things written by us through the Holy Spirit."<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere in the letter he speaks of his words as "spoken by [Jesus] through us."<sup>12</sup> These are very weighty claims; yet Christians acknowledged them. A century later, the Greek church still proclaimed Clement's words in the liturgy.

Obedience to Christ in the person of his vicar: This is the common testimony of the Fathers. When the saints of East and West saw danger, they appealed to the pope. We find such pleas in the works of Saint Irenaeus (second century), Saint Basil the Great (fourth century), Saint John Chrysostom (early fifth century), Saint Cyril of Alexandria (mid-fifth century), and Saint Maximus Confessor (sixth century). Saint Irenaeus was pleased to recite the list of all the popes who succeeded to the chair of Saint Peter.

One and all, these early Church fathers were men with an encyclopedic knowledge of the Scriptures. When they wished for an action that bore the authority of Jesus Christ, they knew where to send their petition. Sometimes they were disappointed by the papal response, but they maintained their faith in the papal office.

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<sup>11</sup> St. Clement of Rome, *To the Corinthians* 63.2.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 59.1.

In the year 376, the greatest Scripture scholar in the ancient world, Saint Jerome, addressed Pope Saint Damasus I with a torrent of biblical seals of the papacy: "I speak with the successor of the fisherman and disciple of the cross. Following none but Christ as my primate, I am united in communion with Your Beatitude — that is, with the chair of Peter. Upon that Rock I know the Church is built. Whosoever eats a lamb outside this house is profane. Whoever is not in Noah's ark will perish when the flood prevails."

To be a Christian was to obey Jesus Christ. To be a Christian was to obey Christ in his vicar, the pope.

This was not just the teaching of churchmen who had a vested interested in papal power. It was the faith of the congregations.

The Roman people passed down many traditions of Peter's ministry in their city. According to one story, during his imprisonment, the Apostle preached to his jailers, who begged him for baptism. Finding insufficient water, Peter prayed and a pure spring bubbled up into the cell. Today we may see a most ancient testimony to this story on the walls of the Catacomb of Commodilla. There, the early Christians portrayed Peter as a new Moses, striking a rock wall and drawing forth water.

Reverence for the papacy wasn't just a Roman thing. A coffin in Arles, France, made around the same time, shows Christ handing on the law to this new Moses.

Christ gave his law to Peter with the grace of state. Peter bequeathed it to Linus, Linus to Cletus and Cletus to Clement.

What was true universally was true locally as well. We have already seen how Irenaeus, Eusebius and others considered apostolic succession essential to the office of all local bishops. There is ample testimony, too, to indicate that the local bishops were supported in their ministry by priests and deacons. As early as A.D. 107, Saint Ignatius compared the unity of the clergy to the unity of Christ with God the Father: "Take care to do all things in harmony with God, with the bishop presiding in the

place of God, and with the priests in the place of the council of the apostles, and with the deacons, who are most dear to me, entrusted with the business of Jesus Christ, who was with the Father from the beginning and is at last made manifest.”<sup>13</sup> This is a constant theme in Ignatius’ letters, and he emphasizes its apostolic pedigree. (We can see the offices for ourselves in the New Testament: bishops and deacons in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:1-13; priests [presbyters] in 1 Timothy 5:17 and James 5:14-15.) Many of the early Fathers would see this three-part structure foreshadowed in the Old Testament offices of high priest, priest and levite.

The offices are not so much about power as about service. Service is the very meaning of the word *ministry*. It is the root meaning of the word *liturgy*. There were few opportunities to exercise power during the centuries of persecution. There were countless opportunities to serve. It was as Jesus promised: “He who is greatest among you shall be your servant” (Mt 23:11). The deacons, priests, and bishops were ministers and servants of the gospel. The pope — in the words of one of the later Fathers — was the servant of the servants of God.

### Thumbnail profile: Saint Clement of Rome (first century)

Saint Clement was the third pope after Saint Peter. According to an ancient tradition, he was ordained by the Prince of Apostles himself. Clement’s *Letter to the Corinthians* was revered in the early Church. Spread far and wide and translated into many languages, it was counted in some places among the New Testament writings. Certain passages suggest it was written before the rebellion in Judea and the destruction of the Jerusalem temple (A.D. 67-70). But ancient historians placed it slightly later (A.D. around 97). Saint Clement shows an easy familiarity with the whole Bible. One of the major themes in his letter is *harmony* among the various offices in the Church. Like Saint Ignatius before him, he saw this unity as an earthly reflection of the communion of Jesus with God the

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<sup>13</sup> St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Magnesians* 6.1.

Father. "Christ is from God, and the Apostles are from Christ. Both therefore came of the will of God in the appointed order.... Preaching everywhere in country and town, they appointed their first fruits...to be bishops and deacons for those who should believe.... They appointed these men, and afterward they provided a succession, so that if these should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed to their service."<sup>14</sup>

## THE FAMILY ON MISSION

Through the first three centuries, the Church grew at a fairly steady rate of 40 percent per decade.<sup>15</sup> It spread most rapidly in the cities, and it grew in spite of intermittent persecution, epidemics of disease and natural disasters. By the early years of the fourth century, Christians probably held at least a slight majority of the population in urban areas — even though the Church was then suffering its most ruthless persecution ever.

