Chapter 7

Patristics

This word is a broad one and basically means the “study of the Fathers” with the Fathers being the teachers who ‘fathered’ the faith along its way from the earliest post-Apostolic times. The canon of Scripture and the Creeds of the Church are the direct result of the efforts of these Fathers. We also mention the “Doctors of the Church” here, with the difference between the two mainly being that the Fathers lived within the first six centuries and participated in the first seven ecumenical councils, and the Doctors span the history of the Church; that said, every Church Father is a Church Doctor but not every Doctor is a Father.

Who’s The Father?

There are probably close to 70 people who could be considered ‘Church Fathers’ because of their writings, but only a few are designated such by the East and the West. The early Church Fathers fall into three basic categories corresponding to pivotal times in the Church, specifically the Apostolic times and the Council of Nicaea which we mentioned in the last chapter. They are therefore designated as *Apostolic Fathers*, *ante-Nicene Fathers*, and *post-Nicene Fathers*.

The *Apostolic* Church Fathers are the earliest writers who were contemporaries of the apostles and probably heard them preach if not having been directly taught by them. They take up and uphold the tradition and teaching of the apostles themselves, in effect continuing on as their direct successors. Examples of Apostolic Fathers would be Clement of Rome and Polycarp.

The *ante-Nicene* Fathers are the group who came after the apostolic fathers and before the Council of Nicaea in 325. Irenaeus and Justin Martyr are ante-Nicene fathers. Their work lays the framework for the decisions made at the Council.

The *post-Nicene* Fathers are such noted men as Augustine, John Chrysostom, Jerome, and Eusebius. They represent the orthodox thinking solidified at the Council and yet they are not limited by that thinking but freed by it to expand on the solid theology and doctrine.

Fatherly Advice

After the apostolic kerygma, there develops the need for exposition on that kerygma. If we think back we might see similarities in the development of the Hebrew Scriptures and the rabbinic books which developed around the Torah. So, in tandem with the ideas presented in the last chapter these men began to expand, solidify, and define doctrine from the earliest days of the Church.

The difference being that they retain an air of orthodoxy. Certainly they were inspirational, but so was Arius. Why were they chosen over Arius? The solidness of their arguments may have played a part, but let us be a bit more basic than that. Along with being the most respected pastors and theologians of their day, their teachings set the standard for what is to be considered orthodox Christian teaching. You might say that is a bit of circular thinking, they set the standard and so became the standard but it is larger than that. They became the standard because they remained true to the accepted teaching of their time. Where they strayed they were not accepted. So, while the Fathers were not infallible and even wandered theologically, their widely accepted thinking and the consensus of their peers on significant issues give weight to the theological positions they taught.

Who’s Your Daddy?

Why is it important to have Fathers? As said, there is a two-fold aspect to this answer. First is the idea of authority – it is important to have orthodoxy when teaching. These men garnered the respect of their peers and their flocks not just for their thinking but for their holiness as well. So secondly, they are important because of the chain they represent back to the Apostles and back then to Jesus himself. Their solid and orthodox teachings which spoke to unity among all Christians everywhere could only be because they were in line with Jesus’ original teachings. Therefore they were faithful to Jesus, and as such holy men who were worthy to be followed. Many suffered greatly at the hands of arbitrary decisions but remained true to the teachings they had been handed.

So perhaps we can reduce it back to the usual father-as-head-of-the-household thing, where the father is both a leader and an authority. The faithfulness of these men inspired others to levels of faithfulness on both an intellectual and a spiritual level. It is important to have a lineage, to have an unbroken chain back to the origins of the faith and in fact we see that in many denominations which claim an ‘unbroken’ linage back to the Apostles even though they bypass the post-Apostolic age and jump straight to the 18th or 19th centuries.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Why are there no mothers? Well, not to be sexist but at the time they were just not acknowledged, not in a theological way at least. This is not to say that there were no female leaders – that is just not true. Women performed spiritual leadership of a level we learn to appreciate only when we look at the role of the Saints, and see the women who populate it and why.

Name Dropper

The unofficial list of Fathers is longer than my arm so there are far too many to even bring up here. There is no time to give real due to the unfathomable gift given the Church by so many, so let us just examine a few.

Some, whom we still reference, do not make the list like Origen (185-254) [though influential in the Church, got a bit too Platonic and held views on the pre-existence, transmigration, and *apokatastasis* of souls that were condemned.] Of course the same could be said of several of these guys, but most were well reformed before the ends of their lives. Once again the idea of theology versus doctrine [should always be kept in mind.] Origen himself has been lately reformed, with the understanding that not all of his thought was heretical and therefore worthy of consideration. Note, most early dates are approximate.

Clement of Rome

Clement of Rome is known from an early epistle he wrote (somewhere about the mid-90’s) to the Corinthians which was widely circulated and even considered for inclusion in the canon. Tertullian, writing about one hundred years later in 199, says that the Roman Church claimed that Clement was ordained by St. Peter. His epistle to the Corinthians contains Old Testament references, showing the importance of understanding the Hebrew Scriptures. In addition his is some of the earliest references to Paul’s epistles to the Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and First Corinthians. His statements about resurrection and the after-life rely upon OT references more that NT ones.

