Great Christian Thinkers

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From the Early Church through the Middle Ages

Pope Benedict XVI

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GREAT CHRISTIAN THINKERS
From the Early Church through the Middle Ages

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Publisher's Foreword

It is a matter of particular pride at Fortress Press that we offer this compilation of brief portraits composed and presented by Pope Benedict XVI on key figures from Christian history. Over the last several years, week after week, Benedict has devoted most of his public audiences to depicting some of the most important figures of the tradition—theologians and philosophers but also spiritual guides, eremites and monks, abbots and abbesses, popes and bishops, founders and reformers, mystics and missionaries.

The result is a set of seventy expert and reliable yet quite accessible introductions to the key framers of the pre-Reformation tradition, East and West, as useful for personal reading or study as for classroom or congregation. As one might expect of someone who brings decades of his own teaching and research to the task, Benedict's pieces are not only illuminating historical sketches but also often surprisingly personal reflective meditations on the perennial challenges of theology, spirituality, devotion, and corporate religious life—in short, of thinking about and wrestling daily with the mysteries that envelop all our lives and struggles.

The editors of Fortress Press are grateful to the Vatican Library Press for their enthusiasm for the project and willingness to facilitate it by providing lucid and accessible translations.

Part One

Heirs of the Apostles

St. Clement, Bishop of Rome

After the first witnesses of the Christian faith, mentioned in the New Testament writings, we find the Apostolic Fathers, that is, to the first and second generations in the Church subsequent to the Apostles. And thus, we can see where the Church's journey begins in history.

St. Clement, bishop of Rome in the last years of the first century, was the third successor of Peter, after Linus and Anacletus. The most important testimony concerning his life comes from St. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons until 202. He attests that Clement "had seen the blessed Apostles," "had been conversant with them," and "might be said to have the preaching of the Apostles still echoing [in his ears], and their traditions before his eyes" (*Adversus Haer.* 3, 3, 3). Later testimonies, which date back to between the fourth and sixth centuries, attribute to Clement the title of martyr.

The authority and prestige of this bishop of Rome were such that various writings were attributed to him, but the only one that is certainly Clement's is the *Letter to the Corinthians*. Eusebius of Caesarea, the great "archivist" of Christian beginnings, presents it in these terms: "There is extant an epistle of this Clement which is acknowledged to be genuine and is of considerable length and of remarkable merit. He wrote it in the name of the Church of Rome to the Church of Corinth, when a sedition had arisen in the latter church. We know that this epistle also has been publicly used in a great many churches both in former times and in our own" (*Hist. Eccl.* 3, 16).

An almost canonical character was attributed to Clement's *Letter*. At the beginning of this text, written in Greek, Clement expressed his regret that "the sudden and successive calamitous events which have happened to ourselves" (1, 1) had prevented him from intervening sooner. These "calamitous events" can be identified with Domitian's persecution: therefore, the *Letter* must have been written just after the emperor's death and at the end of the persecution, that is, immediately after the year 96.

Clement's intervention—we are still in the first century—was prompted by the serious problems besetting the Church in Corinth: the elders of the community, in fact, had been deposed by some young contestants. The sorrowful event was recalled once again by St. Irenaeus, who wrote: "In the time of this Clement, no small dissension having occurred among the brethren in Corinth, the Church in Rome dispatched a most powerful letter to the Corinthians exhorting them to peace, renewing their faith and declaring the tradition which it had lately received from the Apostles" (*Adv. Haer.* 3, 3, 3).

Thus, we could say that Clement's *Letter* was a first exercise of the Roman primacy after St. Peter's death. His *Letter* touches on topics that were dear to St. Paul, who had written two important letters to the Corinthians, in particular the theological dialectic, perennially current, between the *indicative* of salvation and the *imperative* of moral commitment.