We can only marvel at the achievement of our ancestors in the faith. Yet their accomplishments are all the more remarkable when we consider the culture they were trying to evangelize.

It was a cruel and violent culture, a crude and pornographic one. The Church Fathers observed that impurity and cruelty arise as sibling vices in the soul. The elder is impurity, which reduces other people first to mere means of sensual satisfaction and then to mere objects of sport.

It is as true of cultures as it is of souls. Consider Rome of the late first and second century A.D. — but don't judge by what you see in museums. Be grateful, instead, that today's curators have some sense of decorum. For the remains of imperial Rome are overwhelmingly sexualized. The walls of Pompeii are shocking because the volcanic ash preserved them in lurid color, but their motifs are little different from those that appear on common vases, lamps and jewelry of the time. The

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<sup>14</sup> St. Clement of Rome, *To the Corinthians* 42, 44.

<sup>15</sup> For the demographic data in this chapter and some details in the next, I am indebted to Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (HarperCollins, 1997).

homes of the bourgeois were little different, in decoration, from the common rooms of the brothels.

Families seemed unwilling or unable to preserve the innocence of children. Those who sent small boys to school assumed that the tutors would molest them. With limitless leisure time and no supervision, teenaged boys roamed the streets in gangs. They passed time in mischief, homosexual activity and, now and then, by raping a prostitute.

Girls were married off at age 11 or 12 to a mate much older, and not of their choosing. Friends celebrated the wedding by singing bawdy songs. "The wedding night," writes the French historian Paul Veyne, "took the form of legal rape."<sup>16</sup>

Marital custom meant that the newlywed girl could look forward to a predatory relationship, rife with sodomy, abortion and abuse. Adultery was expected of men. Infanticide was common, especially for female offspring. In one city of the empire, the census enrolled 600 families — of which only six had raised more than one daughter. Though some of those were large families, they had routinely killed their baby girls. In another city, a recent archeological dig turned up an ancient sewer clogged with the bones of hundreds of newborns.

But if marriage grew too miserable, at least divorce was easy. All it took was for one party to leave home with the intention of divorcing.

All of these mores were reflected in popular entertainment — the music business, the theater. And when Romans tired of sex, they flocked to the circus to see criminals tortured and killed, by beasts or by gladiators. The gladiators drew life's blood from one another as well.

That's the world where the Church Fathers ministered and where the early Christians raised their families. You might call it a culture of death.

Yet Christians immediately set themselves apart. They took no part in the impurity or cruelty. We have many sermons and tracts from those

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<sup>16</sup> Paul Veyne, *A History of Private Life*, vol. 1: From Pagan Rome to Byzantium (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1987), 34.

years condemning the grossness of the theater, the sickness of the circus and the bedroom behavior of ordinary Romans. But what is more remarkable is the testimony of the pagans themselves.

The Romans were frankly astonished by the Christians, for the Christians routinely achieved something the Romans had thought impossible. Christians preached and practiced a range of virtues that involved sexual continence — chastity, purity and even lifelong celibacy. The great pagan physician Galen wrote: “They also number individuals who, in self-discipline and self-control, have attained a pitch not inferior to that of genuine philosophers.”<sup>17</sup> Even most stoics, who supposedly despised human passion, believed that sexual passions were best quelled by indulgence.

But even married Christians strove for purity and true love. A second-century Christian wrote of his co-religionists: “They marry, as do all others; they beget children; but they do not commit infanticide. They share a common table, but not a common bed.”

It was Christian morality, and the evident love of Christian families, that gradually converted the Roman empire.

The brothels had exercised a certain attractive power over Rome, but the brothels did not satisfy. Restless pagans had indulged their crudest blood lusts at the circus, but the circus did not satisfy.

What drew these weary citizens to the Church was the paradox evident in the family life of Christians, who were chaste, but who had found peace.

### Thumbnail profile: Saint John Chrysostom (c. 347–407)

John was living as a monk when his bishop called him out of seclusion and ordained him for ministry in the Church of Antioch. John soon earned quite a reputation for preaching. His congregations

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<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Richard Walzer, *Galen on Jews and Christians* (London: Oxford, 1949), 65.

nicknamed him “Golden Mouth” (*Chrysostomos* in Greek). Though John was celibate, he had a keen appreciation for the holiness of Christian marriage. He called the domestic family “the Church in miniature.”<sup>18</sup> He even spoke of marriage in terms that suggest the Blessed Trinity: “The child is a bridge connecting mother to father, so the three become one.”<sup>19</sup> Preaching about the married couple’s bodily union, he asked: How do a man and a woman become “one flesh”? And he answered: “As if she were gold receiving purest gold, the woman receives the man’s seed with rich pleasure, and within her it is nourished, cherished and refined. It is mingled with her own substance and she then returns it as a child.”<sup>20</sup>

Though John’s approach to marriage was very positive, he also recognized that certain actions were sins against the sacrament. He saw contraception as an act of desecration. If marriage is an image of God and of the Church, then it should be a true communion and truly fruitful, as are God and the Church. For the same reason, John condemned adultery, domestic violence, abortion, divorce and other acts traditionally rejected by Christians.

