

Past Masters of Holy Scripture: An Introduction to the Fathers of the Church

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The Fathers of the Church deserve our unlimited respect, gratitude and veneration. While most of them are illustrious for their sanctity and high position in the Church, they are all renowned for their erudition and antiquity. Their writings enable us to render a better account of our Faith because they were closer to the fountain of truth.

Monsignor George Agius

Tradition and the Church

Intro

A reliable method for increasing one's comprehension of Sacred Scripture is to discover its greatest commentators. Among such exegetes, a place of honor goes to the Fathers of the Church. Their contribution to Catholic doctrine and dogma is immeasurable, as numerous Magisterial pronouncements indicate by their frequent Patristic citations which substantiate the Catholic Faith. This article is a primer on these esteemed men.

Sacred History

Terms such as "Patrology," "Patristics," "Church Fathers," and "Fathers of the Church" designate the Christian individuals or writers from the earliest eight centuries of the Faith.¹ Within Scripture, the word "father" (Heb. *'āb*, Gk. *patēr*) aligns with two key Biblical facts: the office of teacher, and the exercise of authority. Consider the inferences drawn from the following passages. Mark 11:10, which records Our Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem before His Passion, reveals the crowd shouting, "Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming!" Saint Peter's second sermon after Pentecost states, "The God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified His servant Jesus" (Acts 3:13). Saint Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 4:14-15, "I do not write this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel." First John 2:1 reveals the Beloved Apostle exhorting his flock as "My little children." Patristic implications are revealed also in Hebrews 11:4-12:2; the renowned "Saints Hall of Fame."

The Scriptural texts above, from the many available, link the actions of teaching and authority with the corresponding Biblical truths of kingdom, covenant, priestly fatherhood, and spiritual childhood. The Old Testament is also embedded with such realities: a stellar example comes from the Patristic overtones within the life of Abraham. Read and meditate upon the Abrahamic passages such as Genesis 12:1-7; 13:14-18; 14:14-20; 15:1-6; 17:1-21; 18:17-32; 20:9-17; 21:1-5; and 22:1-18. The actions and truths of both Testaments coalesce in the field of Patrology.

Ecclesiastical History

In view of the Scriptural foundation, one sees the organic development of the field of Patrology during the very epoch of the Fathers.² A “theological” history on Christian literature is credited to the distinguished ecclesiastical historian of that time; Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 340). His influential *History of the Church*, composed during the first quarter of the Fourth Century, provides us a record of “those who in each generation have proclaimed the divine word either orally or in writing” (1.1.1). This monumental work, formatted into ten books, is indispensable for historian and theologian alike. *History*, which covers the time of Jesus Christ to the period of Constantine, is the lone source for many non-extant works.

Alongside Eusebius, the first “formal” history of Christian literature comes from Saint Jerome (d. 420). *On Illustrious Men*, written 392, is a response to certain pagans who derided the alleged intellectual weakness of Christians. The tome begins with Saint Peter the Apostle, and ends with Saint Jerome’s own writings to date. Although dependent upon Eusebius’ writings, Saint Jerome’s *On Illustrious Men* remains the basic source for the history of ancient Christian literature.

The tomes of Eusebius and Saint Jerome were not perfect. Nonetheless, both writers provide an invaluable benefit in their respective works: the documentation of those in error. This kind of task, often unpleasant and taxing, is a necessary service for the cause of truth. In a bit of irony, Eusebius, in spite of making such an indispensable contribution for the study of the early Church, has never undergone canonization.³ Subsequent

Patristic compositions on the history of Christian literature come from Gennadius of Marseilles (d. 505), Saint Isidore of Seville (d. 636), and Saint Ildephonsus of Toledo (d. 667).

