

## St. Irenaeus

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Pope John Paul II, writing in his 1979 Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae* (Catechesis in our Time), reminds the faithful that the writings of the Church Fathers are models for catechetical instruction (No. 12). The Roman Pontiff, the “primary catechist” for the Catholic Church, is giving us an incentive to study and put into practice the Patristic legacy. An excellent Patristic model, in this regard, is St. Irenaeus of Lyons.

St. Irenaeus (A.D. 130—200) was born in the Roman province of Asia Minor, probably the city of Smyrna. At this city, a young St. Irenaeus had been a pupil of Smyrna’s bishop, the famous St. Polycarp (d. A.D. 155). Providentially, St. Polycarp had been a listener of St. John the Apostle (cf. Jn. 19:35; 21:24). The historian Eusebius of Caesarea (d. A.D. 340) affirms these acquaintances in his opus *Ecclesiastical History* 5.20.5-7; showing that St. Irenaeus had a historical link traceable to the Apostolic age.

After his early years in Asia Minor, St. Irenaeus settled in Gaul (modern France), becoming the presbyter at Lugdunum. Circa A.D. 177, while still a young man in his late 30s, St. Irenaeus succeeded Pothinus and was consecrated the 2<sup>nd</sup> bishop of Lyons, Gaul. As a bishop, St. Irenaeus would help to establish the Church at Gaul as a great “Christian metropolis.”

In addition to his episcopate in Lyons, St. Irenaeus provided missionary outreach in the surrounding areas, spreading the Catholic Faith to Besancon and Valence. During this period in Gaul, St. Irenaeus directed his personal piety and towering intellect to pen and paper (i.e. stylus and papyrus), composing some of the greatest writings found in early Catholicism.

The most distinguished literary contribution of St. Irenaeus is *Detection and Overthrow of the Gnosis Falsely So Called* — better known as *Against Heresies*. A work of five books, *Against Heresies* was composed A.D. 180—199. This composition established the Bishop of Lyons as perhaps the most important theologian of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Noteworthy sections for study in *Against Heresies* are the statements on Scripture, Tradition, and the Church: three essential components that safeguard Divine Revelation.

St. Irenaeus gives valuable testimony to the Apostolic authorship of the four Gospels. He writes: “Matthew also issued among the Hebrews a written Gospel in their own language... Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, also handed down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. Luke also, the companion of Paul, set down in a book the Gospel preached by him... John, the disciple of the Lord who reclined at His bosom, also published a Gospel...” (*Against Heresies* 3.1.1). This traditional order (Matthew first, John last) was repeated at the Ecumenical Councils of Florence (1442), Trent (1546), and Vatican I (1870).

“It is possible then, for everyone in every Church,” writes the Bishop of Lyons, “who may wish to know the truth, to contemplate the tradition of the Apostles which has been made known throughout the whole world” (*Against Heresies* 3.3.1). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Nos. 77—79) mirrors these concepts of St. Irenaeus, stating that Tradition, alongside Scripture, is necessary to know the truth.

*Against Heresies* 3.3.2 states: “For with this Church [at Rome], because of its superior origin, all Churches must agree, that is, all the faithful in the whole world; and it is in her that the faithful everywhere have maintained the Apostolic tradition.” This statement, which touches upon the authority and role of the Catholic Church, is enunciated by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in the 2000 document *Dominus Iesus* (On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church).

The great significance about St. Irenaeus is that in a sense, because of his travels (Rome) and residence (Gaul), the bishop represented both “East” and “West.” This makes his testimony extremely weighty; showing a type of universality (i.e. “Catholicity”) that can be gleaned from *Against Heresies*. For this reason, any study of the Catholic Faith can only gain greater insight from a reading of the Bishop of Lyons.

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