“*If any one will consider these things with sincerity and one by one, he will recognize the magnificence of the gifts that were given by him. For from Jacob came the priests and all the Levites that serve the altar of God. From him came our Lord Jesus Christ according to the flesh; from him came the kings and rulers and governors of the tribe of Judah; and the remainder of his tribes are of no small glory, since God hath promised, Thy seed shall be as the stars of heaven. All these, therefore, have been glorified and magnified, not through themselves or through their works, or through the righteousness that they have done, but through his will. And we who through his will have been called in Christ Jesus are justified, not by ourselves, or through our wisdom or understanding or godliness, or the works that we have done in holiness of heart, but by faith, by which all men from the beginning have been justified by Almighty God, to whom be glory world without end. Amen. What, then, shall we do, brethren? Shall we cease from well-doing, and abandon charity? May the Master never allow that this should happen to us! But let us rather with diligence and zeal hasten to fulfill every good work. For the Maker and Lord of all things rejoices in his works.”*

Ignatius of Antioch

 Ignatius of Antioch (35 to 50-107 to 117) third bishop of Antioch, believe to have been instated by Peter. Identified as a disciple of the Apostle John, martyred in Rome, and author of author of at least 7 letters that had exceptional influence in the early Church. Eusebius (263-339) and Jerome (342-420) mention his letters. Ignatius is important because he has some of the earliest quotes from Matthew, Luke, Acts, First Thessalonians, First Colossians, First Corinthians, Romans, and Ephesians as well as insights into early Church governance “*It is not lawful apart from the bishop either to baptize or to hold a love-feast*” (*Letter to the Smyrnaeans,*8) and Eucharistic theology (causing Calvin to completely reject him). Ignatius’ Eucharistic theology is very physical, describing it as the “*medicine of immortality and the antidote against death, enabling us to live forever in Jesus Christ*.” (*Letter to the Ephesians*) Aside from John chapter 6, his is some of the earliest expressions of belief in the reality of the Sacrament. “*The heretics abstain from Eucharist because they do not allow that the Eucharist is the flesh of Christ.*” (*Letter to the Smyrn.,*6) Zeal for martyrdom.

He is often thought to be a bit anti-Semitic but is probably more against “Judaizers” as was Paul and was more protest against a return to Judaism which had sought to separate itself from the Christian sect. “*It is monstrous to talk of Jesus Christ and to practice Judaism, for Christianity did not believe in Judaism but Judaism in Christianity*." (*Epistle to the Magnesians,*10) In addition to the older internal struggles he also fought the new doctrinal heresy of the Docetists, emphasizing Jesus’ humanity over their belief in a ‘phantom’ body. Christ “*was* truly *born and ate and drank, was* truly *persecuted under Pontius Pilate...was* truly *raised from the dead.*” (*Letter to the Trallians*, 9) “*I know that He was in the flesh even after the resurrection, and when He came to Peter and his company, He said to them, ‘Lay hold and handle me, and see that I am not an incorporeal spirit’*” (*Smyrn*, 3).

To make his arguments Ignatius is the earliest extra-Scriptural writer to use the philosophical language of his day. “*There is one only physician, of flesh and of spirit, generate and ingenerate, God in man, true life in death, son of Mary and son of God, first passible and then impassible*.” (*Eph*., 7) Along that vein he is also the first writer outside the New Testament to mention the Virgin Birth, which for reasons of combating the Christological heresies he particularly emphasizes. “*Hidden from the prince of this world were the virginity of Mary and her child-bearing and likewise also the death of the Lord, three mysteries to be cried aloud, the which were wrought in the silence of God*” (*Eph*., 19)

Polycarp

Polycarp (69-155) was bishop of Smyrna and the first post-New Testament (non-Scriptural) recorded martyr in Church history. Friend of Ignatius and also thought to be a disciple of the Apostle John, he is best known for his epistle to the Philippians, one of the earliest surviving Christians writings,and several references by Ignatius and Irenaeus. Irenaeus regarded the memory of Polycarp as a link to the apostolic past, an important fact, along with his long age made him a much sought after teacher. Little is really directly known of his teachings but more of the effect of those teachings, which were obviously powerful. We can see creedal and anti-heretical statements as well as statements which give an idea as to the structures in place in the early Church, including the sharing of epistles among the Churches.

“‘*Wherefore, girding up your loins,’ ‘serve the Lord in fear’ and truth, as those who have forsaken the vain, empty talk and error of the multitude, and ‘believed in Him who raised up our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead, and gave Him glory,’ and a throne at His right hand. ‘To Him all things in heaven and on earth are subject. Him every spirit serves. He comes as the Judge of the living and the dead. His blood will God require of those who do not believe in Him. But He who raised Him up from the dead will raise up us also, if we do His will, and walk in His commandments, and love what He loved, keeping ourselves from all unrighteousness, covetousness, love of money, evil speaking, false witness; ‘not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing,’ or blow for blow, or cursing for cursing, but being mindful of what the Lord said in His teaching: ‘Judge not, that ye be not judged; forgive, and it shall be forgiven unto you; be merciful, that ye may obtain mercy; with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again’; and once more, ‘Blessed are the poor, and those that are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of God*.’” (*Epistle to the Philippians*)

Irenaeus

Irenaeus (~130-~200) is considered by most to be the father of Christian theology. A student of Polycarp, Jerome and others state that he died as a martyr in the persecution under the Septimus Severus (145-211) of the arch fame, but there is no certainty about this and probably more doubt as even his death date is unknown.[[2]](#footnote-2) Aside from some fragments, he is known mainly through his apologetic five volume work *Against the Heresies* and a catechumenate book titled *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*.

A broad and brilliant thinker, his discussion of evil and death probably merits its own section, but we will not be so kind here. Suffice it to say that salvation is part of a process of growing up, that part of the reason for freewill is that we grow fully into the “image and likeness” of God. The Fall in the Garden was more of a childish desire to have it all and have it now. The penalty for sin is death, hardship, and corruption but we should not go the route of the Gnostics and realize the less harsh view that we are merely spiritually maturing. Death and suffering appear evil, but without them we could never come to know God.

