

The Early Church Fathers

by Sebastian R. Fama

The Early Church Fathers were the men who led the Church after the apostles died. Their writings are widely available, and are considered to be authentic by Catholic and non-Catholic scholars alike. Thus, they provide common ground for establishing the beliefs and practices of the early Church.

The earliest of the fathers are known as the "Apostolic Fathers." They were the immediate successors to the Apostles. Four of them were disciples of one or more of the Apostles. Clement of Rome was a disciple of the apostles Peter and Paul. Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna were disciples of the Apostle John. Papias knew the apostle John and was a companion of Polycarp. Naturally we would expect that those who were personally taught by the Apostles would themselves believe and teach correctly.

A popular Protestant theory claims the church became corrupted shortly after 312 A.D. That is when the emperor Constantine converted and made Christianity the state religion. It is said that pagan converts came into the Church, bringing with them many of their pagan beliefs and practices. Consequently, the accepted pagan beliefs became the distinctive doctrines of Catholicism. Thus, the Catholic Church was born, and true Christianity was lost until the Reformation. But the Early Church Fathers tell us a different story.

In reading the Early Fathers we see a Church with bishops in authority over priests and deacons. We see a church that baptized infants and believed in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. We see a Church that believed in the primacy of Rome, the intercession of the saints in heaven, and the Immaculate Conception of Mary. Thus, we are led to the inescapable conclusion that the early Church, was the Catholic Church.

As you can imagine, the writings of the Early Fathers are especially helpful in refuting the Protestant claim that many Catholic doctrines were invented in later years. Although they are wrong concerning the age of Catholic doctrines, their reasoning is sound. If a teaching appears after the apostolic age without evidence of previous support, it must be false. Curiously enough they abandon this line of reasoning when it comes to many of their own beliefs. For instance, the doctrine of Sola Scriptura (Scripture Alone) was created by Martin Luther in the mid 1500's. The Protestant teaching on the Rapture was first taught in the late 1800's, and the use of artificial contraception was first allowed in 1930.

It is important to note that some Catholic teachings existed in a primitive form during the early years. These teachings would develop over time. One example is the Doctrine of the Trinity. All its elements were present at the beginning, but it was not clearly defined the way it is today. This would not make it a late teaching as all the information was there from the beginning. Other doctrines were developed in this same way.

Also worthy of note is the fact that the Early Fathers occasionally disagreed on minor issues that were not yet settled by the Church. This does not present us with a problem as we do not claim that the fathers were infallible. While they were not infallible, they were unmistakably Catholic. Their writings clearly illustrate the fact that the early Church bore no resemblance to Protestantism.

John Henry Newman was one of the more famous converts to Catholicism. After studying the Early Fathers, he wrote: "The Christianity of history is not Protestantism. If ever there were a safe truth it is this, and Protestantism has ever felt it so; to be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant" (*An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*).

Christianity was started by Jesus Christ 2000 years ago and it has existed for 2000 years. It did not go away for 1200 years and then come back. Indeed, that would have rendered Jesus' words impotent. In Matthew 16:18 as He was establishing His Church, Jesus gave us a guarantee. He said: "I will build my Church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." If the Protestant theory is correct, the gates of hell did some serious prevailing. And that would make Jesus Christ a liar. But of course, such is not the case.

As we noted above, the writings of the Early Church Fathers are considered to be authentic by Catholic and non-Catholic scholars alike. That is the good news. The bad news is that all too many Protestants read the Early Fathers in the same way they read the Bible; selectively. They focus on passages that appear to support their

arguments while ignoring those that do not. For example, the following passage authored by Athanasius is used to support the claim that he was a proponent of Sola Scriptura (Scripture Alone):

The Catholic Christians will neither speak nor endure to hear anything in religion that is a stranger to Scripture; it being an evil heart of immodesty to speak those things which are not written (*Exhort. ad Monachas*).

Note that Athanasius says, “nor endure to hear anything in religion that is a stranger to Scripture.” He is talking about doctrines that would contradict Scripture. Those are the things that he condemns that “are not’ written.” Sacred Tradition would not be included in that because Scripture tells us to “Hold Fast” to the Church’s oral traditions (2 Thessalonians 2:15). But you do not have to take my word for it. We can ask Athanasius about it.

Me: Is it true that you believe in the doctrine of Sola Scriptura?

Athanasius: Beyond these [Scriptural] sayings, let us look at the very tradition, teaching and faith of the Catholic Church from the beginning, which the Lord gave, the Apostles preached, and the Fathers kept. (*Four Letters to Serapion of Thmuis* 1:28 [A.D. 360]).

Me: Okay, so you are saying that it is from Sacred Tradition and Scripture that we learn those doctrines which were ordained by God for those who follow Him. But what is wrong with people interpreting the Scriptures for themselves?