Papal Endorsements

The Magisterium has spoken many times about the value of the Fathers. The *Roman Catechism* (1566), one of the great teaching tools for the Faith, makes ample use of the Fathers. Pope Leo XIII's *Providentissimus Deus* I.B.2a (1893) speaks of the great Patristic schools at Alexandria and Antioch, "whose laborious studies and admirable writings have justly merited for the three following centuries the appellation of the golden age of Biblical exegesis." Pope Pius XII's *Divino Afflante Spiritu* 28 (1943) tells us, "the Catholic exegete will find invaluable help in an assiduous study of those works, in which the Holy Fathers, the Doctors of the Church and the renowned interpreters of past ages have explained the Sacred Books." The Pontifical Biblical Commission's *Sancta Mater Ecclesia* I (1964) says, "The Catholic exegete, under the guidance of the Church, should take advantage of all the contributions made by earlier commentators, by the Fathers and Doctors of the Church in particular, and carry on their work." This is a mere sample of the authoritative Church pronouncements that endorse the Fathers.⁴

The unambiguous Magisterial endorsements above raise some questions. Should we grant more influence to the opinions of scholars in the last several centuries, than to the earlier Patristic writers who may have sat at the very feet of the Apostles or their close associates? Is it legitimate to disregard the works of a Church Father who, perhaps, had been only a few generations removed from the very men who actually wrote the Holy Bible? The answer is no to both questions — to ignore or dismiss the Patristic testimony is second-rate scholarship.

The Essentials

We may now examine the Fathers within the science of Dogmatic Theology. Certain facts within Patrology are crucial for making sense of the field. The standard Patristic texts give attention to the following basics.⁵

The classification of Fathers may be done in a general or specific way. In a general manner, the titles “Eastern Father” or “Western Father” is conducted on geographical grounds; on the relationship of the Fathers to the area surrounding the Mediterranean Basin of the Roman Empire. Another method is the labels “Greek Father” (i.e., Eastern) or “Latin Father” (i.e., Western); derived from the language the respective Father utilized for communication. Other languages were employed such as Syrian, Coptic, and Armenian.

In a specific manner, three designations are common. The “Apostolic Fathers” are those likely born within the New Testament era: Pope Saint Clement of Rome (d. 101), Saint Ignatius of Antioch (d. 107), Saint Papias of Hierapolis (d. 130), Saint Polycarp of Smyrna (d. 155), and Hermas (d. Second Century). The “Apologists” are the great defenders of the Faith: Saint Justin Martyr (d. 165), Tatian the Assyrian (d. 180), Saint Melito of Sardis (d. 190), Saint Irenaeus of Lyons (d. 200), Athenagoras (d. Second Century), Saint Theophilus of Antioch (d. Second Century), and Minucius Felix (d. Second or Third Century). The “Doctors” are those who manifested a profound knowledge of doctrine, uncompromising orthodoxy, and exemplary holiness. The four “Great Doctors” of the East are Saint Athanasius (d. 373), Saint Basil the Great (d. 379), Saint Gregory of Nazianz (d. 390), and Saint John Chrysostom (d. 407). The West has Saint Ambrose of Milan (d. 397), Saint Jerome (d. 420), Saint Augustine (d. 430), and Pope Saint Gregory the Great (d. 604).

The Fathers were identified by four main attributes: “orthodoxy,” “sanctity,” “Church approbation”, and “antiquity.”⁶ Orthodoxy entails the Father leaving behind a teaching or reputation, no matter how small. For example, Saint Papias’ extant writings consist of mere fragments. Miltiades has no extant writings, but is mentioned by Eusebius. This teaching or reputation must have manifested a correct belief. True, some Patristic opinions and actions were erroneous and imprudent. Sanctity is holiness of life, but doesn’t mean impeccability. For example, the early Tertullian is one of the great Latin theologians, but his later rigorism taints his whole legacy. Church approbation means

ecclesiastical approval; the Father was considered as such by the Church. An obvious sign is the designation “saint,” applicable to many Fathers. Antiquity covers the time from the Apostolic era through the mid Eighth Century. In this light, the Eastern Fathers close with Saint John Damascene (d. 749). The Western Fathers have some latitude, and end with either Pope Saint Gregory the Great (d. 604), Saint Isidore of Seville (d. 636), or Saint Bede the Venerable (d. 735). In light of the chronology East and West, one finds reference to “The Period of Origins” for the First to Third Century, “The Golden Age” from 300 to 430, and “The Last Centuries” for 430 to circa 750. It is conceded that many dates associated with the Fathers are uncertain.