Gnostics wanted to break God apart and made the Cross a bridge to a secret salvation. Irenaeus instead emphasized that God created the world and is still overseeing it and so we can see that there is a unity and the goodness of God. As a proof of the idea he stresses the idea of Jesus as *Logos*, which also shows the unity of all of salvation history (the idea of Jesus as always with God, being God, being an instrument of Creation, and the Incarnation as the high point of salvation – as seen in John’s Gospel and in Paul). God is unity, is immortal, and is incorruptible; we gain those benefits from the Incarnation. That simple act unites human nature and God’s nature. In Christ God conveys those qualities to us: they spread, as it were, like a benign infection. The atonement by Christ happens through Incarnation rather than crucifixion, though one is unable to be separated from the other.[[3]](#footnote-3) Salvation comes about, essentially, through the incarnation of God as man.

He also promoted the idea of apostolic succession as a proof for orthodoxy. “*The Lord of all gave to His apostles the power of the gospel, and by them we also have learned the truth, that is, the teaching of the Son of God—as the Lord said to them, 'He who hears you hears Me, and he who despises you despises Me, and Him Who sent Me'* [Luke.10:16]. *For we learned the plan of our salvation from no other than from those through whom the gospel came to us. The first preached it abroad, and then later by the will of God handed it down to us in Scriptures, to be the foundation and pillar of our faith. For it is not right to say that they preached before they had come to perfect knowledge, as some dare to say, boasting that they are the correctors of the apostles. For after our Lord had risen from the dead, and they were clothed with the power from on high when the Holy Spirit came upon them, they were filled with all things and had perfect knowledge. They went out to the ends of the earth, preaching the good things that come to us from God, and proclaiming peace from heaven to all men, all and each of them equally being in possession of the gospel of God*.” (*Against the Heresies*, III)

Justin Martyr

Justin Martyr (~100-~165) is someone we met back in chapter 5, so there is no need to go deeply into his thought, except perhaps where it fits into the history. He was a big Platonist who saw Christianity as *the* philosophy. As an apologist he sought to make Christianity understandable to the non-Christians around him. He believed that any rational, intellectual expression of the Christian faith would unfailingly demonstrate its harmony with that same reason, hence making it the soundest of all the philosophies of the day. The same would have to be true for the teachings of Christianity as based not just in rational argument but in existing Scripture, both Hebrew *and* secular. For Justin the Old Testament and Greek philosophy met to form the single stream of Christianity. God, as the creator of all things, means that anything humans could come up with is merely a reflection of that divine thinking. All human thought pointed toward Christ. Jesus therefore is both the messiah announced by the Old Testament prophets and the preexisting *Logos* of the philosophers through whom God revealed himself in the Scriptures. This progressive idea of knowledge of God (influenced by Paul) was also reflected in his belief that the gentiles have been chosen to replace Israel as God’s chosen people.

As an early writer, his arguments for martyrdom and his descriptions of the Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist are very important because they articulate some of the earliest non-Scriptural theological thinking on those tenets, especially the sacraments.

“*Our doctrines, then, appear to be greater than all human teaching; because Christ, who appeared for our sakes, became the whole rational being, both body, and reason, and soul. For whatever either lawgivers or philosophers uttered well, they elaborated by finding and contemplating some part of the Word. But since they did not know the whole of the Word, which is Christ, they often contradicted themselves. And those who by human birth were more ancient than Christ, when they attempted to consider and prove things by reason, were brought before the tribunals as impious persons and busybodies. And Socrates, who was more zealous in this direction than all of them, was accused of the very same crimes as ourselves. For they said that he was introducing new divinities, and did not consider those to be gods whom the state recognized. But he cast out from the state both Homer and the rest of the poets, and taught men to reject the wicked demons and those who did the things which the poets related; and he exhorted them to become acquainted with the God who was to them unknown, by means of the investigation of reason, saying, “That it is neither easy to find the Father and Maker of all, nor, having found Him, is it safe to declare Him to all.” But these things our Christ did through His own power. For no one trusted in Socrates so as to die for this doctrine, but in Christ, who was partially known even by Socrates (for He was and is the Word who is in every man, and who foretold the things that were to come to pass both through the prophets and in His own person when He was made of like passions, and taught these things*[John 1:9]*), not only philosophers and scholars believed, but also artisans and people entirely uneducated, despising both glory, and fear, and death; since He is a power of the ineffable Father, not the mere instrument of human reason*.” (*Second Apology*, 10)

* **N.B. *Fathers of the time of Nicea***

Athanasius

Athanasius (296-373) was the first person to uniquely identify the 27 books of the New Testament that, after being ratified by a series of synods, are in the canon today. By all rights an impressive youth he wrote a treatise entitled *On the Incarnation*, affirming and explaining that Jesus Christ was both God and Man. About the time Athanasius was 23 and still but a deacon, as we previously discussed Arius began his teaching that Jesus was but another creature, that there was a time before God the Father ‘begat’ Jesus and he did not exist. Athanasius responded that the Father's begetting of the Son, the action of uttering of the Word, was an *eternal* relationship between them, not an event that took place *within time*. We can call this the “shot heard ‘round the world” signifying the beginning of Christianity's fight against the heresy of Arianism.