First of all came the joyful proclamation of saving grace. The Lord forewarns us and gives us his forgiveness, gives us his love and the grace to be Christians, his brothers and sisters. It is a proclamation that fills our life with joy and gives certainty to our action: the Lord always forewarns us with his goodness, and the Lord's goodness is always greater than all our sins. However, we must commit ourselves in a way that is consistent with the gift received and respond to the proclamation of salvation with a generous and courageous journey of conversion.

In comparison with the Pauline model, the innovation is that Clement adds to the doctrinal and practical sections, found in all the Pauline Letters, a "great prayer" that virtually concludes the *Letter*.

The *Letter*'s immediate circumstances provided the bishop of Rome with ample room for an intervention on the Church's identity and mission. If there were abuses in Corinth, Clement observed, the reason should be sought in the weakening of charity and of the other indispensable Christian virtues. He therefore calls the faithful to humility and fraternal love, two truly constitutive virtues of being in the Church: "Seeing, therefore, that we are the portion of the Holy One," he warned, "let us do all those things which pertain to holiness" (30, 1).

In particular, Clement recalls that the Lord himself "has established where and by whom he wishes liturgical functions to be carried out, so that all may be devoutly performed in accordance with his wishes and in a manner acceptable to him. . . . For his own peculiar services are assigned to the high priest, and their own proper place is prescribed to the priests, and their own special ministries devolve on the Levites. The layman is bound by the laws that pertain to laymen" (40, 1–5: it can be noted that here, in this early first-century letter, the Greek word *laikós* appears for the first time in Christian literature, meaning "a member of the *laos*," that is, "of the People of God"). In this way, referring to the liturgy of ancient Israel, Clement revealed his ideal Church. She was assembled by "the one Spirit of grace poured out upon us," which breathes on the various members of the Body of Christ, where all, united without any divisions, are "members of one another" (46, 6–7).

The clear distinction between the "layperson" and the hierarchy in no way signifies opposition, but only this organic connection of a body, an organism with its different functions. The Church, in fact, is not a place of confusion and anarchy where one can do what one likes all the time: each one in this organism, with an articulated structure, exercises his ministry in accordance with the vocation he has received.

With regard to community leaders, Clement clearly explains the doctrine of Apostolic Succession. The norms that regulate it derive ultimately from God himself. The Father sent Jesus Christ, who in turn sent the Apostles. They then sent the first heads of communities and established that they would be succeeded by other worthy men. Everything, therefore, was made "in an orderly way, according to the will of God" (42). With these words, these sentences, St. Clement underlined that the Church's structure was sacramental and not political.

The action of God who comes to meet us in the liturgy precedes our decisions and our ideas. The Church is above all a gift of God and not something we ourselves created; consequently, this sacramental structure does not only guarantee the common order but also this precedence of God's gift which we all need.

Finally, the great prayer confers a cosmic breath to the previous reasoning. Clement praises and thanks God for his marvelous providence of love that created the world and continues to save and sanctify it.

The prayer for rulers and governors acquires special importance. Subsequent to the New Testament texts, it is the oldest prayer extant for political institutions. Thus, in the period following their persecution, Christians, well aware that the persecutions would continue, never ceased to pray for the very authorities who had unjustly condemned them. The reason is primarily christological: it is necessary to pray for one's persecutors, as Jesus did on the cross.

But this prayer also contains a teaching that guides the attitude of Christians toward politics and the state down the centuries. In praying for the authorities, Clement recognized the legitimacy of political institutions in the order established by God; at the same time, he expressed his concern that the authorities would be docile to God, "devoutly in peace and meekness exercising the power given them by [God]" (61, 2). Caesar is not everything. Another sovereignty emerges whose origins and essence are not of this world but of "the heavens above": it is that of Truth, which also claims a right to be heard by the state.

