

# Would You Like to Know More?

The Church Fathers were influential theologians, bishops or scholars whose writings explained key Scriptural principles in the early Church. They were not all ordained, not all of them became saints, and they were not infallible. But they had powerful communication skills, personal holiness and doctrinal orthodoxy, so we honor them unofficially as "fathers" for their proximity to the Apostles, their explanations of how to understand and apply Scripture, and their ability to teach the Catholic faith.

They are generally divided into four categories based on when or where they lived: the Apostolic Fathers, the Greek (Eastern) Fathers, the Latin (Western) Fathers, and others such as the Desert Fathers. The era of the Church Fathers, called the Patristic period, ended in 749 with the death of St. John of Damascus.

## **Apostolic Fathers**

The Apostolic Fathers lived and wrote in the second half of the first century and the first half of the second century. They were taught by the Apostles and personally witnessed the birth of the Church. Most were martyred – crucified, beheaded, fed to the lions at the Roman colosseum, boiled in oil or burned alive. They were the ones empowered by the Holy Spirit and who personally handed on the oral teaching of Jesus Christ, before the New Testament canon was collected in the late 4th century and then translated into Latin by a later Church Father, St. Jerome.

**St. CLEMENT** One of these Fathers: St. Clement, is actually mentioned in the Bible – in Philippians 4:3. Before he died in about the year 96, he wrote an epistle (1 Clement) calling on the Christians of Corinth to maintain harmony and order. His letter was copied and widely read in the early Church, and it is the earliest Christian epistle outside the New Testament.

**St. IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH** (c. 35-110): He was the third bishop of Antioch (the see of Peter before he went to Rome) and a student of John the Evangelist, believed to be the author of the Gospel of John. En route to his martyrdom in Rome, where he was devoured by lions in the colosseum, Ignatius wrote a series of letters which we still have today. His hastily-written letters covered many topics: ecclesiology, the sacraments, the authority of bishops, and the Sabbath. He stressed the value of the Eucharist, and he coined the term "Catholic Church."

**St. POLYCARP OF SMYRNA** (c. 69-c. 155): He was a bishop of Smyrna (now Izmir, Turkey) and a disciple of John the Evangelist known more for his spectacular martyrdom than anything he wrote. Around 155, Polycarp was captured and dragged to the stadium to be burned alive for not paying homage to the emperor. He shouted to the watching proconsul: "You threaten me with fire, which burns for an hour, and after a little is extinguished. But you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment ... What are you waiting for? Bring forth what you will." Many witnesses reported that the rising flames did not burn his body. Losing patience, his killers stabbed him to death, and so much blood flowed from his body that the fire was doused.

## **Greek Fathers**

The Greek Fathers, who wrote in Greek, included St. Irenaeus of Lyons, St. Clement of Alexandria, St. Athanasius of Alexandria, St. John Chrysostom, St. Cyril of Alexandria, the Cappadocian Fathers (St. Basil of Caesarea, St. Gregory Nazianzus, St. Peter of Sebaste and St. Gregory of Nyssa), Maximus the Confessor, and St. John of Damascus.

**ST. IRENAEUS OF LYONS** A bishop in Gaul (now Lyons, France), notable early Catholic apologist and disciple of St. Polycarp. His best-known book, "Against Heresies" (c. 180), enumerated heresies and attacked them. He proposed that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all be accepted as canonical.

**ST. CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA** One of the most distinguished teachers of the Church in Alexandria. He united Greek philosophical traditions with Christian doctrine, and he wrote on such topics as "Who is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?" and "Exhortation to the Heathen."

**ST. ATHANASIUS** (c. 293-May 2, 373) A theologian, patriarch of Alexandria, Doctor of the Church (called the "Doctor of Orthodoxy"), and a noted Egyptian leader of the 4th century. He is remembered for his role in the conflict with Arianism and for his affirmation of the Trinity. At the First Council of Nicaea in 325, he argued against the Arian heresy that Christ is not truly God with the Father.