## THE CHURCH AND THE CULTURE OF DEATH

In the pagan Roman empire, abortion and infanticide were commonplace events, requiring little deliberation. A child did not achieve personhood until recognized by the head of the family. Immediately after the baby’s delivery, a midwife placed the child on the floor and summoned the father. He examined the child with his criteria of selection in mind.

Was the child his? If the man suspected his wife of adultery — pagan Rome’s favorite pastime — he might reject the child without so much as a glance.

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<sup>18</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *On Ephesians* 20.6.

<sup>19</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *On Colossians* 12.5.

<sup>20</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *On Colossians* 12.5.

If the child were an “odious daughter” (the common Roman phrase for female offspring), he would likely turn on his heel and leave the room.

If the child were “defective” in any way, he would do the same.

For the Romans, human life began when the child was accepted into society. A man did not “have a child.” He “took a child.” The father “raised up” the child by picking it up from the floor.

Those non-persons who were left on the floor — while their mothers watched from a birthing chair — would be drowned immediately, or exposed to scavenging animals at the town dump.

Indeed, most pagan cultures considered it a *duty* to kill “defective” newborns. Plato and Aristotle commended the practice, and the Roman historian Tacitus said it was “sinister and revolting” for Jews to forbid infanticide.<sup>21</sup> The philosopher Seneca said: “What is good must be set apart from what is good for nothing.”<sup>22</sup>

Against such customs, the Church consistently taught that life begins at conception and should continue till natural death. In these life-and-death matters, Christianity contradicted pagan mores on almost every point. What were virtuous acts to the Romans and Greeks — contraception, abortion, infanticide, suicide, euthanasia — were abominations to the Christians. The papyrus trail is especially extensive for abortion, which is condemned by the *Didache*, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, the apocryphal *Apocalypse of Peter*; by Clement of Alexandria, Athenagoras, Justin, Tertullian, Minucius Felix, Hippolytus, Origen and Cyprian. And that partial list takes us only to the middle of the third century.

Anti-life practices created a crisis for pagans. Abortion and infanticide led to low fertility rates, high maternal mortality, a shortage of marriageable women and an absence of familial care for the elderly. Over

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<sup>21</sup> Tacitus, *Histories* 5.5.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Veyne, 9.

generations, the dwindling native population of Rome grew increasingly dependent on foreign mercenaries to fill the ranks of the army and immigrants to do the servile jobs that no Roman citizen wanted to do. That makes for an unstable infrastructure. Various emperors tried to legislate fertility, but the law isn't much of an aphrodisiac. And abortion kills a couple's love every bit as much as it kills their baby. Besides, people had grown accustomed to an unmoored, leisurely life, drifting from pleasure to pleasure, without the encumbrance of children.

A growing number of people were dissatisfied with the societal consequences of their sins, but they were unwilling to give up their sinful behavior. What was a culture to do?

Christians offered answers. Around A.D. 155, Saint Justin Martyr wrote to the emperor: "We have been taught that it is wicked to expose even newly born children.... For we would then be murderers."<sup>23</sup> In the same century, Athenagoras said: "Women who use drugs to bring on an abortion commit murder."<sup>24</sup>

Christians knew instinctively that no society could live and grow if it snuffed out life in the seed or in the bud. No society could be inclusive if it refused to welcome the most vulnerable persons. It was Christians who created the first truly tolerant, welcoming and all-inclusive society — with a remarkable social-welfare system. They did this because they, unlike their rulers, not only tolerated the poor and weak, nor loved them with a merely human affection. They saw the least of the human family as the image of God, as Christ who must be welcomed, as angels requiring hospitality.

A third-century document, the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, sums it up in a lovely simile: "Widows and orphans are to be revered like the altar."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> St. Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 27.

<sup>24</sup> Athenagoras of Athens, *A Plea for the Christians* 35.

<sup>25</sup> *Didascalia Apostolorum* 9.

From such reverence for life came true social security, true stability and prosperity.

The earliest extrabiblical document, the *Didache*, begins with these words: “There are two ways, one of Life and one of Death, and there is a great difference between the two ways.” The early Christians converted their world from one way to the other, and they were judged righteous.

### Thumbnail profile: Letter to Diognetus

In the second century there arose a movement of Christian writers called “the apologists.” They labored to explain and defend the faith. The most famous of them was Saint Justin Martyr. But one apologist is valuable for producing a documentary of sorts — a vivid account of how Christians behaved. We don’t know the name of the author who wrote the *Letter to Diognetus*. He addressed a Roman official, deferentially, assuming that the great Diognetus was intelligent and open-minded.

First, he said, you can’t tell a Christian just by looking. “For the Christians are distinguished from others neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. They neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity...[They follow] the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food and the rest of their ordinary conduct.” Christians blended in — to a point. Like everyone else, they “marry and beget children.” Yet they rejected immoral pagan practices, such as abortion, infanticide and adultery.

Christians were even good for the economy and social order. They “obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives ... They are poor, yet make many rich.” Then our author made this remarkable statement: “To sum it up — what the soul is in the body, Christians are in the world.” Christians are the life-giving principle in the world. They are unimposing to the eye, even invisible — but without them, the whole human enterprise is doomed. “The soul is dispersed through all the members of the body, and Christians are scattered through

all the cities of the world. The soul dwells in the body, yet is not of the body; and Christians dwell in the world, yet are not of the world ... The soul, when but ill-provided with food and drink, becomes better; in like manner, Christians, though subjected day by day to punishment, increase the more in number."

