

# Fathers of the Church, Part 1: The Greek (or Eastern) Fathers

The Catholic Church has long honored early Christian leaders, theologians and teachers from the East (Greek) and West (Latin) as Fathers of the Church. Unlike Doctors of the Church, there is no official list of Church Fathers. Over the centuries, lists with many similar names have evolved, and dependent upon the source, there are sometimes an excess of 100 individuals identified as a Father of the Church.

In the fifth century, St. Vincent of Lerins came up with criteria associated with selection of a Church Father: live in the period known as antiquity (which is considered from the first to the eighth centuries), live a holy life, ascribe to and promote the orthodox Christian teachings, and receive Church approval.

In reviewing the Church Fathers, they are generally categorized by the era in which they lived: Apostolic Fathers are those who knew the apostles; second and third century Fathers (Ante-Nicean) are those who lived before the great Council of Nicea in A.D. 325; Nicea Fathers lived during the time of the Council; and finally, Post-Nicea Fathers are those from the Council until the eighth century.

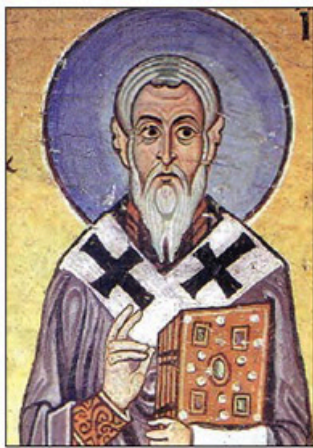
This article discusses some of the Greek Church Fathers, and those singled out are intended to be representative of the holiness, courage and wisdom all the Fathers possessed. These men were willing to die if necessary, and many did, rather than deny their Savior or his Gospel. They are the stepping stones to our Catholic Christian faith, models to everyone calling themselves followers of Christ.

*D.D. Emmons writes from Pennsylvania.*

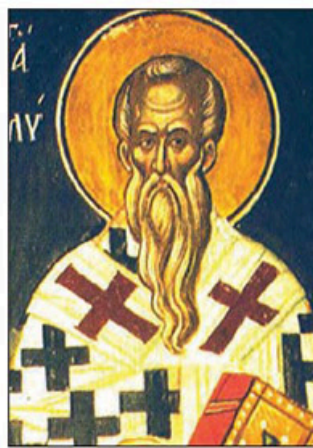
# The Apostolic Fathers



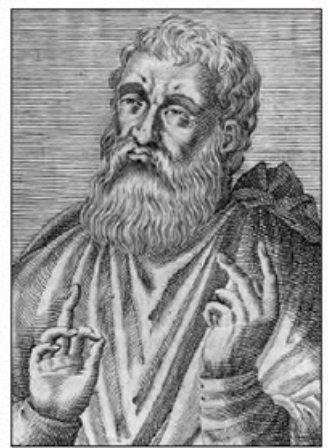
St. Clement Shutterstock



St. Ignatius Wikimedia commons



St. Polycarp Wikimedia commons



St. Justin Wikimedia commons

## St. Clement (30-101)

Living in the mid-first century, Clement was third in succession to the throne of St. Peter, the papacy. Historians have concluded that he knew Peter and Paul; following their martyrdom, he became a Church leader and was eventually selected as the pope (r. A.D. 88-97).

Only one writing from Pope St. Clement, authored around the year 96, has survived; it is a letter to the Christians at Corinth. This letter is not unlike the letters that St. Paul wrote to those Christians and in fact is titled: Letter to the Corinthians. In his own words Clement echoes similar concerns that Paul also addressed, concerns that could divide the Church and the Corinthians.

Clement rebuked a small group in Corinth who had abolished certain elders from the Church. He wrote, "So they who were of no renown, lifted up themselves against the honorable; those of no reputation, against those who in respect: the foolish against the wise; the young against the aged." The upstarts were, intentional or not, ridding the Church of those who had been appointed by St. Paul.

The bigger issue was the potential disunity such actions could cause. Clement advocated peace, love and reconciliation as taught by Jesus and reiterated by St. Paul. There is evidence

that Clement's letter was read in all the churches, emphasizing the need for unity, a unity that, underscored by humility and love, even today sustains the Church.

It is believed that Clement was drowned by Emperor Trajan in the year 101.