**THE CAPPADOCIANS** A 4th-century monastic family led by St. Macrina the Younger (324-379) to provide a place for her three younger brothers to study and pray and a home for their mother. Abbess Macrina fostered her brothers' education, and they became scholars, bishops and saints. The brothers, called the "Cappadocian Fathers," were St. Basil the Great (330-379), a Doctor of the Church (called the "Doctor of Monasticism"); St. Gregory of Nyssa (c.335-after 394); and St. Peter of Sebaste (c. 340-391), the youngest brother. These remarkable brothers and their close friend, St. Gregory Nazianzus (also a Doctor of the Church, called the "Doctor of Theologians"), demonstrated that Christians could hold their own in conversations with Greek-speaking intellectuals of their day. They argued that Christian faith, while it was against many of the ideas of Plato and Aristotle, was an almost scientific philosophy – with the healing of the soul and a person's union with God at its core. They made major contributions to the definition of the Trinity and the final version of the Nicene Creed.

**ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM** (c. 347-c. 407): Perhaps the greatest preacher in Church history. Known for his eloquence in preaching and public speaking, he was nicknamed "chrysostomos" (Greek for "golden tongued"). A Doctor of the Church ("Doctor of Preachers"), he left hundreds of recorded homilies and writings, and his Divine Liturgy is still celebrated by Eastern churches. The themes of his talks were always practical, explaining how to apply the Bible in everyday life, and he lived a simple, unpretentious lifestyle even after being pushed into becoming archbishop of Constantinople. There he denounced the lavish lifestyles of local Church and political leaders – making him popular

with the laity but causing his exile to a desolate area along the Black Sea, where he died from ill health.

**ST. CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA** (c. 378-444): Bishop of Alexandria when the city was at its height of influence and power within the Roman Empire. He wrote extensively and was a leading defender of Christ's dual identity – both fully divine and fully human. A central figure in the First Council of Ephesus in 431, he is a Doctor of the Church ("Doctor of the Incarnation").

**MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR** (c. 580-Aug. 13, 662): A Christian monk, theologian and scholar. In his early life, he was a civil servant and an aide to the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius. However, he gave up politics to become a monk. After moving to Carthage, he studied several Neo-Platonist writers and became a prominent author, defending against heresies denying Jesus' dual humanity and divinity. His title of Confessor means he suffered for the faith, but not to the point of death, and thus is distinguished from a martyr. His "Life of the Virgin" is thought to be the earliest complete biography of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

**ST. JOHN OF DAMASCUS** (also known as St. John Damascene) (c. 676-Dec. 4, 749): A Syrian Christian monk and priest, and the last of the Church Fathers. Born and raised in Damascus, he died at his monastery, Mar Saba, near Jerusalem. A noted scholar, his expertise included law, theology, philosophy and music. Before being ordained, he served as an administrator to the Muslim caliph of Damascus, wrote works expounding the Christian faith, and composed hymns still sung in Eastern monasteries. He is a Doctor of the Church, often referred to as the "Doctor of the Assumption" because of his writings on the Assumption of Mary.

### **Latin Fathers**

The fathers who wrote in Latin are called, not surprisingly, the Latin Fathers.

**TERTULLIAN** (c. 160-c. 225) He converted to Christianity before 197 and was a prolific writer of apologetic, theological, controversial and ascetic works. He denounced Christian doctrines he considered heretical but later in life adopted views that themselves came to be regarded as heretical. He wrote three books in Greek and was the first great writer of Latin Christianity, thus sometimes known as the "Father of the Latin Church." He is said to have introduced the Latin term "trinitas" regarding the Trinity to the Christian vocabulary (but Theophilus of Antioch already wrote of "the Trinity, of God, and His Word, and His wisdom," which is similar but not identical to the Trinitarian wording), and also probably the formula "three Persons, one Substance" as the Latin "tres Personae, una Substantia," and also the terms "vetus testamentum" ("Old Testament") and "novum testamentum" ("New Testament"). He used the early Church's symbol for fish – the Greek word for "fish", an acronym for "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior" – to explain the meaning of baptism since fish are born in water, saying that people are like little fish.

**ST. AMBROSE** (340-397) Archbishop of Milan, one of the most influential Church figures of the 4th century and one of the four original Doctors of the Church (the others being St. Augustine, St. Jerome and St. Gregory I). His writings include "On the Christian Faith," "On the Mysteries," "On Repentance," "On the Duties of the Clergy," "Concerning Virgins" and "Concerning Widows."

**ST. JEROME** (c. 347-Sept. 30, 420) Best known as the translator of the Bible from Greek and Hebrew into Latin, what's known as the Vulgate. He also was a Christian apologist, and is a Doctor of the Church.