## PERSECUTION AND MARTYRDOM

The early Christians placed a high value on human life, and they sought to protect and preserve it, especially when it was most vulnerable. Yet there was something they valued much more than their own lives, and that was the gift of eternal life, the salvation won for them by Jesus Christ. Many of the early Christians chose to die rather than curse Christ, renounce their faith or worship false gods.

Christians endured persecution from the very beginning. Jesus Christ died at the hands of his enemies. Soon afterward, Saint Stephen followed (see Acts 7), as did many others (see Revelation 6:9 and 17:6). According to tradition, all but one of the Apostles died as martyrs.

What was it about Christianity that brought on such hostility? Both Jews and Gentiles perceived it as a threat to the social order. For the Pharisees and Sadducees, Christianity preached a universalism that flew in the face of Jewish exclusivism; Christianity heralded an age when the Jerusalem Temple no longer mattered — or, indeed, no longer existed. The Gentiles, for their part, feared that Christianity would break down ties of loyalty to families and tribes, giving primacy instead to the Church, the universal family of God. What would happen, they wondered, when their wives and children ceased praying to the household gods, the gods of their ancestors? Would it bring disaster on their family, their city or even the empire?

To the Roman authorities, Christianity represented a direct challenge to imperial ideology. Caesar reserved the title "Lord" to himself, and yet Saint Paul preached that there was *one* Lord: Jesus Christ. This perceived threat to Caesar's supremacy played no small part in Jesus' own

death sentence (see John 19:12-13). Moreover, Christians refused (like the Jews before them) to offer sacrifice to the emperor's guiding spirit, his *genius*. This was the religious act that the Romans used to unify a vast and religiously diverse empire.

Along with these relatively reasonable concerns, there were wild rumors. Educated Romans, who should have known better, portrayed Christians as incestuous — believers, after all, referred to everyone, even spouses, as "brothers" and "sisters" — and cannibalistic —they ate Christ's body and drank his blood at every Mass!

In A.D. 64, the emperor Nero launched the first large-scale extermination of Christians. The Roman historian Tacitus (who had contempt for Christianity, but greater contempt for Nero) described the gruesome tortures that took place amid a party in Nero's gardens. Some Christians were dressed up in animal skins and then torn apart by wild dogs. Others were crucified. At night, Nero had some Christians burned alive as human torches to light up the gardens.

Nero's spree provided a legal precedent for later efforts. Persecutions erupted intermittently in the two and a half centuries that Christianity was illegal. The ancient historians identified ten periods of more intense repression: under Nero (64-68); Domitian (81-96); Trajan (98-117); Marcus Aurelius (161-180); Septimus Severus (193-211); Maximinus (235-238); Decius (249-251); Valerian (253-260); Diocletian (284-305) and Galerius (305-311). Interspersed were periods of relative peace for the Church. It was widely rumored, for example, that the emperor Philip the Arab (244-249) was secretly a Christian, and some sources say that Philip's mother was instructed by the Church Father Origen of Alexandria. Eusebius claimed that Philip's successor, Decius, persecuted the Church ruthlessly just to show his deep hatred for Philip.

But the Romans never lacked other motives. Tertullian said that all the misfortunes of the empire were attributed to the Christians' neglect of the old gods: "If the Tiber rises so high it floods the walls, or the Nile so low it doesn't flood the fields, if the earth opens, or the heavens don't, if

there is famine, if there is plague, instantly the howl goes up, ‘The Christians to the lion!’ What, all of them? to a single lion?”<sup>26</sup>

The courage of the martyrs heartened believers, who faithfully attended the executions and treated them as solemn liturgies. Whenever they could, they collected the martyrs’ remains and ever after venerated them as relics. Christian courage made an impression on nonbelievers as well, who marveled that men and women could have something precious enough to die for, when so many godless people had little to live for. Saint Justin said that the courage of the martyrs influenced his own conversion to Christianity. And he was not alone. Tertullian said: “The more we are mown down by you, the greater we grow in number. The blood of Christians is seed.”<sup>27</sup>

Not all Christians, however, were so courageous. A third-century African bishop, Saint Cyprian, lamented that many in his flock, when ordered to offer sacrifice, “ran to the market-place of their own accord; freely they hastened...as if they would embrace an opportunity now to do as they had always desired.”<sup>28</sup> For the early Church, there was no greater tragedy than this, no greater sin than apostasy.

Saint Cyprian echoed Saint Paul (1 Corinthians 10-11) as he drew a sharp contrast between the sacrifice to idols and the sacrifice of the Eucharist. “You yourself have come to the altar an offering; you yourself have come a victim: there you have immolated your salvation, your hope; there you have burnt up your faith in those deadly fires.”

It was from the Church’s altar, however, that the Christian martyrs drew their strength. As Jesus gave his life to them in the Eucharist, so they would give their life to him in martyrdom. Often they made the connection explicit: “I am the wheat of God,” said Saint Ignatius of

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<sup>26</sup> Tertullian, *Apology* 40.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 50.