Thus, Clement's Letter addresses numerous themes of perennial timeliness. It is all the more meaningful since it represents, from the first century, the concern of the Church of Rome, which presides in charity over all the other churches. In this same Spirit, let us make our own the invocations of the great prayer in which the bishop of Rome makes himself the voice of the entire world: "Yes, O Lord, make your face to shine upon us for good in peace, that we may be shielded by your mighty hand . . . through the High Priest and guardian of our souls, Jesus Christ, through whom be glory and majesty to you both now and from generation to generation, forevermore" (60–61).

—*7 March 2007*

St. Ignatius of Antioch

Saint Ignatius was the third bishop of Antioch, from 70 to 107, the date of his martyrdom. At that time, Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch were the three great metropolises of the Roman Empire. The Council of Nicaea mentioned three "primacies": Rome, but Alexandria and Antioch also participated in a certain sense in a "primacy."

St. Ignatius was bishop of Antioch, which today is located in Turkey. Here in Antioch, as we know from the Acts of the Apostles, a flourishing Christian community developed. Its first bishop was the Apostle Peter—or so tradition claims—and it was there that the disciples were "for the first time called Christians" (Acts 11:26). Eusebius of Caesarea, a fourth-century historian, dedicated an entire chapter of his *Church History* to the life and literary works of Ignatius (cf. 3:36). Eusebius writes:

> The report says that he [Ignatius] was sent from Syria to Rome, and became food for wild beasts on account of his testimony to Christ. And as he made the journey through Asia under the strictest military surveillance" [he calls the guards "ten leopards" in his *Letter to the Romans* 5, 1], he fortified the parishes in the various cities where he stopped by homilies and exhortations, and warned them above all to be especially on their guard against the heresies that were then beginning to prevail, and exhorted them to hold fast to the tradition of the Apostles.

The first place Ignatius stopped on the way to his martyrdom was the city of Smyrna, where St. Polycarp, a disciple of St. John, was bishop. Here, Ignatius wrote four letters, respectively to the churches of Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralli, and Rome. "Having left Smyrna," Eusebius continues, Ignatius reached Troas and "wrote again": two letters to the churches of Philadelphia and Smyrna, and one to Bishop Polycarp.

Thus, Eusebius completes the list of his letters, which have come down to us from the Church of the first century as a precious treasure. In reading these texts one feels the freshness of the faith of the generation which had still known the Apostles. In these letters, the ardent love of a saint can also be felt.

Last, the martyr traveled from Troas to Rome, where he was thrown to fierce wild animals in the Flavian amphitheater.

No Church Father has expressed the longing for *union* with Christ and for *life* in him with the intensity of Ignatius. We therefore read the Gospel passage on the vine, which according to John's Gospel is Jesus. In fact, two spiritual "currents" converge in Ignatius; that of Paul, straining

with all his might for *union* with Christ, and that of John, concentrated on *life* in him. In turn, these two currents translate into the *imitation* of Christ, whom Ignatius several times proclaimed as "my" or "our God."

Thus, Ignatius implores the Christians of Rome not to prevent his martyrdom since he is impatient "to attain to Jesus Christ." And he explains, "It is better for me to die on behalf of Jesus Christ than to reign over all the ends of the earth. . . . Him I seek, who died for us: him I desire, who rose again for our sake. . . . Permit me to be an imitator of the passion of my God!" (*Romans* 5–6).

One can perceive in these words on fire with love the pronounced christological "realism" typical of the Church of Antioch, more focused than ever on the Incarnation of the Son of God and on his true and concrete humanity: "Jesus Christ," St. Ignatius wrote to the Smyrnaeans, "was *truly* of the seed of David," "he was *truly* born of a virgin," "and was *truly* nailed [to the cross] for us" (1, 1).

Ignatius's irresistible longing for union with Christ was the foundation of a real "mysticism of unity." He describes himself: "I therefore did what befitted me as a man devoted to unity" (*Philadelphians* 8, 1). For Ignatius, unity was first and foremost a prerogative of God, who, since he exists as three persons, is one in absolute unity. Ignatius often repeated that God is unity and that in God alone is unity found in its pure and original state. Unity to be brought about on this earth by Christians is no more than an imitation as close as possible to the divine archetype.