The School of Antioch

After a focus on Apologetic literature during the early Christian period, the Fathers were able to move to a more systematic presentation of the Catholic Faith. This exposition of truth laid the groundwork for Dogmatic Theology, which provided a great legacy for Biblical interpretation. Thus, two noteworthy “schools” emerge in separate locations: Antioch in Syria, and Alexandria in Egypt.⁷ As we examine both schools, keep in mind the following words that appear centuries later from St. Thomas Aquinas: “In Sacred Scripture, the truth is manifested in two ways. One way is according to what the words themselves signify; this is the literal sense. Another way is where things prefigure certain other things, and in this consists the spiritual sense” (*Quaestiones Quodlibetales* VII, 14). In view of this Thomistic axiom, we can look back at both schools. First, the Antiochene school.

Located in the region of Syria, Antioch was founded in 300 B.C. by Seleucus I Nicator (d. 281 B.C.). In the Old Testament, during the Seleucid Empire, Antioch was the royal city which served as a kind of headquarters (cf. 1 Macc 3:37; 4:35). In the New Testament, Saint Paul spent some time in Antioch, a base of operations for his early missionary journeys (cf. Acts 13:1-3; 15:35-41). Note well: Scripture mentions another Antioch that is part of Pisidia (cf. Acts 13:14; 14:21). Syrian Antioch is our concern.

The school at Antioch had its inception during the latter half of the Third Century. Lucian of Samosata (d. 312), not to be confused with the pagan rhetorician, is the name connected to the school's beginning. Other names associated with this Syrian institution are Diodorus of Tarsus (d. 392), Saint John Chrysostom (d. 407), Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428), and Theodoret of Cyrus (d. 458).

The Antiochene method placed an emphasis on the literal sense of Holy Writ; the meaning conveyed by the actual words of Scripture. At the heart of the literal sense within Biblical interpretation is two points: an attention to the historical context of the Bible, and the recognition of its particular grammar. Look again to Saint Thomas Aquinas: "All other senses of Sacred Scripture are based on the literal" (*Summa Theologiae* I, 1, 10, ad 1). We can now proceed to the Alexandrian school.

The School of Alexandria

Located in the northern tip of Egypt, Alexandria was a city founded circa 332 B.C. by Alexander the Great (d. 323 B.C.). With Rome and Antioch, Alexandria was one of three principle cities of the Roman world. Alexandria became a center of great learning, famous for its libraries, and a popular residence for many intellectuals. This scholarly hub is mentioned with distinction later in the New Testament. This Egyptian city was the home of Apollos, one of the early defenders of the Faith (cf. Acts 18:24-28).

Furthermore, Alexandria was the port for the ship which first carried Saint Paul to the island of Malta (cf. Acts 27:6) and later to Rome (cf. Acts 28:11). Alexandria seemed well equipped to be a mainstay for future Christian thinkers. Earlier, this municipality was the place where the Old Testament was translated from the Hebrew tongue into the Greek language, called the "Septuagint." This Greek translation remains a reference for contemporary translations of the Bible.

Saint Mark the Evangelist is linked to the founding of the Alexandrian school. However, the first head master is usually considered Saint Pantaenus of Sicily (d. 206). The better

known personages of this school are Saint Clement of Alexandria (d. 215), Origen (d. 254), Theognostus (d. 280), and Didymus the Blind (d. 398).

Coinciding with Antioch's stress upon the literal sense of Scripture, the trademark of the school of Alexandria became the promotion of the spiritual sense. This sense considers the realities and events beyond the surface words; an appreciation of the different layers of meaning found in Holy Writ. Tradition testifies to three subdivisions of the spiritual sense: allegorical, moral, and anagogical. The allegorical sense helps us to recognize Biblical words and actions in view of Jesus Christ. The moral sense considers God's word as a guide to living the virtue of justice. The anagogical sense ponders Divine Revelation's eschatological significance.