“*The body of the Word, then, being a real human body, in spite of its having been uniquely formed from a virgin, was of itself mortal and, like other bodies, liable to death. But the indwelling of the Word loosed it from this natural liability, so that corruption could not touch it. Thus is happened that two opposite marvels took place at once: the death of all was consummated in the Lord's body; yet, because the Word was in it, death and corruption were in the same act utterly abolished. Death there had to be, and death for all, so that the due of all might be paid. Wherefore the Word* [Logos]*, as I said, himself being incapable of death, assumed a mortal body, that he might offer it as his own in place of all, and suffering for the sake of all through his union with it*…” (*On the Incarnation*, 20)

Ambrose

Ambrose (330-397) is notable as one of the Fathers from what could be considered ‘the West’ and is therefore known as one of the four “Latin Fathers” (Jerome, Augustine, and Gregory the Great being the other three). He was born in the Gaul region and finally ends up in Milan in northern Italy. His is a fascinating story. He was a politician by birth, you might say, and was well studied in the liberal arts especially philosophy. In fact he reluctantly gave up his political post when, as only a catechumenate still preparing for Baptism, he was elected bishop of Milan. He succeeded an Arian bishop, but had mediated the sides so well in the decision up to the election that he was chosen instead of the other candidates. He fled but eventually gave in. His great ability was as a teacher and orator.

Ambrose fought Arianism at great cost to himself, but he always seemed to come out in the end. As such his many writings contain a very Christ-centered theology, and he laid the foundation for Marian thinking in the West. As such the focus is on Christ as the means of salvation and therefore justification. Twelve hundred years later Luther grasps these teachings as the justification for some of his own ideas on justification. Of additional note is his idea of the Church building its foundation on the ruins of the declining Roman Empire, an idea his student Augustine would pick up later in his work *City of God*. Ambrose (speaking from his own personal experience) saw the role of Christian emperors as dutiful servants of the Church – making them, therefore, subject to the influence of church leaders. Luther apparently failed to follow up on this path.

Along that path, he held to the Nicene beliefs and persuaded the emperor Gratian (359-383) to accept the Nicene Creed as well as convincing him to depose Arian bishops. Finally, he wrote hymns which became the model for hymns in the Church and he introduced the idea of antiphonal (alternating sides) singing.

“*Do you not recognize who this is? Can a man be King of righteousness, when he is hardly righteous himself? Can he be King of peace when he can hardly be peaceable? It is he who is without mother, as touching his Godhead, because he was begotten of his Father who is God, being of one substance with the Father; without father, as touching his incarnation, for he was born of the Virgin; not having beginning, and end, because he is the beginning and the end of all, the first and the last.*

*Perchance you may say, ‘I see something different; how do you claim that it is the body of Christ which I receive?’ It still remains for us to prove this also. What precedents, then, shall we employ? Let us prove that this is not what nature formed but what the blessing consecrated, and that there is greater force in a blessing than in nature, because by a blessing even nature itself is changed.*

*We observe, therefore, that grace is of greater power than nature; and yet it is only the grace of a prophet's blessing of which we are so far taking account. But if a human blessing was powerful enough to change nature, what do we say of the divine consecration itself where the very words of the Lord and Savior act? For the sacrament which you receive, is consecrated by the word of Christ. But if the word of Elijah was powerful enough to bring down fire from heaven, will not the word of Christ be powerful enough to change the characters of the elements? You have read of the works of the whole creation that he spoke the word, and they were made; he commanded and they were created. The word of Christ could make out of nothing that which was not; cannot it then change the things which are into that which they were not? For to give new natures to things is quite as wonderful as to change their natures*.

*‘Christ is in that Sacrament, because it is the Body of Christ. Wherefore it is not corporeal, but spiritual food.’ What can be plainer? What more manifest? What more divine? For he says, ‘Christ is in that Sacrament.’ He* [Paul] *does not say, ‘That bread and that wine is Christ’; had he said that, he would declare that Christ was mortal and subject to corruption, (which God forbid.) For whatsoever is in that food the object either of corporeal sight or taste, is of a surety subject to corruption*.

*He adds, ‘Because it is the Body of Christ.’ Here you will start up and say, See he openly confesses that the bread and the wine are the Body [and Blood] of Christ. But mark how he concluded, ‘Wherefore it is not corporeal, but spiritual food.’ Do not then apply your bodily senses; they can discern nothing here. Of a truth it is the Body of Christ, yet not His corporeal, but His spiritual Body; it is the Blood of Christ, yet not His corporeal, but His spiritual Blood. Nothing then is to be understood here corporally, but all spiritually. It is the Body of Christ, yet not corporally; it is the Blood of Christ, yet not corporally*.” (*On the Mysteries*, 46, 50, 52, 59, 60)

Cyril of Jerusalem

Cyril of Jerusalem (313-386) wrote 24 lectures known as the *Jerusalem Catechesis* the earliest record of the systematic teaching of the Church on the creed and the Sacraments as well as being another important sources for how the church celebrated the liturgy and sacraments during the first few decades after the legalization of Christianity. He professed the Nicene orthodoxy, which caused him great trouble at the time, and was present at the Council at Constantinople (381) where the Nicene Creed was finalized. Not surprisingly, because he is writing a catechism, he takes the orthodox positions previously articulated by other. Still he does make a few deeper insights as in the emphasis he lays on the freedom of the will especially in relationship to sin. To him sin is the consequence of freedom, not a natural condition. The body is not the cause, but the instrument of sin and the remedy for it is repentance.

At this point, there is a small throw back reference here. Recall the influence of Judaism on this fundamentally Jewish sect. Christianity is still in its ‘practice’ stage, very pragmatic and less dogmatic. While this is changing because of both its legitimization and the rise of so many doctrinal clashes, at this point like many of the other Fathers, he sees Christianity as having an essentially moralistic constitution. There is less of an emphasis on speculative theology and more on the physical nature of things. But this is changing and Cyril is one of the ones introducing this new concept while still retaining a link to the more physical and practical side. We can see this in his doctrine of the Resurrection. It is more mystical and speculative and not quite as realistic as that of other Fathers, both his antecedents and his contemporaries but at the same time his conception of the Church is decidedly empirical with the physical, orthodox Church form, the completion of the ‘people of God’ of the Old Testament, being the true one, that is, the one intended by Christ. His doctrine on the Eucharist is also noteworthy especially as an example of these two forms of thought coming together. At one moment he seems to put forth a more symbolic understanding, and at other times he emphasizes a strong realistic doctrine where he bread and wine are not mere elements, but the true body and blood of Christ.