<sup>28</sup> St. Cyprian, *On the Lapsed* 8.

Antioch. “Let me be ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ.”<sup>29</sup>

### Thumbnail profile: Saint Polycarp of Smyrna (c. 69 – c. 155)

Saint Polycarp was the first Christian, after the New Testament, whose trial and martyrdom were recorded in detail. The *Martyrdom of Saint Polycarp* was composed soon after the bishop’s death and immediately distributed, as its opening states, “to all the communities of the holy Catholic Church everywhere.” This document set the terms for all future discussion of martyrdom. It counseled Christians not to seek actively after martyrdom. In fact, it relates the story of one Christian, Quintus, who initially turned himself in (?), but then fled when he saw the wild animals coming toward him. Saint Polycarp, on the other hand, faced his sentence with peace and good humor. His martyrdom is presented as a liturgy. His last words take the form of a eucharistic prayer, complete with doxology at the end. When the flames reached his body, the narrator tells us that the pyre gave off not the odor of burning flesh but the aroma of baking bread — a pure offering, a Eucharist.

### HERESIES, COUNCILS AND CREEDS

The early Christians often spoke of the faith as a sacred deposit, something left to them in trust — “the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).

Divine revelation was complete with the death of the last Apostle, but that doesn’t mean that all points of doctrine were perfectly clear. Even Saint Peter, the first pope, declared that “there are some things” in Saint Paul’s letters that he found “hard to understand,” and “which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction” (2 Peter 3:16).

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<sup>29</sup> St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Romans* 4.

Since the first generation, that curious combination of ignorance and pride has wounded the Church's unity. The New Testament gives abundant evidence of wayward Christians teaching error, leading others astray. Saint Paul was plagued by "Judaizers" who wanted to restore the old dietary laws and require circumcision (Gal 1:3). Saint John contended with people who denied Jesus' true humanity (2 John 1:7). Saint Timothy apparently had to deal with people who indulged in esoteric speculation (1 Tim 1:3-4) and denied the goodness of marriage (1 Timothy 4:1-3). Saint Jude worried about Christians who abused God's grace by flouting the moral law and sinning boldly (Jude 4). And then there was Simon the Magician, who believed he could buy the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:9-19). Toward the end of the Bible, we read about a dissident group that was bothersome enough to have a name, the Nicolaitans (Revelation 2:6).

Yet heresies, too, had their providential purpose. Like persecutions, they served to make the Church stronger, sharper and more zealous. Saint Augustine put it well: "The fevered restlessness of heretics stirs questions about many articles of the Catholic faith. But the need to defend them forces us to investigate them more accurately, understand them more clearly, and proclaim them more earnestly. So the question raised by an adversary becomes the occasion of instruction."<sup>30</sup>

There was no shortage of such occasions in the early centuries of the Church. At the turn of the second century, Saint Ignatius of Antioch complained about *docetists* — those who claimed that Jesus' flesh was an illusion. A few decades later, the Church faced the challenge of Gnosticism, a wave of heretical movements that denied the goodness of creation and taught that salvation was reserved only for a spiritual elite. Somewhat related to Gnosticism was Marcionism, founded by a wealthy shipping magnate who rejected the Old Testament and called its God a demon. In a short time, Marcion bankrolled an enterprise that would survive him by centuries — even though he himself repented before his death!

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<sup>30</sup> St. Augustine, *City of God* 16.2.

In chapter 2 we discussed the importance of the “rule of faith.” These confessions, in their summary form, stood for the faith in all its fullness and were used as a measure for evaluating doctrine. As elements of the faith suffered challenges, doubts, or denial, the churches found it necessary to spell out the content in greater detail. In third-century Egypt, Origen included seven general categories in his discussion of the rule: (1) the unity of God and his role as creator; (2) the eternity of the Divine Word, who was made flesh in Jesus Christ; (3) the worship of the Holy Spirit; (4) the immortality of the soul and the reality of divine judgment; (5) the existence of the devil and his angels; (6) the fact of creation in time and (7) the divine authorship of the Scriptures.<sup>31</sup>

No doubt, the Church of Alexandria had honed each point with particular adversaries in mind. Thus it was that, over time, the Church developed more precise summary statements — *creeds*, from the Latin *credo*, meaning “I believe.” The creed we recite today as the Apostles’ Creed is substantially the same as the one used in the Roman baptismal liturgy in A.D. 200, and it may be much older than that.

The creeds became “rules” themselves — measuring sticks for true doctrine. Their guardians were the bishops. Ordinarily, each bishop adjudicated doctrinal disputes and disciplinary problems that arose in his own territory. In a pinch, he could appeal to the pope. In the case of a widespread crisis, however, the bishops followed the model established by the Apostles in Acts 15: They met in council. There were several provincial councils in the second century, summoned to confront heresies or to (try to) fix a universal date for Easter.

In the early fourth century, just as the Church was celebrating its new legal status in the empire, there arose an especially insidious heresy: Arianism.