Thus, Ignatius reached the point of being able to work out a vision of the Church strongly reminiscent of certain expressions in Clement of Rome's *Letter to the Corinthians*. For example, he wrote to the Christians of Ephesus: "It is fitting that you should concur with the will of your bishop, which you also do. For your justly renowned presbytery, worthy of God, is fitted as exactly to the bishop as the strings are to the harp. Therefore, in your concord and harmonious love, Jesus Christ is sung. And one by one, you become a choir, that being harmonious in love and taking up the song of God in unison you may with one voice sing to the Father" (4, 1–2).

And after recommending to the Smyrnaeans, "Let no man do anything connected with Church without the bishop," he confides to Polycarp: "I offer my life for those who are submissive to the bishop, to the presbyters, and to the deacons, and may I along with them obtain my portion in God! Labor together with one another; strive in company together; run together; suffer together; sleep together; and awake together as the stewards and associates and servants of God. Please him under whom you fight, and from whom you receive your wages. Let none of you be found a deserter. Let your baptism endure as your arms; your faith as your helmet; your love as your spear; your patience as a complete panoply" (*Polycarp* 6, 1–2).

Overall, it is possible to grasp in the *Letters* of Ignatius a sort of constant and fruitful dialectic between two characteristic aspects of Christian life: on the one hand, the hierarchical structure of the ecclesial community, and on the other, the fundamental unity that binds all the faithful in Christ. Consequently, their roles cannot be opposed to one another. On the contrary, the insistence on communion among believers and of believers with their pastors was constantly reformulated in eloquent images and analogies: the harp, strings, intonation, the concert, the symphony. The special responsibility of bishops, priests, and deacons in building the community is clear.

This applies first of all to their invitation to love and unity. "Be one," Ignatius wrote to the Magnesians, echoing the prayer of Jesus at the Last Supper: "one supplication, one mind, one hope in love. . . . Therefore, all run together as into one temple of God, as to one altar, as to one Jesus Christ who came forth from one Father, and is with and has gone to one" (7, 1–2).

Ignatius was the first person in Christian literature to attribute to the Church the adjective "catholic" or "universal": "Wherever Jesus Christ is," he said, "there is the Catholic Church" (*Smyrnaeans* 8, 2). And precisely in the service of unity to the Catholic Church, the Christian community of Rome exercised a sort of primacy of love: "The Church which presides in the place of the region of the Romans, and which is worthy of God, worthy of honor, worthy of the highest happiness . . . and which presides over love, is named from Christ, and from the Father" *(Romans,* Prologue).

As can be seen, Ignatius is truly the "Doctor of Unity": unity of God and unity of Christ (despite the various heresies gaining ground that separated the human and the divine in Christ), unity of the Church, unity of the faithful in "faith and love, to which nothing is to be preferred" (*Smyrnaeans* 6, 1).

Ultimately, Ignatius's realism invites the faithful of yesterday and today, invites us all, to make a gradual synthesis between *configuration to Christ* (union with him, life in him) and *dedication to his Church* (unity with the bishop, generous service to the community and to the world).

To summarize, it is necessary to achieve a synthesis between *communion* of the Church within herself and *mission*, the proclamation of the gospel to others, until the other speaks through one dimension and believers increasingly "have obtained the inseparable Spirit, who is Jesus Christ" (*Magnesians* 15).

Imploring from the Lord this "grace of unity" and in the conviction that the whole Church presides in charity (cf. *Romans,* Prologue), I address to you yourselves the same hope with which Ignatius ended his *Letter to the Trallians*: "Love one another with an undivided heart. Let my spirit be sanctified by yours, not only now but also when I shall attain to God. . . . In [Jesus Christ] may you be found unblemished" (13). And let us pray that the Lord will help us to attain this unity and to be found at last unstained, because it is love that purifies souls.