“*The Church is called catholic or universal because it has spread throughout the entire world, from one end of the earth to the other. Again, it is called catholic because it teaches fully and unfailingly all the doctrines which ought to be brought to men's knowledge, whether concerned with visible or invisible things, with the realities of heaven or the things of earth. Another reason for the name catholic is that the Church brings under religious obedience all classes of men, rulers and subjects, learned and unlettered. Finally, it deserves the title catholic because it heals and cures unrestrictedly every type of sin that can be committed in soul or in body, and because it possesses within itself every kind of virtue that can be named, whether exercised in actions or in words or in some kind of spiritual charism.*

*It is most aptly called a church, which means an ‘assembly of those called out,’ because it ‘calls out’ all men and gathers them together, just as the Lord says in Leviticus: Assemble all the congregation at the door of the tent of meeting. It is worth noting also that the word ‘assemble’ is used for the first time in the Scriptures at this moment when the Lord appoints Aaron high priest. So in Deuteronomy God says to Moses: Assemble the people before me and let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me. There is a further mention of the assembly in the passage about the tablets of the Law: And on them were written all the words which the Lord had spoken to you on the mountain out of the midst of the fire, on the day of the assembly; it is as though he had said, even more clearly, ‘on the day when you were called out by God an gathered together.’ So too the psalmist says: I will give thanks to you in the great assembly, O Lord; in the mighty throng I will praise you*.” (*Jerusalem Catechesis*)

Gregory of Nyssa

Gregory of Nyssa (335-395) is one of the great thinkers on both the theological and the spiritual aspects of Christianity. Gregory was a great influence at many of the councils of this period, like the Council of Constantinople, which added the final section concerning the Holy Spirit to the Nicene Creed. Tireless in his efforts and writings, he continued to attend church councils, discuss doctrinal matters, combat various heresies, and provide great insight into the spiritual life especially as laid out in Scripture. His older brother Basil and their mutual friend Gregory Nazianzus also deserve mention for both their influence in the development of his thought but also as Fathers in their own right, but again that is perhaps a weakness of this chapter.

That said, it is on the power of his dual thinking which makes him stand out. On the theological front, his thinking on the Trinity is without measure. Gregory teaches that the three Persons of the Trinity can be understood along the model of three members of a single class: thus, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three in the same way that Peter, Paul, and Timothy are three men. But those are each separate men so why do we not there are three Gods? Essentially, we can distinguish between different members of the same class by the fact that they have different shapes, sizes, and colors. Even if they are identical, they still occupy different points in space. But that is only true for created things, like humans. This is not true for incorporeal beings like God. Even lesser spiritual beings like the angels can still be distinguished by their varying degrees of goodness, but this does not apply to God either. The only means of telling the three Persons in the Godhead apart is by the relationship between them. This is not as in their relationship to us; to us they are indistinguishable, one God. For example, the difference between the Father and the Son is that the one is the Father of the other and vice versa. It is simply impossible to think of one member of the Trinity without thinking of the other two: they are like a chain of three links, pulling each other along. We may be Christians but our relationship is with God; we cannot separate any of the three out and attribute all of salvation to that one.

His spiritual thinking is equally compelling, with a sense of mysticism which will characterize mystical thinkers to come. As an example, to see how the one thinking influences the other, earlier arguments had been made which paint God as *limited*, because that is the only way something could be *knowable*. Gregory broadens the thinking beyond human knowledge and argues that God is unlimited otherwise he would have to be limited by something greater than himself; ergo he is therefore without boundaries. The idea had already been developed by Neo-platonic philosophers like Plotinus – you remember Plotinus, right? For Gregory, conversion was a journey, one of constant progress toward the perfection of God. And as for knowing God, we progress in stages but not to a limited known quantity, which therefore could be owned, but toward an ineffable mystery. We start our journey in ‘darkness’ (ignorance), then reach spiritual illumination which leads finally to another type of darkness, a ‘darkness of the mind’ where we come to contemplate the God who cannot be comprehended. As an illustration of this he uses the life of Moses. Moses wanders blindly into the desert and first meets God in the burning bush, a moment of light and illumination when he understands that it is God; when fleeing from the Egyptians he meets Him again, but this time in the cloud, where he realizes that God cannot be seen by the eyes. Eventually upon ascending Mount Sinai to receive the ultimate teaching, the Law, he finally comes to that "divine darkness", and the realization that God cannot be known by the mind either.

“*The soul has followed Moses and the cloud, both of these serving as guides for those who would advance in virtue; Moses here represents the commandments of the Law; and the cloud that leads the way, its spiritual meaning. The soul has been purified by crossing the Sea; it has removed from itself and destroyed the enemy army. It has tasted of the waters of Marah, that is, of life deprived of all sinful pleasure; and this at first had seemed bitter and unpleasant to the taste but offered a sensation of sweetness to those who accepted the wood. Next it enjoyed the beauty of the palm trees of the gospel and the springs; it filled itself with the living water, that is, the rock. It took within itself the bread of heaven. It overwhelmed the foreign host—a victory due to the extended arms of the Lawgiver, which thus foreshadowed the mystery of the Cross. Only then can the soul go on to the contemplation of transcendent Being*.” (*The Life of Moses*)

Jerome

Jerome (342-420) is one of the four Latin Fathers, and is best known for his translation of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures into Latin, what is known as the *Vulgate* (where we get the word ‘vulgar’, meaning low or base but in the case meaning ‘the common language’). This translation and its canon became the standard text (and canon) for the Western Church. While he was a prolific writer and defender of orthodoxy, it is for this monumental feat that he is best known. He was taught Greek, but undertook the learning of Hebrew in order to translate as close to the originals as possible for both Scriptures.