Arius — a brilliant and eloquent priest from Alexandria — denied the co-eternity and co-equality of God the Father and God the Son. He

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<sup>31</sup> Origen, *On First Principles*, Preface 3-8.

claimed that the Son was a creature — the first and greatest of creatures, and worthy of worship — but a creature nonetheless. He published very persuasive popular tracts and charmed friends in the hierarchy of the Church and the imperial bureaucracy. His influence extended everywhere. Yet he also encountered fierce opposition. The emperor Constantine worried that the dispute posed a threat to the hard-won peace of the empire. So, in 325, he summoned the Church's bishops to gather in Nicaea, near the new imperial capital.

Though Arius seemed to hold every advantage going into the council, his ideas were soundly defeated. The council adopted the Greek word *homoousion* (one in being) to describe the Father's relation to the Son. The Arian movement, however, would endure for centuries, sometimes under the patronage of the emperors.

In the succeeding centuries, the Church would face many other doctrinal challenges — against the divinity of the Holy Spirit, the person and natures of Christ, and the legitimacy of praying with images. Each critical dispute led to a clearer statement of the Church's faith. What was formerly *implicit* in Scripture and Tradition became gradually *explicit* in doctrine.

As early as the second century, Saint Irenaeus spoke poetically of such development: “The preaching of the Church is everywhere consistent, and continues in an even course, and receives testimony from the prophets, the apostles, and all the disciples ... Since it has been received from the Church, we guard this faith. Constantly its youth is renewed by the Spirit of God, as if it were some precious deposit in an excellent vessel; and it causes the vessel containing it also to renew its youth.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.24.1

<sup>33</sup> St. Jerome, *Dialogue Against the Luciferians* 19.

## Thumbnail profile: Saint Athanasius of Alexandria

Saint Jerome marveled at the suddenness with which the Arian heresy overtook the Church. “The world,” he said, “awoke to find itself Arian.”<sup>33</sup> Imperial officials, respected priests and bishops, and important intellectuals turned increasingly to the new ideas. One man stood fast and fought tirelessly for the apostolic tradition of Christ’s divinity. His contemporaries described the situation as “Athanasius against the world.” At the Council of Nicaea, Athanasius served as secretary to Alexander, the bishop who had first been confronted by Arius. A few years later, as Alexander lay dying, he appointed Athanasius as his successor. Athanasius would serve as bishop of Alexandria for 45 years, though he spent many of those years in exile. He was opposed by scheming churchmen and impatient emperors. He was pursued by assassins, and he stood trial for murder. (Athanasius was exonerated when he produced the supposed “victim,” still alive.) He traveled to Byzantium to plead personally with the emperor, and to Rome to plead with the pope. He lived for a while in his family’s tomb. Through all this, he wrote constantly — theological tracts and epistolary appeals. He produced the first defense of the Holy Spirit’s divinity. He even published a best-selling biography of the monk Saint Anthony. He ended his days at home in Alexandria. Athanasius’ courage poses a daunting task for anyone who would heed his advice: “One cannot possibly understand the teaching of the saints unless one has a pure mind and is trying to imitate their life.”<sup>34</sup>

## THE BIBLE AND THE BELIEVER

In our age of mass media, it is difficult for us to imagine a time when books were rare. They were expensive, since each had to be copied out by hand. Few people owned them, and fewer still could read them anyway. Given these circumstances, it is difficult for us to appreciate how the early Christians received the Scriptures. And receive them they did, and they

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<sup>34</sup> St. Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 57.

took them to heart. The Fathers, in their preaching, assumed that their congregations had a high level of familiarity with the stories and characters from both the Old and New Testaments.

How did believers gain such knowledge? Most of all, by going to Mass.

It was in the liturgy that the Church proclaimed the sacred writings. One of the earliest descriptions of the Mass is from Saint Justin Martyr, writing in Rome around A.D. 155. He begins his account as we begin the Mass today, with the liturgy of the word: “The memoirs of the apostles and the writings of the prophets are read, as much as time permits. When the reader has finished, he who presides over those gathered admonishes and challenges them to imitate these beautiful things.”<sup>35</sup> The ancient sermons that have survived suggest that homilies in the second century were much longer than homilies in the 21st. Justin indicates that the readings were longer, too. The Easter Vigil liturgy, in some places, filled all the hours between sunset and sunrise with reading and preaching!

When those first generations spoke of “the Scriptures,” they meant the books of the Old Testament in the old Greek translation (the Septuagint). This was the edition favored by the Apostles and other New Testament writers. By the end of the first century, however, we find the apostolic fathers treating some New Testament writings as Scriptures too. The *Didache*, Saint Clement, Saint Ignatius and Saint Polycarp all cite the Gospels and Epistles as authoritative, sometimes using the customary preface “It is written.”

The books thus cited are the books we know, collectively, as the New Testament. The second-century Muratorian Fragment provides a fairly close match to our current table of contents, and we find an exact match in Saint Athanasius’ Easter letter of 367. It seems that the four Gospels achieved near universal acceptance very early, as did the letters

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<sup>35</sup> St. Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 67.

attributed to Saint Paul. Rarely did any Church Fathers reject a book that was later accepted in the official canon. Only occasionally did they accept a book as sacred that did not eventually win canonical status. From the second century onward, there were many “apocryphal” documents floating around, but these were generally recognized as the subversive products of heretics or the misguided fantasies of pious eccentrics.

