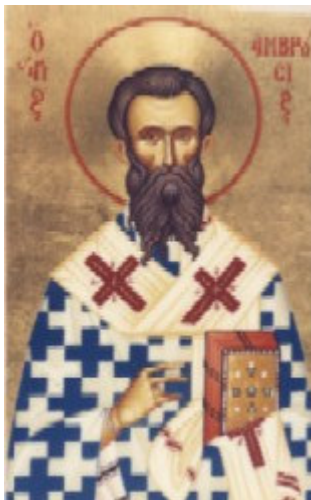




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FATHERS OF THE CHURCH: An Overview

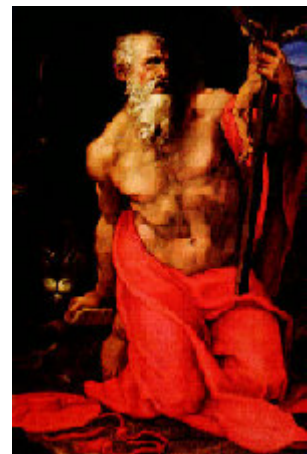
by
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In brief, the Early Church Fathers (a.k.a. Fathers of the Church) were those Great Christian writers who passed on and clarified Catholic doctrine from approximately the 2nd-8th centuries.

Definition: In trying to determine who rightly can be called a "Father of the Church" (or "Early Church Father") one must keep in mind that this is not an officially conferred distinction for which Catholics have a definitive list as is the title "Doctor of the Church." Rather, it is a title that gradually came to be applied to certain Christian leaders distinguished by four characteristics: antiquity, holiness, orthodoxy, and Church approval. This fourfold qualification, however, is vague and sometimes misleading. At first glance, it would seem to fit the apostles, but they, along with all other Christians of the New Testament era (e.g., Timothy), are never referred to as Church Fathers. On the other hand, there are some indisputably regarded as "Fathers of the Church" whose generally orthodox teaching was marred by some doctrinal errors and whose lives were far from exemplary (e.g., St. Hippolytus).

A better clue to understanding what the title means is provided by St. Clement of Alexandria: "Words are the progeny of the soul. Hence we call those that instructed us fathers" (*Stromateis* 1.1.2-2.1; cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.41.2). Since the principal teacher of any Christian community is its bishop, the title "Father" was first applied to him. In fact, the bishops who gather in church councils have been from early times referred to as "council fathers." But because many of the most important early Christian teachers were laymen (e.g., St. Justin), deacons (e.g., St. Ephrem), and priests (e.g., St. Jerome), it became customary from the fourth century to reckon these too among "the Fathers." In the doctrinal disputes that made the Ecumenical councils necessary, all parties recognized the inspired Scriptures as the first court of appeal (see Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitory*, 2.4-5; 29.76).



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But when there was conflict about the truly Catholic interpretation of the Scriptures, all sought backing for their position in the writings of "the Fathers." By this they meant teachers of an earlier era who demonstrated how the apostolic scriptures were understood and applied by the apostles themselves and those who followed them. While all early Christian pastors and catechists "fathered" their particular portion of the flock during their lifetime, only those that put their teaching in writing could continue to serve as a guide to the whole Church in every age.



So the term "Father of the Church" finally came to refer to important Christian *writers* after the New Testament era who, because of closeness to that era, witness to the authentically apostolic way of interpreting the Scriptures handed on to them by the Catholic Tradition. These writers played an irreplaceable and unrepeatable role in transmitting Christian doctrine and bringing it to mature expression, at least in its most fundamental features. While the Church's understanding of revelation will continue to deepen until the Lord returns, the dogmas of the Trinity and the Incarnation, which stand at the center of the "Hierarchy of Truths" (UR 11), were defined once and for all during the period of the Fathers (a.k.a. the patristic era). It is significant that this age, commonly regarded as closing with St. John Damascene (d. 749), is roughly co-terminus with the period of the

first seven great Ecumenical Councils which defined these two central mysteries of the faith and drew out their most important implications. No Catholic teacher after this time, no matter how stellar, is reckoned among the Church Fathers.

Geographical and Cultural Diversity: The first language of the universal Church was Greek, the language of the New Testament. All of the Early Church Fathers, from all parts of the Christian world, continued to write in Greek until about 200 when Tertullian, a North African theologian, wrote a treatise in Latin. From then on, Latin gradually became the language of the Western Fathers. In the Eastern half of the Mediterranean world, many continued to write in Greek, especially those in the urban areas controlled by the Byzantine Empire. In rural localities and territory outside the empire, some Christian authors (e.g., St. Ephrem) began to write in local vernaculars such as Syriac-Aramaic, a dialect of the language spoken by Christ. This wonderful diversity of culture and location makes it that much clearer that, whenever the Fathers teach the same doctrine or describe the same liturgical practice, they are witnessing to something that came not from them, but to them—the apostolic Tradition.



Periodization. The first Ecumenical council, held in the city of Nicaea, (325) marked a momentous event for the Church. For this reason, the writers before these interrelated events are known as the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* ("ante" meaning before). They in turn are commonly divided into two groups. *The Apostolic Fathers* are those who wrote during the generation or two after the close of the New Testament era (from about 95-150AD). They are so-called because they are thought to have had living contact with the apostles and so are particularly precious witnesses to primitive apostolic Christianity. The few writings from this period that have survived are pastoral and practical rather than speculative. They include the anonymous "Teaching of the Twelve Apostles," otherwise known as the *Didache*, which is the earliest work describing Christian sacramental life. They also include letters from St. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, St. Polycarp, who reportedly sat at the feet of the apostle John, and St. Clement, the bishop of Rome, who wrote to the Church in Corinth around 95 AD. It is fascinating that Clement's letter, probably written around the same time as John's Gospel, was regarded as so authoritative in the early church that it was copied and passed to churches all over the known world and considered by many as part of the New Testament scriptures.