—14 March 2007

St. Justin, Philosopher and Martyr

Saint Justin, Philosopher and Martyr, was the most important of the second-century apologist Fathers.

The word *apologist* designates those ancient Christian writers who set out to defend the new religion from the weighty accusations of both pagans and Jews, and to spread the Christian doctrine in terms suited to the culture of their time. Thus, the apologists had a twofold concern: that most properly called "apologetic," to defend the newborn Christianity (*apología* in Greek means, precisely, "defense"), and the pro-positive, "missionary" concern, to explain the content of the faith in a language and on a wavelength comprehensible to their contemporaries.

Justin was born in about the year 100, near ancient Shechem, Samaria, in the Holy Land. He spent a long time seeking the truth, moving through the various schools of the Greek philosophical tradition. Finally, as he himself recounts in the first chapters of his *Dialogue with Trypho*, a mysterious figure, an old man he met on the seashore, leads him into a crisis by showing him that it is impossible for the human being to satisfy his aspiration to the divine solely with his own forces. He then pointed out to him the ancient prophets as the people to turn to in order to find the way to God and "true philosophy." In taking his leave, the old man urged him to pray that the gates of light would be opened to him.

The story foretells the crucial episode in Justin's life: at the end of a long philosophical journey, a quest for the truth, he arrived at the Christian faith. He founded a school in Rome where, free of charge, he initiated students into the new religion, considered as the true philosophy. Indeed, in it he had found the truth, hence, the art of living virtuously.

For this reason, he was reported and beheaded in about 165, during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, the philosopher-emperor to whom Justin had actually addressed one of his *Apologia*.

These—the two *Apologies* and the *Dialogue with the Hebrew, Trypho*—are his only surviving works. In them, Justin intends above all to illustrate the divine project of creation and salvation, which is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the *Logos,* that is, the eternal Word, eternal Reason, creative Reason. Every person as a rational being shares in the *Logos,* carrying within himself a "seed," and can perceive glimmers of the truth. Thus, the same *Logos* who revealed himself as a prophetic figure to the Hebrews of the ancient law also manifested himself partially, in "seeds of truth," in Greek philosophy. Now, Justin concludes, since Christianity is the historical and personal manifestation of the *Logos* in his totality, it follows that "whatever things were rightly said among all men are the property of us Christians" (*Second Apology of St. Justin Martyr* 13, 4).

In this way, although Justin disputed Greek philosophy and its contradictions, he decisively oriented any philosophical truth to the *Logos*, giving reasons for the unusual "claim" to truth and universality of the Christian religion. If the Old Testament leaned toward Christ, just as the symbol is a guide to the reality represented, then Greek philosophy also aspired to Christ and the gospel, just as the part strives to be united with the whole. And he said that these two realities, the Old Testament and Greek philosophy, are like two paths that lead to Christ, to the *Logos*. This is why Greek philosophy cannot be opposed to gospel truth, and Christians can draw from it confidently as from a good of their own.

Therefore, my venerable predecessor Pope John Paul II described St. Justin as a "pioneer of positive engagement with philosophical thinking—albeit with cautious discernment. . . . Although he continued to hold Greek philosophy in high esteem after his conversion, Justin claimed with power and clarity that he had found in Christianity 'the only sure and profitable philosophy' (*Dial.* 8, 1)" (*Fides et Ratio*, n. 38).

Overall, the figure and work of Justin mark the ancient Church's forceful option for philosophy, for reason, rather than for the religion of the pagans. With the pagan religion, in fact, the early Christians strenuously rejected every compromise. They held it to be idolatry, at the cost of being accused for this reason of "impiety" and "atheism." Justin in particular, especially in his first *Apology*, mercilessly criticized the pagan religion and its myths, which he considered to be diabolically misleading on the path of truth.