By choosing to translate the Hebrew Scriptures from their original Hebrew rather than the Greek of the Septuagint, he was one of the first to remove a layer of confusion when translating. That said, Jerome is a quizzical character, at once pious and humble and yet irascible and contentious. An eminent scholar and astute moralist he could also be cantankerous, argumentative, stubborn, and vain all of which probably made him well suited to the tasks he performed. He lived at a time of great turmoil, and one might be able to forgive some of his faults in light of his zeal and accomplihsments.

“*While the Origenistic heresy was flourishing here in Jerusalem, a terrifying rumor reached us from the West. Rome had been besieged. Citizens were ransoming their lives, we were told, and after being stripped of their wealth, they were once again attacked: first material possessions, then their very lives were lost in the sack of the city. My voice sticks in my throat, words fail as I dictate this.*

*The city which had captured the whole world is captured herself. Indeed, Rome perished from hunger before being put to the sword. Only a handful were found living to be taken captive. Hunger's frenzy, erupting, sent men to feed on strange, hideous food: they tore and gnawed at each other's limbs; the mother did not spare the infant suckling at her breast, but devouring it, took back into her stomach flesh and blood which her womb had just brought forth. ‘In the night Moab was captured, in darkness her walls tumbled down.’ And with the Psalmist we may lament: ‘O God, the heathens have come into Your inheritance. They have polluted Your Holy Temple, and made Jerusalem into a barren orchard. To feed the birds of heaven they have thrown the corpses of Your servants, and to the beasts of the earth the flesh of Your saints. Blood has flowed like water round Jerusalem. Nobody was there to bury the dead.’*

*Barbarians burst in; but Marcella met them with an unperturbed countenance. When they demanded gold and hidden valuables, she merely pointed to her shabby dress. Refusing to believe such voluntary poverty, they beat her with clubs and riding-whips. She felt no pain. Instead, flinging herself at their feet, she begged them with tears not to snatch you from her, or to force that young body of yours to endure what she, because of her age, had no reason to fear. Christ softened their iron hearts. Even among bloody swords, natural piety somehow revealed itself. So they escorted you and Marcella to St. Paul's Church, where you might find either a sanctuary or a tomb. There Marcella bursts into tremendous joy, thanking God for having kept you unmolested; and she is grateful that the capture of the city has found her a poor woman, not made her one, for now, even though she will have no bread, hunger shall not make her suffer: she is full of Christ. Both in word and deed she will be able to sing, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the .Lord." A short while later she fell asleep in the Lord Jesus. To the very end she remained sound in mind and body.*

*Shame on us Christians! The whole world crashes down in ruins, and still we remain firm in our sins. Head of the great Empire, the glorious city blazes in one tremendous conflagration. No part of the earth lacks exiles from Rome. Churches once held sacred collapse, broken down into cinders and smoldering ashes. Yet our minds are buzzing with schemes to accumulate money! Live for today, tomorrow you may die this is our attitude. But we continue to build homes as if we were going to reside in this world forever: our walls glitter with gold; gold shines from the ceilings and radiates from our pillars. Yet huddled among the famished, naked, destitute people at our doors, Christ Himself lays dying*.” (from a letter written in 412 to the nun, Principia, friend to Marcella)

Augustine

Augustine (354-430). It is hard to estimate the effect of Augustine, not just on theological matters but on Western thought in general. His reception in the East is mixed; although he is acclaimed a Father by the Council of Constantinople (553) many profess him as a great spiritual writer but a rotten theologian seeing in his works the impetus of error in the West, especially the *filioque* as added to the Western Creed.

What can be said about Augustine in such a short space? The range of his writings alone is enormous: comprising moving and profound discussions of Christian doctrine in works like *On the Trinity*. They contain relentless yet carefully crafted arguments against heresies especially Manichaeism, a dualistic religion to which he had once adhered. He fought Donatism and Pelagianism. He wrote Biblical exegesis, homilies, sermons, and produced an incredible number of personal letters. His *Confessions* is at once an autobiography and a spiritual and doctrinal discussion. *The City of God* is perhaps the least self-serving and most penetrating study ever made of the theology of history bundled within the fundamental contrast between Christianity and the world. Every issue he tackled was scrutinized at a depth still argued about today. The problem of evil, sin, creation, grace, free will, the nature of the Church, you name it and people are still debating not just those doctrines but his presentation of them. And as a final wonder, he wrote it all in Latin when Greek was *the* scholarly language.

“*To Nobilius, My Most Blessed and Venerable Brother and Partner in the Priestly Office, Augustine Sends Greeting.*

*So important is the solemnity at which your brotherly affection invites me to be present, that my heart’s desire would carry my poor body to you, were it not that infirmity renders this impossible. I might have come if it had not been winter; I might have braved the winter if I had been young: for in the latter case the warmth of youth would have borne uncomplainingly the cold of the season; in the former case the warmth of summer would have met with gentleness the chill languor of old age. For the present, my lord most blessed, my holy and venerable partner in the priestly office, I cannot undertake in winter so long a journey, carrying with me as I must the frigid feebleness of very many years. I reciprocate the salutation due to your worth, on behalf of my own welfare I ask an interest in your prayers, and I myself beseech the Lord God to grant that the prosperity of peace may follow the dedication of so great an edifice to His sacred service*.” (*Letter 169*, probably one of the last he ever wrote)

Leo (Pope) The Great

Leo (400-461) was bishop of Rome 442-461. Leo is considered ‘great’ because he was pretty courageous on all fronts. Not only did he provide doctrinal stability but in 452, by mere words he stopped Attila the Hun from pillaging Rome and again in the year 455, when the Vandals (a Germanic tribe) sacked Rome, Leo persuaded them not to pillage, burn buildings, or spill *any* blood.