The Fathers and the Bible Student

Even a cursory reading of the Patristic literature indicates men of real faith, who possessed an undeniable *sensus Catholicus*. The Fathers displayed a love for Jesus Christ and His Church, a zealotness to spread the Gospel, and a concern to safeguard the dogmas and doctrines of the Faith. The age of Patrology treated God's words with great reverence, and the Bible student immersed in the writings of the Fathers will undergo a truly Catholic influence. Consider the contribution by Saint Augustine. One could begin with his *Christian Instruction*, and then proceed to his numerous letters, sermons, commentaries, and doctrinal texts.⁸ This material will increase one's understanding and appreciation of God's word.

In addition to the Augustinian literature, there is a wide range of Patristic material available today. Beside the standard Latin and Greek collections found in larger libraries, many publishers have issued the writings of the Fathers in the English language. The popular sets are *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (InterVarsity), *Ancient Christian Writers* (Newman/Paulist), *The Church's Bible* (Eerdmans), *The Early Church Fathers* (Routledge), *The Fathers of the Church* (Catholic University), and *Message of the Fathers of the Church* (Liturgical).⁹ Not to be overlooked is Saint Thomas Aquinas' *Catena Aurea* (Cosimo); his collection of Patristic comments upon the Gospels.

Final Thoughts

The literary output of the Fathers should be viewed in proper perspective: such writings originated from a wide range of geography, culture, and background. The Fathers are “catholic” (i.e., universal) in every sense of the term. The Patristic treatises are a worthy alternative to the neo-Modernism found in some contemporary works on the Bible. Father M. F. Toal’s *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers*, a work that may deserve pride of place among the sets mentioned earlier, tells us: “In the framing of the great corpus of Catholic doctrine and theology, the authority and influence of the Fathers are secondary only to those of the Apostles and Evangelists themselves.”¹⁰ The Fathers are a key component of Tradition; let us do our best to spread their writings far and wide.

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¹ The term “Patrology” was first used by the Lutheran theologian, Johann Gerhard, in his 1653 work *Patrologia*; cf. Aloys Dirksen, *Elementary Patrology: The Writings of the Fathers of the Church* (St. Louis: Herder, 1959) 3-7.

² See Johannes Quasten, *Patrology, Volume I: The Beginnings of Patristic Literature* (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1993) 1-9.

³ There is a convenient collection of ancient testimony, for and against Eusebius, in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers: Second Series* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994) I:57-72.

⁴ Additional endorsements are found in Vatican II’s *Dei Verbum* 23 (1965); Pope John Paul II’s *Catechesi Tradendae* 12 (1979); and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 8, 11, 78, 688 (1997).

⁵ Two texts that provide useful information on the essentials are Berthold Altaner, *Patrology* (NY: Herder, 1961) 1-9 and Boniface Ramsey, *Beginning to Read the Fathers* (NY: Paulist, 1985) 3-7.

⁶ Individuals who didn’t meet these attributes are sometimes designated “Christian or ecclesiastical writers” in lieu of “Fathers.” However, this designation is not a strict rule.

⁷ The schools and exegetical methods of the Fathers are discussed in F. Cayré, *Manual of Patrology and History of Theology: First Volume, First and Second Books* (Paris: Desclée, 1927); Bertrand de Margerie, *An Introduction to the History of Exegesis, Volumes I—III* (Petersham: Saint Bede’s, 1993, 1995, 1991); Frank Sadowski, ed., *The Church Fathers on the Bible: Selected Readings* (NY: Alba, 1987); Manlio Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church: An Historical Introduction to Patristic Exegesis* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994); and Joseph W. Trigg, *Message of the Fathers of the Church, Volume 9: Biblical Interpretation* (Wilmington: Glazier, 1988).

⁸ For a bibliography of Saint Augustine’s literary output, consult the charts in Allan D. Fitzgerald, gen. ed., *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) xxxv-ii.

⁹ Some of the sets (e.g., InterVarsity, Eerdmans, Routledge) are released by non-Catholic publishers; all the sets must be scrutinized in light of Catholic Tradition.

¹⁰ M. F. Toal, ed., *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers* (Chicago: Regnery, 1964) I: opening page. This work has been reprinted by Ignatius Press.