Philosophy, however, represented the privileged area of the encounter between paganism, Judaism, and Christianity, precisely at the level of the criticism of pagan religion and its false myths. "Our philosophy . . .": this is how another apologist, bishop Melito of Sardis, a contemporary of Justin, came to define the new religion in a more explicit way (*Ap. Hist. Eccl.* 4, 26, 7).

In fact, the pagan religion did not follow the ways of the *Logos* but clung to myth, even if Greek philosophy recognized that mythology was devoid of consistency with the truth. Therefore, the decline of the pagan religion was inevitable: it was a logical consequence of the detachment of religion—reduced to an artificial collection of ceremonies, conventions, and customs—from the truth of being.

Justin, and with him other apologists, adopted the clear stance taken by the Christian faith for the God of the philosophers against the false gods of the pagan religion. It was the choice of the *truth* of being against the myth of *custom*. Several decades after Justin, Tertullian defined the same option of Christians with a lapidary sentence that still applies: "*Dominus noster Christus veritatem se, non consuetudinem, cognominavit*—Christ has said that he is truth not fashion" (*De Virgin. Vel.* 1, 1).

It should be noted in this regard that the term *consuetudo*, used here by Tertullian in reference to the pagan religion, can be translated into modern languages with the expressions: "cultural fashion," "current fads." In a time like ours, marked by relativism in the discussion on values and on religion—as well as in interreligious dialogue—this is a lesson that should not be forgotten. To this end, I suggest to you once again—and thus I conclude—the last words of the mysterious old man whom Justin the Philosopher met on the seashore: "Pray that, above all things, the gates of light may be opened to you; for these things cannot be perceived or understood by all, but only by the man to whom God and his Christ have imparted wisdom" (*Dial.* 7, 3).

—21 March 2007

St. Irenaeus of Lyons

In reflecting on the prominent figures of the early Church, we come to the eminent personality of St. Irenaeus of Lyons. The biographical information on him comes from his own testimony, handed down to us by Eusebius in his fifth book on Church history.

Irenaeus was in all probability born in Smyrna (today, Izmir in Turkey) in about 135–140, where in his youth, he attended the school of Bishop Polycarp, a disciple in his turn of the Apostle John. We do not know when he moved from Asia Minor to Gaul, but his move must have coincided with the first development of the Christian community in Lyons: here, in 177, we find Irenaeus listed in the college of presbyters. In that very year, he was sent to Rome bearing a letter from the community in Lyons to Pope Eleutherius. His mission to Rome saved Irenaeus from the persecution of Marcus Aurelius, which took a toll of at least forty-eight martyrs, including the ninety-year-old Bishop Pontinus of Lyons, who died from ill-treatment in prison. Thus, on his return Irenaeus was appointed bishop of the city. The new pastor devoted himself without reserve to his episcopal ministry, which ended in about 202–203, perhaps with martyrdom.

Irenaeus was first and foremost a man of faith and a pastor. Like a good pastor, he had a good sense of proportion, a wealth of doctrine, and missionary enthusiasm. As a writer, he pursued a twofold aim: to defend true doctrine from the attacks of heretics and to explain the truth of the faith clearly. His two extant works—the five books of *The Detection and Overthrow of the False Gnosis* and *Demonstration of the Apostolic Teaching* (which can also be called the oldest "catechism of Christian doctrine")—exactly corresponded with these aims. In short, Irenaeus can be defined as the champion in the fight against heresies. The second-century Church was threatened by the so-called *Gnosis,* a doctrine which affirmed that the faith taught in the Church was merely a symbolism for the simple, who were unable to grasp difficult concepts; instead, the initiates, the intellectuals—*Gnostics,* they were called—claimed to understand what was behind these symbols and thus formed an elitist and intellectualist Christianity. Obviously, this intellectual Christianity became increasingly fragmented, splitting into different currents with ideas that were often bizarre and extravagant, yet attractive to many. One element these different currents had in common was "dualism": they denied faith in the one God and Father of all, Creator and Savior of man and of the world. To explain evil in the world, they affirmed the existence, besides the Good God, of a negative principle. This negative principle was supposed to have produced material things, matter.