Athanasius: But since they allege the divine oracles and force on them a misinterpretation, according to their private sense, it becomes necessary to meet them just so far as to vindicate these passages, and to show that they bear an orthodox sense, and that our opponents are in error (*Discourse Against the Arians* 1:37 [A.D. 362]).

Me: You are right, people can and do misinterpret the Scriptures. In fact, now that you mention it, I seem to remember Peter telling us that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation (2 Peter 1:20). Logically then, an outside authority would be needed to assure us that we are interpreting the Scriptures properly. However, I still have people telling me they can do it completely on their own without the aid of a visible church.

Athanasius: Take thought of the Church, lest many of the little ones be injured on your account, and the others be given an occasion of withdrawing.... But if the organizing of the Churches is distasteful to you, and you do not think the ministry of the episcopate has its reward, why, then you have brought yourself to despise the Savior that ordered these things. I beseech you, dismiss such ideas, nor tolerate those who advise you in such a sense.... For the order the Lord has established by the Apostles abides fair and firm.... For if all were of the same mind as your present advisers, how would you have become a Christian, since there would be no bishops? Or if our successors are to inherit this state of mind, how will the Churches be able to hold together? Or do your advisers think that you have received nothing, that they despise it? If so surely, they are wrong (Letter 49:3-4 [A.D. 354]).

Me: A good point! How would the Churches be able to hold together if they abandon that one Church established by Christ. I believe the fractured state of Protestantism proves your point most convincingly. Would you like to expand on that?

Athanasius: So that for the future all men everywhere may say, “One Lord, one faith” (Ephesians 4:5). For as the psalmist says, what is so good or pleasant as for brethren to dwell in unity. But our dwelling is the Church, and our mind ought to be the same. For thus we believe that the Lord also will dwell with us, who says, 'I will dwell with them and walk in them' and 'Here will I dwell for I have a delight therein.' But by 'here' what is meant but there where one faith and religion is preached? (*Letter to the People of Antioch* 1 [A.D. 362]).

Me: I agree, Church unity is an important part of God’s plan.

Athanasius: What then I have learned myself, and have heard men of judgment say, I have written in few words; but do you, remaining on the foundation of the Apostles, and holding fast the traditions of the Fathers, pray that now at length all strife and rivalry may cease, and the futile questions of the heretics may be condemned (*De Synodis* 3:54 [A.D. 359]).

Me: Another good point. I wonder how many people have rejected Christianity because of all the strife and rivalry within its ranks. We have thousands of denominations all claiming authority from the Bible and yet disagreeing on what it teaches. That is not the result Jesus intended when He prayed that we would be one as He and the Father are one (John 17:21). He obviously meant for us to be one united Church.

Athanasius: For if this be done, all evil suspicion will be removed on all hands, and the faith of the Catholic Church alone be exhibited in purity (*Letter to the People of Antioch* 3 [A.D. 362]).

Me: Well said. Thank you, Athanasius.

Spaghetti is good! Does that mean that rice is not? The statement “spaghetti is good” does not even address the issue of rice, and thus it does not rule it out. Likewise, when the Early Fathers extol the virtues of Scripture, they are not ruling out the role of Sacred Tradition or Church authority.

And so, once again we say that the early Church was the Catholic Church. The Early Fathers even called it that. But, say our critics, when the Early Fathers used the word catholic, they were referring to the nature of the church and not to any one Christian body. In this they are partly right. Catholic means universal. And it signifies the church’s mission of proclaiming the Gospel to all men. But the label catholic is something more than a general description. It was then, as it is now, the name of the one church established by Jesus Christ. Let us consider just three of the Church Fathers who referred to the Church as Catholic. Note what else they believed and taught:

Very early in Church History, Ignatius of Antioch, wrote the following in his *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*: “Where the bishop is present, there is the **Catholic Church**” (8:2 [A.D. 110]). Elsewhere he writes about the primacy of Rome, apostolic succession, the Mass, and the fact that the Eucharist is the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ.

Justin Martyr wrote: For the men of former generations, who instituted private and public rites in honor of such as were more powerful, caused forgetfulness of **the Catholic faith** to take possession of their posterity (*On the Sole Government of God* 1 [inter A.D. 151-155]). Elsewhere he wrote: Those who apostatize are cast into eternal fire. In order to apostatize, you must first be a Christian. You only become an apostate by abandoning the faith you once had. Thus, no assurance of salvation. He also wrote we are regenerated by baptism and baptism is synonymous with being born again. He says the celebration of the Mass along with the Eucharist is the pure offering spoken of in Malachi 1:10-11.

