

St. Justin Martyr

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The Second Vatican Council's 1964 Decree, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* (The Catholic Churches of the Eastern Rite), proclaimed that the Eastern tradition is one of "high esteem" (No. 1). Unfortunately, Catholics of the "Roman" (Latin) rite can easily overlook the excellent Patristic writers from the "Churches of the East," an integral part of universal Catholicism. One of the most distinguished of the Eastern Fathers to be recognized is St. Justin Martyr.

St. Justin Martyr (A.D. 100—165), raised in a pagan household, was born in ancient Flavia Neapolis, located in Palestine. Prior to embracing the Catholic Faith, St. Justin had studied the various schools of pagan philosophy, ultimately finding each school deficient. This search for truth would terminate in the bosom of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.

Studying for a time under a Stoic, St. Justin became disheartened, failing to discover any new information about God. A Peripatetic quickly disgusted St. Justin by charging him a fee, and a Pythagorean refused to teach St. Justin, unless he first learned "secular" subjects (e.g. music). Providentially, after a stay with Platonic thought, St. Justin met an old man who explained "the true philosophy" of the Prophets and Christ Jesus. After being confronted by Truth Himself in Sacred Scripture, St. Justin uttered: "Christian philosophy alone was sure and profitable" (*Dialogue with Trypho* 8). The Holy Bible, not surprisingly, helped direct St. Justin to the Catholic Church.

After his conversion to Christianity, circa A.D. 130, St. Justin became an active missionary for the propagation of the Gospel. During these travels, St. Justin did not merely spread the Catholic Faith, but also catechized the people throughout Asia Minor. This Eastern lay evangelist understood a crucial point: authentic conversion is impossible without an authentic renewal of the mind (cf. Mk. 12:30; Rom. 12:2; 1 Pet. 1:13).

During his life, St. Justin spent some time in Rome, founding a school of "Christian philosophy." At this school in Rome, one of St. Justin's students was another notable apologist, Tatian the Assyrian (d. 180). It was in the "Eternal City" of Rome that St. Justin would merit his name "Martyr" — he was beheaded under the Roman Empire.

St. Justin's surviving works, whose authenticity is certain, are *First Apology*, *Second Apology*, and *Dialogue with Trypho*. Some Patristic scholars (e.g. Quasten; Jurgens) believe *First Apology* and *Second Apology* originally had been one tome. Nevertheless, it is these authentic works that established St. Justin's reputation as a first-rate philosopher and theologian.

First, St. Justin was the earliest Patristic writer to develop the theme of the Blessed Virgin Mary as the "New Eve" (cf. *Dialogue* 100). This theme was expounded by St. Irenaeus (d. A.D. 200), in his work *Against Heresies* 3.22.4, and by Tertullian (d. A.D.

223), in his work *The Flesh of Christ* 17. These Church Fathers assisted in giving the components for the dogma of the “Immaculate Conception.”

Second, St. Justin was a pioneer in showing the relationship between sound portions of ancient pagan philosophy (e.g. Socrates; Plato) and Christian theology (cf. *First Apology* 44). St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), utilizing Aristotle, would solidify this philosophical theological relationship in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* and *Summa Theologiae*. Pope John Paul II alludes to this relationship, in Nos. 43-45, in the 1993 encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (The Splendor of Truth).

Third, St. Justin gives us one of the earliest writings on the branch of theology known as “Apologetics” — the explanation and defense of the Catholic Faith (cf. *Second Apology* 14). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 3, reveals that handing on the truths of Catholicism is a universal calling.

The lay missionary from Palestine, St. Justin Martyr, is truly one of the great luminaries “from the East.” His search for truth, passing through numerous schools of thought, is not unlike many today who are hostile to the Church. There may be a future St. Justin in a family member, co-worker, or neighbor. Perhaps we can point them to the “only true philosophy” — found in the Lord Jesus Christ and His Church.

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