Firmly rooted in the biblical doctrine of creation, Irenaeus refuted the Gnostic dualism and pessimism, which debased corporeal realities. He decisively claimed the original holiness of matter, of the body, of the flesh no less than of the spirit. But his work went far beyond the confutation of heresy: in fact, one can say that he emerges as the first great Church theologian who created systematic theology; he himself speaks of the system of theology, that is, of the internal coherence of all faith. At the heart of his doctrine is the question of the "rule of faith" and its transmission. For Irenaeus, the "rule of faith" coincided in practice with the Apostles' Creed, which gives us the key for interpreting the gospel, for interpreting the creed in light of the gospel. The creed, which is a sort of gospel synthesis, helps us understand what it means and how we should read the gospel itself.

In fact, the gospel preached by Irenaeus is the one he was taught by Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, and Polycarp's gospel dates back to the Apostle John, whose disciple Polycarp was. The true teaching, therefore, is not that invented by intellectuals, which goes beyond the Church's simple faith. The true gospel is the one imparted by the bishops who received it in an uninterrupted line from the Apostles. They taught nothing except this simple faith, which is also the true depth of God's revelation. Thus, Irenaeus tells us, there is no secret doctrine concealed in the Church's common creed. There is no superior Christianity for intellectuals. The faith publicly confessed by the Church is the common faith of all. This faith alone is apostolic; it is handed down from the Apostles, that is, from Jesus and from God. In adhering to this faith, publicly transmitted by the Apostles to their successors, Christians must observe what their bishops say and must give special consideration to the teaching of the Church of Rome, preeminent and very ancient. It is because of her antiquity that this Church has the greatest apostolicity; in fact, she originated in Peter and Paul, pillars of the Apostolic College. All churches must agree with the Church of Rome, recognizing in her the measure of the true Apostolic Tradition, the Church's one common faith. With these arguments, summed up very briefly here, Irenaeus refuted the claims of these Gnostics, these intellectuals, from the start. First of all, they possessed no truth superior to that of the ordinary faith, because what they said was not of apostolic origin; it was invented by them. Second, truth and salvation are not the privilege or monopoly of the few, but are available to all through the preaching of the successors of the Apostles, especially of the bishop of Rome. In particular—once again disputing the "secret" character of the Gnostic tradition and noting its multiple and contradictory results—Irenaeus was concerned to describe the genuine concept of the Apostolic Tradition, which we can sum up here in three points.

1. Apostolic Tradition is "public," not private or secret. Irenaeus did not doubt that the content of the faith transmitted by the Church is that received from the Apostles and from Jesus, the Son of God. There is no other teaching than this. Therefore, for anyone who wishes to know true doctrine, it suffices to know "the Tradition passed down by the Apostles and the faith proclaimed to men": a tradition and faith that "have come down to us through the succession of bishops" (*Adversus Haereses* 3, 3, 3–4). Hence, the succession of bishops, the personal principle, and Apostolic Tradition, the doctrinal principle, coincide.