Irenaeus wrote: The truth is to be found nowhere else but in **the Catholic Church**, the sole depository of apostolical doctrine. Heresies are of recent formation and cannot trace their origin up to the apostles (*Against Heresies* 3:4 [A.D. 189]). Note he says “the sole depository of apostolical doctrine.” That precludes the possibility of other denominations as other denominations would naturally have different doctrines. Elsewhere he speaks out against the idea of private interpretation. Specifically, he said: “For in this way no one will possess the rule of truth” (*ibid* 2:27). He spoke of the universal [Catholic] Church getting its tradition from the Apostles. Like Ignatius, he spoke of the primacy of Rome, and Apostolic Succession. His writings clearly refute Martin Luther’s doctrine of “Assurance of Salvation.”

He equated the sacrament of Baptism with being born again. He also speaks of Baptism for infants and young children. Just like Justin Martyr, he sees the Mass and the Eucharist as the perfect sacrifice spoken of in Malachi 1:10-11. And of course, Jesus is the perfect sacrifice. Thus, the Eucharist is the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ. He spoke of Eve’s disobedience [sin] and compared it to Mary’s obedience [no sin] (The Immaculate Conception). He said: “Eve’s disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary” (*ibid* 3:22:24 [A.D. 189]).

Tertullian wrote: “For it is evident that those men lived not so long ago – in the reign of Antoninus for the most part – and that they at first were believers in **the doctrine of the Catholic Church, in the church of Rome** under the episcopate of the blessed Eleutherus, (*The Prescription Against Heretics* 22, 30 [A.D.200]).

Elsewhere he wrote that heresies are made possible by the false interpretation [private interpretation] of the Scriptures. He believed in the primacy of Rome. To that effect he wrote: “Upon you, [Peter] he says, I will build my Church; and **I will give to you the keys, not to the Church; and whatever you**

shall have bound or you shall have loosed, not what they shall have bound or they shall have loosed (*Modesty* 21:9-10 [A.D. 220]).

He believed in Apostolic Succession; he equated baptism with being born again and the role it plays in salvation. He believed that salvation could be lost by those who fall out of grace. He believed in the Church's power to forgive sins (Confession). He believed in praying for the dead and the existence of Purgatory. Finally, he believed in the legitimate use of sacred images.

Many other examples could be given, such as, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Cyprian of Carthage etc.... Clearly the Catholic Church of the Fathers is the same Catholic Church which is identical in belief and practice as the modern-day Catholic Church. And that is because they are one and the same. If the God of the universe creates something and says it will last until the end of the age, then logic demands that it be so. If He says: "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it, it can be no other way. Her members may sin. But that is to be expected. As the apostle Paul noted: "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). But as a Church she is holy (set apart) and a sure guide in matters of faith and morals.

Keeping in mind that the Church established by Jesus Christ is the "Pillar and foundation of truth" (1 Timothy 3:15) and was to endure "until the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20), a question must be asked. If it is not the Catholic Church, then who? There is no Christian body that I am aware of, that even claims to be that Church. And if we were to find another contender, what would they present for evidence? Or as Tertullian put it:

If there be any [heresies] bold enough to plant themselves in the midst of the apostolic age, so that they might seem to have been handed down by the Apostles because they were from the time of the Apostles, we can say to them: let them show the origin of their Churches, let them unroll the order of their bishops, running down in succession from the beginning, so that their first bishop shall have for author and predecessor some one of the Apostles or of the apostolic men who continued steadfast with the Apostles (*The Prescription Against Heretics* 32:1 [A.D. 200]).

As we saw above, the Church of Jesus Christ was to endure forever, that is, from the moment He established it until He returned. Jesus, who is God, gave us His word on that. And the Father, who is God, said the following concerning His word: "So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11). So, what do we see when we look out across the Christian landscape? With the evidence provided by the Early Fathers, we see the Catholic Church whose teachings have not changed for 2000 years. On the other hand, we have the assertion that it took Jesus 1500 years to finally get His message through via Protestantism. And once He got it through, those receiving it could not agree on what it meant. So, they split up into thousands of groups. To make matters worse, many of those groups are in the habit of changing their doctrines from time to time to match societal trends. Which of these two scenarios do you suppose is the fulfillment of God's infallible promise?

When Marcion of Pontus began propagating his novel theories about the Old Testament, his sect was called the Marcionite Church (144 A.D.). The Church established by Jesus was still called the Catholic Church.

When the followers of Nestorius separated from the Church for theological reasons, they were called Nestorians (circa 435 A.D.). The Church established by Jesus was still called the Catholic Church.

When Martin Luther's followers organized in the 1520's, they were called Lutherans. The Church established by Jesus was still called the Catholic Church. And it will be called the Catholic Church until the Second Coming.