A local council in Rome in 382 adopted the same canon listed by Saint Athanasius, as did the African synods of Hippo (393) and Carthage (397 and 419). The Roman council was led by Pope Saint Damasus I, the African synods by Saint Augustine. Thus we see how the ordinary structures of authority functioned in the Church, deliberating over centuries to define a basic truth of the faith.

Nevertheless, the Bible was not self-interpreting. And it has been said that the history of Christian doctrine is the history of biblical interpretation.

The earliest and fiercest divisions in the Church did not pit “scriptural” Christians against “extra-biblical” innovators. They arose, rather, from disagreements over what the Scriptures meant. Tertullian complained that “heretics make use of the scriptures and...find support for their blasphemies from precedents [God] has provided.”<sup>36</sup> Indeed, he moaned about “*that sentence*” they always “bring forward to justify” their restless speculation: “It is written.”<sup>37</sup> Both Arius and his opponents drew many of their proof-texts from the same Gospel: The Gospel According to John. Arius cited John 3:35, 14:28, and other passages to argue that Jesus is subordinate to the Father. Saint Athanasius invoked John 1:1-2, 20:28, and others to establish the eternal deity of Jesus Christ.

The Church sought the truth in the apostolic tradition: the rule of faith, the canon of Scriptures, the words of liturgical worship and the authority of the bishops who held legitimate succession. These were the

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<sup>36</sup> Tertullian, *On the Flesh of Christ* 6.

<sup>37</sup> Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics* 8.

sure measures of biblical interpretation. Christians lived in an interpretive community that transcended their current historical moment, with its fads and intellectual fashions. They interpreted the Bible from within the communion of saints. Since Christ gave both Scripture and Tradition to the Apostles, these two streams of revelation were mutually illuminating, mutually confirming. The opponents of Arius, for example, could demonstrate that Christians in every age had worshipped Christ as God.

Tertullian observed: “We do not take our scriptural doctrine from the parables, but we interpret the parables according to our doctrine. Nor do we labor hard to twist all things to avoid contradictions.”<sup>38</sup> Our spiritual ancestors recognized the limits of their own understanding, and they trusted God to be consistent, even if his reasons eluded them from time to time.

### Thumbnail Profile: Origen of Alexandria (c. 185-c. 251)

As a young boy, Origen watched as his father was taken away to martyrdom. The image haunted him all his life and set a high standard for his own self-giving. He was a prodigy, mastering many fields of secular learning and theology while a teenager. He was still a youth when his bishop entrusted him with the instruction of all new converts.

Origen had a special love for the Scriptures. In the course of his lifetime, he produced more than 2,000 works, most of them in the field of biblical interpretation. He also compiled a critical edition of the Bible that included several Greek and Hebrew versions in parallel column. He was one of the Church’s first speculative theologians, and sometimes his speculation took him beyond the limits of what would later be defined as orthodoxy. Still, what kept him from heresy was his willingness to be

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<sup>38</sup> Tertullian, *On Modesty* 9.1.

<sup>39</sup> For example, Origen, *Homilies on Luke* 16.

<sup>40</sup> Origen, *Homilies on Numbers* 9.1.

corrected, his desire to teach only the Catholic faith: “I want to be a man of the Church,” he wrote many times,<sup>39</sup> and he sought always to conform himself to “Catholic doctrine.”<sup>40</sup> As an old man, he was at last arrested for his faith and tortured beyond what most people could endure. The authorities wanted to make an example of him. But he held firmly to the faith. Weakened and infirm, he died from his wounds in 251.

## THE HOLY FATHERS

When Christians discuss the great teachers of the ancient Church, we do so with a certain reverence. We acknowledge that they have a special authority. We treat them as true fathers, and indeed we traditionally call them the “Fathers of the Church.”

The fathers are a select group from the earliest Christian centuries. Not every Christian who wrote in those years is considered a Church Father. Theologians have settled on four criteria that must be fulfilled for “Fatherhood”: 1. sound doctrine; 2. holiness of life; 3. Church approval and 4. antiquity.

This recognition of spiritual fatherhood has very deep roots. The Church learned to honor the fathers from Jesus, who was himself following Jewish custom (see John 6:31, 49). Saint Peter described the first generation of Christians as “the Fathers” (see 2 Peter 3:4). Saint Paul reminded the Corinthians that he was their “father in Christ Jesus” (1 Corinthians 4:15). Those who later inherited the office of the apostles — the bishops — would also inherit the fatherly role in God’s earthly family, the Church.

As we have seen throughout this book, one of the marks of the fathers was their reverence for the doctrine they received from the apostles. The fathers preserved, preached, and passed on the rule of faith — the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the moral counsel of the apostles, and the sacred rites of the Church. They viewed that body of doctrine as an inheritance, a sacred trust. Thus, they were not given to experimentation,

and they looked askance at innovation. They had a holy pride in the pedigree of their doctrine.

Polycarp spoke with powerful authority, for he was himself a disciple of Saint John the Apostle. Polycarp was in turn the master of the most illustrious teacher of the next generation, Saint Irenaeus of Lyons. Irenaeus's influence extended to Saint Hippolytus in the next generation and then on to many others. At the end of Irenaeus' life, we have not yet arrived at the year 200. And yet the Church's pattern of invoking, studying and honoring the fathers was already well established, as were many of Christianity's distinctive doctrines: the offices of priest, deacon, and bishop, the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the authority of the papacy and so on.