On the doctrinal front, and probably because of the continuous/impending decent of the hordes on all borders he repeatedly called for the convening of the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon (451), to among other things, condemn the heresy of Monophysitism which had been growing steadily, lending to both spiritual and political instability. Once convened it was a letter from Leo which set forth the definitive teaching about the two natures of Christ, divine and human. The bishop of Rome had always enjoyed a central role of “first amongst equals” and aside from a call by the Eastern bishops to proclaim the primacy of see at Constantinople, because of Leo’s letter the Council apparently cried out: “*This is the faith of the fathers, this is the faith of the Apostles…. Peter has spoken thus through Leo*....” (*Acts of the Council*, Session II) and overcame the Eastern assertion and gave the distinction of ‘universal bishop’ to the bishop of Rome, an understanding which, combined with many of his own efforts, led to the development of the understanding of the primacy of Rome and the modern understanding of the Papacy.

“*Having read your…letter, the late arrival of which is matter of surprise to us, and having gone through the record of the proceedings of the Bishops, we have now, at last, gained a clear view of the scandal which has risen up among you, against the integrity of the faith; and what at first seemed obscure has now been elucidated and explained. By this means Eutyches, who seemed to be deserving of honour under the title of Presbyter, is now shown to be exceedingly thoughtless and sadly inexperienced, so that to him may apply what the prophet said, 'He refused to understand that he might act well: he meditated unrighteousness on his bed.' What, indeed, is more unrighteous than to entertain ungodly thoughts, and not to yield to persons wiser and more learned? But into this folly do they fall, who, when hindered by some obscurity from knowing the truth, have recourse, not to the letters of the Apostles, nor to the authority of the Gospels, but to themselves; and become teachers of error, just because they have not been disciples of the truth. For what learning has he received from the sacred pages of the New and the Old Testament, who does not so much as understand the very beginning of the Creed? And that which, all the world over, is uttered by the voices of all applicants for regeneration, is still not apprehended by the mind of this aged man.*

 *If, then, he knew not what he ought to think about the Incarnation of the Word of God, and was not willing, for the sake of obtaining the light of intelligence, to make laborious search through the whole extent of the Holy Scriptures, he should at least have received with heedful attention that general Confession common to all, whereby the whole body of the faithful profess that they 'believe in God the Father Almighty, and in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord, Who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary.' By which three clauses the engines of almost all heretics are shattered. For when God is believed to be both 'Almighty' and 'Father,' it is found that the Son is everlasting together with Himself, differing in nothing from the Father, because He was born as 'God from God,' Almighty from Almighty, Co-eternal from Eternal; not later in time, not unlike Him in glory, not divided from Him in essence; and the same Only-begotten and Everlasting Son of an Eternal Parent was ' born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary.' This birth in time in no way detracted from, in no way added to, that divine and everlasting birth; but expended itself wholly in the work of restoring man, who had been deceived, so that it might both overcome death, and by its power 'destroy the devil who had the power of death.' For we could not have overcome the author of sin and of death, unless He Who could neither be contaminated by sin, nor detained by death, had taken upon Himself our nature, and made it His own. For, in fact, He was 'conceived of the Holy Spirit within the womb of a Virgin Mother, who bare Him, as she had conceived Him, without loss of virginity. But if [Eutyches] was not able to obtain a true conception from this pure fountain of Christian faith, because by his own blindness he had darkened the brightness of a truth so clear, he should have submitted himself to the Evangelical teaching.... And he should not have spoken idly to the effect that the Word was in such a sense made flesh, that the Christ who was brought forth from the Virgin's womb had the form of a man, but had not a body really derived from His Mother's body. Possibly his reason for thinking that our Lord Jesus Christ was not of our nature was this,—that the Angel who was sent to the blessed and ever-Virgin Mary said, 'The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee, and therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called Son of God;' as if, because the Virgin's conception was caused by a divine act, therefore the flesh of Him Whom she conceived was not of the nature of her who conceived Him. But we are not to understand that 'generation,' peerlessly wonderful, and wonderfully peerless, in such a sense as that the newness of the mode of production did away with the proper character of the kind. For it was the Holy Spirit Who gave fecundity to the Virgin, but it was from a body that a real body was derived; and 'when Wisdom was building herself a house,' 'the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us,' that is, in that flesh which He assumed from a human being, and which He animated with the spirit of rational life*.” (excerpt from “*The Tome*”)

Gregory (Pope) The Great

Gregory (540-604) was bishop of Rome 590-604. Gregory is really the last of the Latin Fathers, though some would argue that ended with Augustine and Leo. But looking at the establishment (or re-establishment if you will) of the Western Church, Gregory stands out as the transition to the Middle Ages. He participated in the courts of the East during the end of the decline of the West, certainly indicated by the collapse of Hippo around Augustine but also the rise of a more self-sufficient West.

Gregory went to Constantinople in 578 as part of the Roman delegation that ventured there to ask the Eastern emperor for military aid against the Lombard tribes invading Italy. The attempt was unsuccessful but it did put him in the unique position of participating in both worlds and had the added bonus of endearing him to many within Constantinople. By the time he left he successfully defended the corporeal nature of Christ’s resurrected body. But it was the beginning of the end in the full exchange between the East and the West, which for both political and doctrinal reasons would become more and more strained, especially as the East began its decline.