### **St. Ignatius (35-107)**

St. Ignatius purportedly was a disciple of the Apostle John and appointed second bishop of Antioch after St. Peter. Ignatius reigned as bishop for 40 years, spreading the message of Jesus and the apostles. There is not a lot of information about his life, but he held the Church together during the brutal second-century persecutions of the Roman Emperor Domitian. In the year 107 he was seized by the Romans and condemned to death because he refused to sacrifice to the emperor or deny Christ. Arrested in Antioch, he was put in chains and transported to Rome, where he would be executed by wild beasts. In route to Rome, he wrote seven letters addressed to many of the Christian communities.

These letters encouraged all Christians to remain focused on the original and divine teachings of the apostles, emphasizing the importance of unity, the need to stay obedient to their bishop and away from the heretical elements that were penetrating and would attack the Church. Ignatius would not be the last leader to proclaim the need for Church unity.

To the Smyrnaean community he wrote: "Whenever the bishop appears, let the people be here; just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church." This was the first time the term Catholic Church was used in Christian writing.

### **St. Polycarp (69-155)**

St. Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, was baptized by St. John the Apostle and was the teacher of St. Irenaeus of Lyons. A bishop for 70 years, he taught the virtues of a moral life and counseled people in every occupation or station, advocating

Jesus' message to love one another. In his letter to the Philippians (135), he wrote, "When you can do good, defer it not, because alms deliver from death."

He possessed an elevated status among Christians of his time because he knew the apostles and his teachings were considered orthodox and authentic. His widespread influence was not lost on pagan Rome. He was arrested and brought before the Roman proconsul.

When Polycarp refused to make a sacrifice, take an oath to the emperor and deny Christ, he was threatened with being fed to wild beasts. When he showed no fear, the proconsul instead threatened to burn him alive. When he was bound and set on fire, the flames miraculously did not consume him. Then the Romans drove a sword through his heart.

### **St. Justin (110–65)**

St. Justin converted to Christianity when he was 30. While he considered himself a philosopher, he would become the most important apologist of the second century. Living in Rome, as the head of a school of philosophy, he concluded that the pagan Romans misunderstood Christians and erroneously accused them (Christians) of being enemies of the state, criminals and cannibals.

He wrote a bold letter titled First Apology (A.D. 155) and sent it to Emperor Antonius Pius. The letter clearly explained that Christians were not threats to the state but they were the emperor's "helpers and allies in maintaining peace; for it is our position that it is no more possible for the evil-doer, the avaricious and the treacherous, to hide from God, than it is for the virtuous: and that every man will receive the eternal punishment or reward which his actions deserve."

Christian worship was regarded as a secret, mysterious affair involving cannibalism. Justin addressed this misunderstanding, spelling out what happened during the Christian Sunday

celebration or Eucharist. His description has a remarkable similarity to the Mass today (see sidebar).

Justin also wrote a letter to the Roman Senate, describing the Christian faith as nonthreatening. His words had seemingly no impact. He was martyred in 165.

## **Ante Nicene Fathers**

*Historians often refer to the next category of Church Fathers as the Ante-Nicene Fathers, those after the Apostolic Fathers and before the fourth-century Council of Nicea. These dedicated philosophers and theologians began to develop and explain the basic doctrines and beliefs of Christianity. In the East, the greatest Father was Origen.*

### **Origen (185-253)**



Origen [Wikimedia commons](#)

Although not a canonized saint and in fact condemned by the Second Council of Constantinople, Origen is regarded as one of the great thinkers among the early Fathers. He authored over 2,000 different works in his lifetime, and it is difficult to name the most important work, as each one had great influence on Christian doctrine in the early Church.

He prepared, during a 28-year period, a project called "Hexapla," in which he compared, and harmonized, the Old Testament Hebrew texts and the four Greek texts including the Septuagint, which was the translation used by the Church. He arranged the Scriptures of the Old Testament in six columns, side by side; each column was the different translation of a passage. This was a 50-volume document and an analysis of the Scriptures that had never been done.

Around 178, he wrote an apologetic text refuting the attack on Christianity by a pagan named Celsus. Among other falsehoods, Celsus claimed that Jesus was not born of a virgin, that there was no Resurrection, that Christians were some kind of secret pagan group, that the Scriptures they attested to are fictitious and that, while they could worship a supreme God, they should also worship local deities. Origen drew on the Scriptures to reject each of the false claims, doing so by categorizing the issues and, as he often did, analyzing them from a literal, moral and allegorical view.

Not everything Origen discerned was accepted by the Church, although in some cases it appears he was surfacing issues for debate rather than espousing a belief. He did claim that even the devil could be saved and believed in the preexistence of souls, which resulted in his condemnation by the Church 200 years after his death.