When a bishop or a council made a public statement about a doctrine or practice, the statement often included an appeal to precedents in the witness of “the holy Fathers.” Churchmen would make a chain (in Latin, *catena*) of such precedents, with quotations representing every generation between their own and that of the apostles. Catholics today can still do this, thanks to the writings of the fathers.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (n. 688) speaks of the fathers as “always timely witnesses” to the Gospel tradition. We want to worship in the way Christians have always worshiped, and so we look to the fathers’ witness; and we find that our worship has remained the same, even down to the small details. In fact, when the editors of the *Catechism* wished to describe the Mass as it takes place in typical parishes today, they simply lifted verbatim the description of Saint Justin Martyr from the year 155!

What else do the fathers show us? When we bless ourselves with holy water, we are simply repeating an action that was already traditional by the time of Eusebius of Caesarea and Saint Serapion of Egypt. The same goes for Marian devotion, the invocation of the saints, prayer for the dead, and on and on.

In the mid-fourth century, Saint Basil offered a partial list of customs that had been handed down by word of mouth from the Apostles. “These no one will deny,” he added, and then he mentioned: blessing ourselves with the Sign of the Cross, the words and gestures of the Mass, the custom of blessing holy water and oils, the exorcism during baptism and the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>41</sup> Though these do not appear explicitly in Scripture, they have always been practiced in the Church. They are undeniably and essentially Christian.

That’s reassuring for us to see. For we as Catholics don’t make hypotheses about the origins of the faith we live today. We don’t speculate about our paternity. We look upon our fathers with the joy of true sons and daughters. We hold the end of a strong chain of doctrine, and it leads us back through generation after generation — not to some mythological time and place, but to real people, in real cities, who held real things in their real hands: bread and wine, oil and water, and pen and paper.

In the year 434, Saint Vincent of Lerins set down rules for the study of the fathers: “Now in the Catholic Church, we take the greatest care to hold that which has been believed everywhere, always and by all...the bishops and teachers of antiquity.”

It is the faith we now have a duty to preserve and share.

### Thumbnail profile: Saint Jerome (c. 347-420)

Saint Jerome hailed from the remote European provinces. He was born in Stridon, in what is now Croatia. In his early teens, he traveled to Rome for studies in literature and rhetoric. There, he experienced a conversion to deeper faith. It was a custom then for people to delay baptism as long as possible, for fear of committing some serious and unforgivable sin afterward.

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<sup>41</sup> St. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit* 66-67.

At age 19, he committed himself to the life of a wandering monk. He traveled through the empire, writing letters of counsel to his many disciples, carrying on scholarly correspondence with the likes of Saint Augustine. Pope Damasus commissioned him to revise the Latin Bible (the Vulgate). Some of his revisions amount to new translations, and some books he translated a second time! Jerome composed numerous commentaries on the Scriptures as well as homilies. His *Lives of Illustrious Men* profiles 135 eminent Christians, from Saint Peter to...Saint Jerome! It is considered by many to be the first sustained work of *patrology*, the academic study of the Church Fathers — and it was written by one of them.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Mike Aquilina** is vice-president of the Saint Paul Center for Biblical Theology based in Steubenville, Ohio. He is author of many books about the early Christians, and he has hosted several series on the Eternal Word Television Network. He appears often on Catholic radio and writes regularly for the religious press. Mike is past editor of *New Covenant* magazine and *The Pittsburgh Catholic* diocesan newspaper. He hosts a weblog on the early Church at [www.FathersOfTheChurch.com](http://www.FathersOfTheChurch.com). Mike and his wife Terri have six children.





*“Faith is a gift of God which enables us to know and love Him. Faith is a way of knowing, just as reason is. But living in faith is not possible unless there is action on our part. Through the help of the Holy Spirit, we are able to make a decision to respond to divine Revelation, and to follow through in living out our response.”*

– United States Catholic Catechism for Adults, 38.

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In the case of coming generations, the lay faithful must offer the very valuable contribution, more necessary than ever, of a systematic work in catechesis. The Synod Fathers have gratefully taken note of the work of catechists, acknowledging that they “have a task that carries great importance in animating ecclesial communities.” It goes without saying that Christian parents are the primary and irreplaceable catechists of their children...; however, we all ought to be aware of the “rights” that each baptized person has to being instructed, educated and supported in the faith and the Christian life.

Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* 34  
Apostolic Exhortation on the Vocation and Mission  
of the Lay Faithful in the Church and the World

## About the Knights of Columbus

The Knights of Columbus, a fraternal benefit society founded in 1882 in New Haven, Connecticut, by Blessed Michael McGivney, is the world's largest lay Catholic organization, with more than 1.9 million members in the Americas, Europe, and Asia. The Knights support each other and their community, contributing millions of volunteer hours to charitable causes each year. The Knights were the first to financially support the families of law enforcement and fire department personnel killed in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and to work closely with Catholic bishops to protect innocent human life and traditional marriage. To find out more about the Knights of Columbus, visit [www.kofc.org](http://www.kofc.org).

Whether you have a specific question or desire a broader, deeper knowledge of the Catholic faith, CIS can help. Contact us at:

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