

The Early Church Fathers on The Catholic Church

We have one Savior, and He established one Church (Matthew 16:18). He also promised to guard it against error (John 16:13). And He did. It was never His intent to create thousands of churches with contradictory teachings. Rather, He prayed that we would be one as He and the Father are one so that the world would know that He sent us (John 17:21). It would be hard to deny that the Protestant Reformation created and continues to create many divisions in the Body of Christ. In the words of Scott Hahn; “The world now has reason to doubt.” The Early Church was the Catholic Church. It taught and practiced in the same manner as the Catholic Church of today. And oddly enough, it was even called the “Catholic Church.”

Ignatius of Antioch

See that ye all follow the bishop, even as Jesus Christ does the Father, and the presbytery as ye would the apostles; and reverence the deacons, as being the institution of God. Let no man do anything connected with the Church without the bishop. Let that be deemed a proper Eucharist, which is [administered] either by the bishop, or by one to whom he has entrusted it. Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude [of the people] also be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church (*Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* 8 [A.D. 110]).

Polycarp

And of the elect, he was one indeed, the wonderful martyr Polycarp, who in our days was an apostolic and prophetic teacher, bishop of the Catholic Church in Smyrna. (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 16:2 [A.D. 155]).

Justin Martyr

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]).

Irenaeus

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]).

The Muratorian Canon

He wrote, besides these, one to Philemon, and one to Titus, and two to Timothy, in simple personal affection and love indeed; but yet these are hallowed in the esteem of the Catholic Church (3 [inter A.D. 180-200]).

Tertullian

Where was Marcion then, that shipmaster of Pontus, the zealous student of Stoicism? Where was Valentinus then, the disciple of Platonism? 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, until on account of their ever restless curiosity, with which they even infected the brethren, they were more than once expelled (*The Prescription Against Heretics* 22, 30 [A.D.200]).

Clement of Alexandria

It is my opinion that the true Church, that which is really ancient, is one, and that in it those who according to God's purpose are just, are enrolled... Therefore in substance and idea, in origin, in pre-eminence, we say that the ancient and Catholic Church is alone, collecting as it does into the unity of the one faith (*Stromata* 7:17 [A.D. 202]).

Origen

Let such things, however, be lightly esteemed by him who is desirous of being trained in divine learning, while retaining in its integrity the rule of the Catholic faith (*On First Principles* 3 [A.D. 225]).

Hippolytus

Behold, into how great impiety that lawless one has proceeded, by inculcating adultery and murder at the same time! And withal, after such audacious acts, they, lost to all shame, attempt to call themselves a Catholic Church! (*Refutation of All Heresies* 9:7 [A.D. 228]).

Cyprian of Carthage

They are striving here also to distract the members of Christ into schismatical parties, and to cut and tear the one body of the Catholic Church (Epistle 40:2 [circa A.D. 250]).

Dionysius the Great

For, indeed, in the most considerable councils of the bishops, as I hear, it has been decreed that they who come from heresy should first be trained in Catholic doctrine, and then should be cleansed by baptism from the filth of the old and impure leaven (Epistle 6:1 [A.D. 251-253]).

Peter of Alexandria

These things having thus ended, it was everywhere published far and wide that Arius had not been cut off from the Catholic unity without a divine interposition (*Genuine Acts of Peter* [inter A.D. 300-311]).

Lactantius

Therefore, it is the Catholic Church alone which retains true worship. This is the fountain of truth, this is the abode of the faith, this is the temple of God; into which if any one shall not enter, or from which if any shall go out, he is estranged from the hope of life and eternal salvation (*Divine Institutes* 4:30 [A.D. 307]).

Alexander of Alexandria

And besides, also, one only Catholic and Apostolic Church, which can never be destroyed, though all the world should seek to make war with it; but it is victorious over every most impious revolt of the heretics who rise up against it (*Letter 1 on the Arian Heresy* 12 [inter A.D. 313-325]).

Eusebius

But the splendor of the Catholic and only true Church, which is always the same, grew in magnitude and power, and reflected its piety and simplicity and freedom, and the modesty and purity of its inspired life and philosophy to every nation both of Greeks and of Barbarians (*Church History* 4:7:13 [A.D. 325]).

Cyril of Jerusalem

Now then let me finish what still remains to be said for the Article, "In one Holy Catholic Church," on which, though one might say many things, we will speak but briefly. It is called Catholic then because it extends over all the world, from one end of the earth to the other; and because it teaches universally and completely one and all the doctrines which ought to come to men's knowledge, concerning things both visible and invisible, heavenly and earthly; and because it brings into subjection to godliness the whole race of mankind, governors and governed, learned and unlearned; and because it universally treats and heals the whole class of sins, which are committed by soul or body, and possesses in itself every form of virtue which is named, both in deeds and words, and in every kind of spiritual gifts (*Catechetical Lecture* 18:22-23 [A.D. 350]).

Augustine

This same is the holy Church, the one Church, the true Church, the Catholic Church, fighting against all heresies: ... "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (*A Sermon to Catechumens on the Creed* 14 [inter A.D. 388-430]).

Leo the Great

Wherefore do not doubt that the LORD, the Founder of the catholic Faith, will befriend you in all things (Letter 20 [A.D. 448]).