No matter these shortcomings, the profound works of Origen in content and number rival those of St. Augustine and provide the foundation for many doctrines of our Catholic faith.

## **Nicean Fathers**





St. Athanasius Shutterstock



St. Basil Wikimedia commons



St. Cyril of Alexandria Shutterstock

*Sts. Athanasius, Cyril of Alexandria and Basil were among the Eastern Church Fathers who, during the era of the Council of Nicea, took on the worst of the idolatrous teachings and heresies of the fourth century.*

### **St. Athanasius (297-373)**

Around the year 318, a priest from Alexandria named Arius began advocating that Jesus was not God, that he was created and not divine. Arius wrote in a document called the "Banquet" (A.D. 320): "God was not always a Father; indeed, there was a time when God was alone, and he was not yet a Father. ... The Son was not always; for inasmuch as all things were made out of what did not exist, the Son of God, too, was made out of what did not exist ... so also there was a time when the Word of God did not himself exist: and before he was begotten, he was not; rather, he had a beginning of existence."

This struck at the heart of Christianity.

Suddenly there were arguments between theologians and among the populace as to whether Jesus was divine, whether Jesus and God were the same. Sensing the potential for disunity within the Church and empire, Emperor Constantine (272-337) called for an Ecumenical Council at Nicea in 325 designed to settle the issue. Led by Bishop Alexander of Alexandria and his

secretary Athanasius, the assembled bishops developed the Nicene Creed, clearly indicating that Jesus and God are of the same substance (consubstantial).



A 16th-century fresco from the Capella Sistina in the Vatican depicts the first Council of Nicaea. Wikimedia commons

Arius was deposed of his priestly duties and banished by Emperor Constantine. This was not, however, the end of the heresy. Arius had wide support from many Eastern bishops, and when Constantine died, his pro-Arian son became emperor and immediately began to enforce Arianism on everyone and removed use of the Creed from the churches. He pressured Athanasius to receive Arius back into the Church, and when Athanasius refused he was exiled to Egypt. Arius was welcomed back by the bishop in Constantinople, but while returning to be reinstated, he experienced some kind of severe seizure, and he died immediately.

Athanasius spent his adult life opposing Arianism. Five times, 17 years total, he was exiled; even when accused of every type of crime including murder, he never backed down as the constant opponent to Arianism. Athanasius challenges the heretics, asking which of the Church Fathers favored Arianism. He said the Arians only advocate was the devil, "for he alone is your father in such an apostasy. In the beginning he sowed



you with the seeds of this impiety, and now he persuades you to slander the ecumenical council, because it committed to writing not your doctrines, but those which from the beginning were handed down by those who were eye-witnesses and ministers of the Word" (Letter Concerning the Decrees of The Council of Nicea, A.D. 350).

It was largely because of Athanasius that Arianism did not get a longstanding foothold in the Catholic faith.

### **St. Basil (329-379)**

When Athanasius died in 373, Arianism still threatened Christianity; the fight against the heretics was carried on by Basil of Caesarea. Arianism was arguably the greatest threat to the Catholic faith until the 15th-century Protestant Reformation.

St. Basil received the highest honors of the Church: sainthood, Father and Doctor of the Church, Father of Eastern Monasticism, and named the "Great" for his role as bishop. From a family of five saints and three bishops (three Fathers of the Church) he was the perfect person to carry on the fight against the various forms of Arianism, including Macedonianism, which denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit. This denial had evolved since Nicea, not unlike many unorthodox beliefs of the Arians.

Basil, in his immensely clear and detailed treatise "On the Holy Spirit," rejects the Arian idea that the Holy Spirit is not divine, not equal to the Father and the Son: "For if our Lord, when enjoining the baptism of salvation, charged his disciples to baptize all nations in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Mt 28:9), not disdaining fellowship with him, and these men [Arians] allege that we must not rank him [Holy Spirit] with the Father and the Son, is it not clear that they openly withstand the commandment of God?"

It was the tradition then as now, that baptism was not valid unless those exact words were spoken. Basil's defense against Arianism in all forms, including the heretics' effort to diminish or even ignore the Holy Spirit, was a major factor during the First Council of Constantinople in 381, at which Arius was again condemned, the role of the Holy Spirit defined and even elevated in an expanded version of the Nicene Creed (the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed).

