

Church History: the Patristic School of Alexandria

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The early Church Fathers, after an initial focus during the 1st and 2nd centuries on apologetics literature (written defenses of Christianity), subsequently engaged in a systematic presentation of the Catholic Faith. This presentation was the point of departure for what is today called “Dogmatic theology.” Two of the noteworthy schools of thought, main locations for this necessary exposition of Catholic truth, were Alexandria (Egypt) and Antioch (Syria). For now, the focus will be on the “School of Alexandria.”

Alexandria, an Egyptian city founded circa 332 B.C. by Alexander the Great (d. 323 B.C.), was a city located in the northern tip of Egypt. Along with Rome and Antioch, Alexandria was one of the three principle cities of the Roman world. This later city became a center of great learning; famous for its great libraries, as well as the popular residence of many intellectuals. At this scholarly hub in Egypt, the Old Testament was translated from the Hebrew tongue into the Greek language; the Septuagint (“LXX”). The Septuagint still remains an important reference for contemporary translations of the Holy Bible.

Biblically speaking, Alexandria is mentioned with distinction in the New Testament. This Egyptian city was the home of Apollos, one of the early defenders of Christianity (cf. Acts 18:24-28). Further, this Egyptian setting was the port for the ship which carried St. Paul to Malta (cf. Acts 27:6), and the ship which brought him to Rome (cf. Acts 28:11). Alexandria, in view of its reputation for intellectual activity, seemed destined to be a mainstay for future Christian thinkers.

There is a tradition, confirmed by St. Jerome (d. A.D. 420) in his work *On Illustrious Men* 36, which claims St. Mark (cf. Acts 12:12; 1 Peter 5:13) was associated with the founding of the School of Alexandria. However, the first “official” head master at Alexandria is usually attributed to Pantaenus. Prior to arriving in Egypt, Pantaenus was a missionary in Arabia. This laborer for the Gospel became known as the “bee of Sicily” — Pantaenus feasted on the flowers of the Prophets and Apostles, and spread this great knowledge to the students in Alexandria.

Pantaenus, in the coming years, was succeeded as head master by the following individuals: Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Heraclas, Alexander, Dionysius, Pierius, Theognostus, Peter, Macarius, Didymus the Blind, and Rhodon. The two most distinguished scholars among this list were Clement (d. A.D. 215) and Origen (d. A.D. 254). This lineage of masters in Alexandria, gathered from historical sources, lends credence to the notion that Alexandrian activity was well known during early Catholicism.

How was the Christian intellectual life practiced at the School of Alexandria? How were educational affairs conducted at this ancient spot of academia? There was no building that housed the gathering of students; the masters taught from their own place of residence. Usually, the master was the sole lecturer, with an occasional assistant. The teaching was not limited to religious matters, focusing some time on the profane sciences. These secular subjects were followed by instructions in morals and philosophy. As expected, the final end of study was the knowledge of Christian theology, with a focus on Sacred Scripture and Tradition.

Commenting on the type of education received by students from the School of Alexandria, St. Clement writes: “These men, moreover, retained the true tradition of holy teaching, which came directly from the holy apostles, Peter and James, John and Paul, as a son receives an inheritance from his father” (*Miscellanies* 1.11.3).

What is one of the great legacies of the School of Alexandria? This Egyptian city would eventually become famous for its Biblical hermeneutics (i.e. exegesis or interpretation), showing the great utility of the “spiritual sense” of Sacred Scripture. In the future, this spiritual sense of Scripture, endorsed by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Nos. 115—118), will be examined in relation to the “literal sense” expounded by the “School of Antioch” in Syria.

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