A great ascetic, and perhaps a bit of a bump on a log, Gregory is generally accredited with laying the foundations of the medieval papacy as well as the beginning of medieval spirituality. The chant used in Western liturgies is also attributed to him (by name), or at least his refinement and consent. He held tight to an orthodoxy which held the West together, bringing about the conversion Clovis the Frankish king and the reconversion of England, an act which some in the East see as the destruction of Orthodoxy in England, though I am unsure about the validity of such a claim in the long term.

Some of this animus is probably the result of his opposition to the relationship between the Eastern Emperors and the bishops and their claim to be the leaders of the Church. He saw their claim based more in the tie to the Emperor (a passing thing) rather than to Peter as did the ‘old Rome’ but some of it may have had to do with his ascetic, monastic life and the horrible calamities which best Rome during his life as well as his experiences in Constantinople.

“*One coming from Sicily has told me that some friends of his, whether Greeks or Latins I know not, as though moved by zeal for the holy Roman Church, murmur about my arrangements* [i.e. of the divine liturgy]*, saying ‘How can he be arranging so as to keep the Constantinopolitan Church in check, when in all respects he follows her usage?’ And, when I said to him, ‘What usages of hers do we follow?’ he replied: ‘you have caused Alleluia to be said at mass out of the season of Pentecost; you have made appointment for the sub-deacons to proceed disrobed, and for Kyrie Eleison to be said, and for the Lord's Prayer to be said immediately after the canon’. To him I replied that in none of these things have we followed another Church.*

*For, as to our custom here of saying the Alleluia, it is said to be derived from the Church of Jerusalem by the tradition of the blessed Jerome in the time of pope Damasus of blessed memory; and accordingly in this matter we have rather curtailed the former usage which had been handed down to us here from the Greeks.*

*Further, as to my having caused the subdeacons to proceed disrobed, this was the ancient usage of the Church. But it pleased one of our pontiffs, I know not which, to order them to proceed in linen tunics. For have your Churches in any respect received their tradition from the Greeks? Whence, then, have they at the present day the custom of the subdeacons proceeding in linen tunics, except that they have received it from their mother, the Roman Church?*

*Further, we neither have said nor now say the Kyrie Eleison, as it is said by the Greeks: for among the Greeks all say it together; but with us it is said by the clerks, and responded to by the people; and as often as it is said, Christe Eleison is said also, which is not said at all among the Greeks. Further, in daily masses we suppress some things that are usually said, and say only Kyrie Eleison, Christe Eleison, so as to devote ourselves a little longer to these words of deprecation. But the Lord's prayer (orationem Dominicam) we say immediately after the prayer (mox post preeem) for this reason, that it was the custom of the apostles to consecrate the host of oblation to (ad) that same prayer only. And it seemed to me very unsuitable that we should say over the oblation a prayer which a scholastic had composed, and should not say the very prayer' which our Redeemer composed over His body and blood. But also the Lord's Prayer among the Greeks is said by all the people, but with us by the priest alone. Wherein, then, have we followed the usages of the Greeks, in that we have either amended our own old ones or appointed new and profitable ones, in which, however, we are not shown to be imitating others? Wherefore, let your Charity* [an honorary title]*, when an occasion presents itself, proceed to the Church of Catana; or in the Church of Syracuse teach those who you believe or understand may possibly be murmuring with respect to this matter, holding a conference there, as though for a different purpose, and so desist not from instructing them. For as to what they say about the Church of Constantinople, who can doubt that it is subject to the Apostolic See, as both the most pious lord the emperor and our brother the bishop of that city continually acknowledge? Yet, if this or any other Church has anything that is good, I am prepared in what is good to imitate even my inferiors, while prohibiting them from things unlawful. For he is foolish who thinks himself first in such a way as to scorn to learn whatever good things he may see.” (Epistle 12)[[4]](#footnote-4)*

Putting It All Together

When we look at these guy historically we can see some of the development of theology and by combining it with the previous chapter’s timeline of heresies, we can come to see their greatness within the challenges of their ages. Would Augustine been as effective in the 2nd century as he was in the 5th? Would the nature of Polycarp’s 2nd century martyrdom have inspired much or would it have been viewed as a waste by the 6th century? Perhaps…perhaps not; one cannot truly say, but trusts to the will of God. What one can say is that even today one and one half to two *millennia* later, these men have as profound an effect now as they did then. They provide rational for continued belief in the Faith, as well has a solid foundation defending orthodox doctrine. In the end they provide a solid link back through those millennia to the foundations of the Christian Faith.

Certainly the Father’s emphasis was on the nature of Christ, but this calls for statements about the Trinity, the Virginity of Mary, and a host of other ‘related’ doctrines. It also had the effect of bringing forth the practical questions of authority and who had it.

*“It is not necessary to seek the truth among others when it is easy to obtain from the Church; since the apostles, like a rich man* [depositing his money] *in a bank, lodged in her hands most copiously all things pertaining to the truth. . . . Suppose there arise a dispute relative to some important question among us, should we not have recourse to the most ancient Churches with which the apostles held constant intercourse, and learn from them what is certain and clear?”*

Irenaeus**,** *Against Heresies*

1. Ironically they claim Scripture as that unbroaken link. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. His reported remains were placed in the Church of St. John (later renamed St. Irenaeus) but that tomb demolished by Calvinist sympathizers in 1562 and the remains apparently scattered. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The concept that Jesus was “born to die” is based on many biblical statements in both the Old and New Testaments. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For a great contrast also read his *Epistle 49* To Anastasius, Bishop Of Antioch [↑](#footnote-ref-4)