### **St. Cyril of Alexandria (376-444)**

Around the year 428, Nestorius, the bishop of Constantinople, began to preach that Jesus was two persons, one human and one divine. Thus, according to Nestorius, Mary gave birth to a human and accordingly, could only be the mother of Jesus, not the mother of God. When St. Cyril of Alexandria heard about these false doctrines, he immediately reminded Nestorius of the Church teaching, as confirmed at the Council of Nicea, that Jesus was one person, equal to the Father, and Mary was the Mother of God.

Nestorius was not impressed, rebutted Cyril's letter and continued advocating that God always existed and could not be born of a woman. Cyril notified Pope Celestine, who advised Nestorius to stop his teachings, recant what he had said or be excommunicated. Nestorius convinced Emperor Theodosius to call an ecumenical council so he, Nestorius, could explain his position. Eventually the Fourth Ecumenical Council was held in Ephesus, Turkey, in June of 431. Here Nestorius was declared a heretic and excommunicated, and Mary was declared the Mother of God (Theotokos).

The council bishops decreed: "If anyone does not confess that God is truly Emmanuel, and that on this account the holy virgin is the mother of God (for according to the flesh she gave birth to the Word of God become flesh by birth), let him be anathema."

Cyril was bishop of the prestigious and influential Church of

Alexandria for 32 years, and as such always in a leadership role in the East and maintained close continuity with the West. His commentaries defended the Holy Trinity against the radical teaching of both Nestorius and Arius. He was noted for his charity toward others, establishing hospitals, poor houses and hostels.

## GREEK FATHERS OF THE CHURCH



"The Church Fathers" is an 11th century Kievan miniature from Svyatoslav's Miscellany. [Wikimedia commons](#)

- ▶ St. Anastasius Sinaita (d. 700)
- ▶ St. Andrew of Crete (660-740)
- ▶ Aphraates (early fourth century)
- ▶ St. Archelaus (d.282)
- ▶ St. Athanasius of Alexandria (297-373)
- ▶ Athenagoras (second century)
- ▶ St. Basil the Great (329-79)
- ▶ St. Caesarius of Nazianzus (330-69)
- ▶ St. Clement of Alexandria (150-215)
- ▶ St. Clement I of Rome, pope (30-101)
- ▶ St. Cyril of Jerusalem 315-86)
- ▶ St. Cyril of Alexandria (376-444)
- ▶ Didymus the Blind (313-98)
- ▶ Diodore of Tarsus (d.392)
- ▶ Dionysius (fifth century)
- ▶ St. Dionysius the Great (190-264)
- ▶ St. Epiphanius of Salamis (315-403)
- ▶ Eusebius of Caesarea (260-340)
- ▶ St. Eustathius of Antioch (fourth century)
- ▶ St. Firmilian of Caesarea (d.268)
- ▶ Gennadius I of Constantinople (d.471)
- ▶ St. Germanus of Constantinople (634-733)
- ▶ St. Gregory of Nazianzus (d. 390)
- ▶ St. Gregory of Nyssa (330-95)
- ▶ St. Gregory Thaumaturgus of Neocaesarea (213-70)
- ▶ Hermas (second century)
- ▶ St. Hippolytus (170-236)
- ▶ St. Ignatius of Antioch (35-107)
- ▶ St. Isidore of Pelusium (360-450)
- ▶ St. John Chrysostom of Constantinople (347-407)
- ▶ St. John Climacus (579-649)
- ▶ St. John Damascene (645-749)
- ▶ St. Julius I, pope (d.352)
- ▶ St. Justin Martyr (100-65)
- ▶ St. Leontius of Byzantium (sixth century)
- ▶ St. Macarius the Great (300-90)
- ▶ St. Maximus (580-662)
- ▶ St. Melito of Sardis (d.190)
- ▶ St. Methodius of Olympus (d.311)
- ▶ St. Nilus the Elder (d. 430)
- ▶ Origen (184-254)
- ▶ St. Polycarp of Smyrna (69-155)
- ▶ St. Proclus of Constantinople (d.446)
- ▶ St. Serapion of Thmuis (died after 362)
- ▶ St. Sophronius of Constantinople (560-638)
- ▶ Tatian, apologist (120-80)
- ▶ Theodore of Mopsuestia (350-428)
- ▶ Theodoret of Cyrrhus (393-458)
- ▶ St. Theophilus of Antioch (late second century)

Source: Modern Catholic Dictionary, John A. Hardon, S.J., reprint 1999, Eternal Life, Bardstown, Ky.