Unlike the apostolic fathers who were generally simple, uncultivated men, the Ante-Nicene Fathers from 150-325AD included the first great Christian intellectuals who sought a synthesis between biblical truth and the best of classical wisdom. Employing the rigorous intellectual tools of Greek philosophy in their reflection on the mysteries of the faith, these writers contributed to the clarification and development of Catholic doctrine as well as to its faithful transmission. They are generally known as *the Apologists and Anti-heretical Writers* since virtually all of them wrote either treatises combating various Christian heresies or written defenses of Christianity addressed to the Roman government known as "apologies." Among them we find such luminaries as St. Justin, the pagan philosopher turned Christian apologist, St. Irenaeus, the implacable foe of Gnosticism, Origen, the greatest Scripture scholar of the Ante-Nicene period, and Tertullian, the first writer to use the term "Trinity."

The *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* are likewise divided into two groups. The fourth and fifth centuries is the era of the first four ecumenical councils which defined the dogmas of the Trinity and Christ's divinity and full humanity. Under the influence of the Fathers of this period, the biblical canon and the Nicene Creed assumed their final shape and the various liturgical rites of the Catholic Church (e.g., Roman and Byzantine) took on many of their distinctive characteristics. For these reasons, scholars often refer to this era as the *Golden Age of Patristic Literature*. Notable among the eastern fathers of this period are Athanasius, tireless defender of Christ's divinity, Ephrem, the most poetic of all the Fathers, the friends Basil and Gregory of Nazianzen, known as "Cappadocians" after the region of their birth, and John Chrysostom, whose name is associated with the

principal Byzantine liturgy. The western Church Fathers of this period include Ambrose, the fearless bishop of Milan, Jerome, the great but irascible Scripture scholar, and the incomparable Augustine, whose corpus of over five million words came to serve as the second bible of the western church. The fathers of the sixth through the eighth centuries, often referred to as *the Later Fathers*, did not have the same decisive impact on the Catholic tradition. Their role, and the role of the three ecumenical councils that took place in this period, was mainly to defend and draw out some important implications of the trinitarian and christological teaching of the first four councils. Gregory the Great, monk turned Pope, is the greatest figure in the west during this time. In the east, the most outstanding figures are Maximus the Confessor, who suffered torture in defense of Christ's full humanity, and John Damascene who defended the veneration of icons against those who attacked them.

Authority and Relevance. Some of the Early Church Fathers, especially those of the Golden Age, have been officially recognized as "Doctors of the Church," meaning that they are extraordinarily reliable teachers of the Catholic faith. It is important to remember, however, that the Catholic Church does not regard even these as personally infallible in all that they teach. It is rather in their common teaching, or consensus, that the Fathers infallibly witness to the authentic Catholic tradition (Vatican Council I, *Dei Filius*, 2; Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitory* 2.6, 3.8, 28.72-73). In attempting to defend a particular Catholic doctrine such as Christ's divinity, the apologist would do well to cite not just one Father but many and from as wide a geographical and cultural range as possible in order to demonstrate this

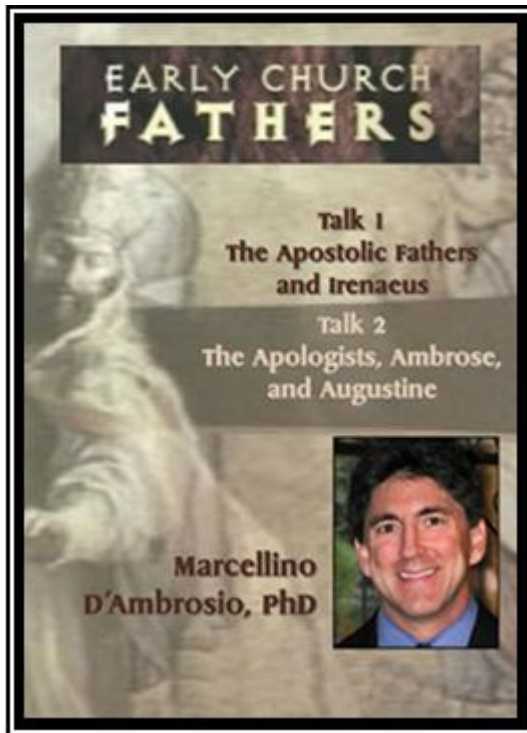


consensus patrum. The Eastern Orthodox consider the Fathers to be as authoritative as Catholics do, though they tend to be somewhat critical of Augustine. Anglicans and many other Protestants revere the Fathers as well, though some are more suspicious of writings produced after the Church became entangled with the Roman state. In fact *patrology* (the study of the Church Fathers) enjoyed a renaissance following the Protestant Reformation as Catholic and Protestant scholars alike sought patristic support for their respective doctrines. It is notable, however, that many of the most important texts of the Ante-Nicene Fathers were not generally available at the time of the Reformation. Some, like the *Didache* and the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus, provide invaluable information regarding disputed points and yet were only recovered in the last 150 years. These and other writings of the Fathers of the Church prove that many aspects of Catholic doctrine and piety rejected by some as medieval inventions (e.g., infant baptism) are in fact part of the legacy of the ancient Church. For Further Reading: C. Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers*; *Ancient Christian Writers* series, Paulist Press; *Fathers of the Church* series, Catholic University of America Press; *Ante-Nicene Fathers & A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* series; J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*; J. Quasten,

Patrology, 4 vols; W. Jurgens, *Faith of the Early Fathers*, 3 vols.

For more information about the Early Church Father's teachings on Baptism, Confirmation and the Priesthood of all Christians visit The Crossroads Initiative at www.dritaly.com.

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