**ST. AUGUSTINE** (Nov. 13, 354-Aug. 28, 430) Bishop of Hippo, philosopher and theologian, Doctor of the Church, and one of the most important figures in the Church. Augustine was radically influenced by Platonism. He framed the concepts of original sin and just war as they are understood in the West. When Rome fell and the faith of many Christians was shaken, he developed the concept of the Church as a spiritual City of God, distinct from the material City of Man. Augustine was born in present day Algeria to a Christian mother, St. Monica. He was educated in North Africa and resisted his mother's pleas to become Christian. He took a concubine and became a Manichean. He later converted to Christianity, became a bishop and opposed various heresies. His works include "Confessions" (often called the first Western autobiography), "City of God," "Concerning Faith of Things Not Seen," "On the Good of Marriage," "On Lying," "On the Morals of the Catholic Church," "On the Grace of Christ, and on Original Sin," "On the Spirit and the Letter" and "Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount."

**ST. GREGORY I** (c. 540-March 12, 604) Pope from 590 until his death, and the first pope with a monastic background. One of the four original Doctors of the Church, St. Gregory the Great's papacy had the most influence on the early medieval Church.

**ST. ISIDORE** (c. 560-April 4, 636) Archbishop of Seville for more than three decades and Doctor of the Church (:Doctor of Education"). At a time when the remnants of the Roman Empire were crumbling and aristocratic violence and illiteracy were spreading, he helped convert the royal Visigothic Arians to Catholicism and played a prominent role in developing Visigothic legislation – regarded by historians as having influenced the beginnings of representative government.

### **Other fathers**

The Desert Fathers were early monastics living in the Egyptian desert. Although they did not write as much, their influence was also great. A small number of Church Fathers wrote in other languages. St. Ephraim the Syrian (306-373), a Doctor of the Church, wrote in Syriac. His works include "Miscellaneous Hymns – On the Nativity of Christ in the Flesh, For the Feast of the Epiphany, and On the Faith ('The Pearl')."

- Sources: *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, *The Vatican*, [www.catholic.com](http://www.catholic.com), [www.staycatholic.com](http://www.staycatholic.com), "Early Church Fathers Overview: A Snapshot of the Fathers of the Church" by Dr. Marcellino D'Ambrosio, [www.catholicbible101.com](http://www.catholicbible101.com), Wikipedia

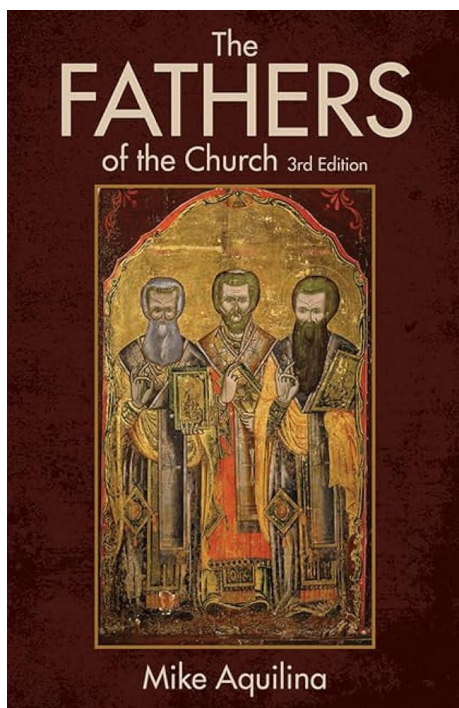
## Learn more online

Pope Benedict XVI has delivered many addresses about the Church Fathers, lauding their unique role in building up the Church and their continued relevance today. Online at [www.annusfidei.va](http://www.annusfidei.va): Read the pope's take on famous Church Fathers such as St. Leo the Great, St. Augustine, St. Jerome, St. John Chrysostom, St. Ambrose, St. Cyril, St. Basil, St. Gregory Nazianzus, St. Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen and St. Hilary of Poitiers, as well as some of the lesser known Fathers, including St. Paulinus, St. Chromatius of Aquileia and Aphraates "the Sage."

- All of the Church Fathers' writings (translated into English) are collected at: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/>
- Search the Church Fathers' writings by name or date at: <http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/fathers/>
- Why are they called "Fathers?" The Catholic Encyclopedia explains: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06001a.htm>
- More info about the Church Fathers and the topics they preached about is online at: <http://www.churchfathers.org> and at [http://www.staycatholic.com/early\\_church\\_fathers.htm](http://www.staycatholic.com/early_church_fathers.htm)

[catholicnewsherald.com](http://catholicnewsherald.com)

## Other source:



Mike Aquilina's books may be purchased online.