2. Apostolic Tradition is "one." Indeed, whereas Gnosticism was divided into multiple sects, Church Tradition is one in its fundamental content, which—as we have seen—Irenaeus calls precisely *regula fidei* or *veritatis*: and thus, because it is one, it creates unity through the peoples, through the different cultures, through the different peoples; it is a common content like the truth, despite the diversity of languages and cultures. A very precious saying of St. Irenaeus is found in his book *Adversus Haereses*: "The Church, though dispersed throughout the world . . . having received [this faith from the Apostles] . . . as if occupying but one house, carefully preserves it. She also believes these points [of doctrine] just as if she had but one soul and one and the same heart, and she proclaims them, and teaches them and hands them down with perfect harmony as if she possessed only one mouth. For, although the languages of the world are dissimilar, yet the import of the tradition is one and the same. For the churches which have been planted in Germany do not believe or hand down anything different, nor do those in Spain, nor those in Gaul, nor those in the East, nor those in Egypt, nor those in Libya, nor those which have been established in the central regions of the world" (1, 10, 1–2). Already at that time—we are in the year 200—it was possible to perceive the Church's universality, her catholicity, and the unifying power of the truth that unites these very different realities, from Germany, to Spain, to Italy, to Egypt, to Libya, in the common truth revealed to us by Christ.

3. Last, the Apostolic Tradition, as he says in the Greek language in which he wrote his book, is "pneumatic," in other words, spiritual, guided by the Holy Spirit: in Greek, the word for "spirit" is *pneuma*. Indeed, it is not a question of a transmission entrusted to the ability of more or less learned people, but to God's Spirit, who guarantees fidelity to the transmission of the faith. This is the "life" of the Church, what makes the Church ever young and fresh, fruitful with multiple charisms.

For Irenaeus, Church and Spirit were inseparable: "This faith," we read again in the third book of *Adversus Haereses,* "which, having been received from the Church, we do preserve, and which always, by the Spirit of God, renewing its youth as if it were some precious deposit in

an excellent vessel, causes the vessel itself containing it to renew its youth also. . . . For where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church and every kind of grace" (3, 24, 1). As can be seen, Irenaeus did not stop at defining the concept of Tradition. His tradition, uninterrupted Tradition, is not traditionalism, because this Tradition is always enlivened from within by the Holy Spirit, who makes it live anew, causes it to be interpreted and understood in the vitality of the Church. Adhering to her teaching, the Church should transmit the faith in such a way that it must be what it appears, that is, "public," "one," "pneumatic," "spiritual." Starting with each one of these characteristics, a fruitful discernment can be made of the authentic transmission of the faith in the *today* of the Church. More generally, in Irenaeus's teaching, the dignity of man, body and soul, is firmly anchored in divine creation, in the image of Christ and in the Spirit's permanent work of sanctification. This doctrine is like a "high road" in order to discern together with all people of goodwill the object and boundaries of the dialogue of values, and to give an ever new impetus to the Church's missionary action, to the force of the truth which is the source of all true values in the world.

—28 March 2007

Clement of Alexandria

Clement of Alexandria, a great theologian, was probably born in Athens at around the middle of the second century.

From Athens he inherited that marked interest in philosophy which was to make him one of the pioneers of the dialogue between faith and reason in the Christian tradition. While he was still young, he arrived in Alexandria, the "city-symbol" of that fertile junction between the different cultures that was a feature of the Hellenistic age. He was a disciple of Pantaenus until he succeeded him as head of the catechetical school. Many sources testify that he was ordained a priest. During the persecution of 202–203, he fled from Alexandria, seeking refuge in Caesarea, Cappadocia, where he died in about 215.

Of his most important works three are extant: the *Protrepticus,* the *Paedagogus*, and the *Stromata.* Although it does not seem that this was the author's original intention, it is a fact that these writings constitute a true trilogy, destined to effectively accompany the Christian's spiritual growth. The *Protrepticus,* as the word itself suggests, is an "exhortation" addressed to those who are starting out and seek the path of faith. Better still, the *Protrepticus* coincides with a person: the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who makes himself the exhorter of men and women so that they will set out toward the Truth with determination.

Jesus Christ himself becomes the *Paedagogus,* that is, the "tutor" of those who, by virtue of baptism, have henceforth become children of God. Last, Jesus Christ himself is also the *Didascalos,* the "Master" who presents the most profound teachings. These are gathered in Clement's third work, the *Stromata*, a Greek term which means "tapestries": indeed, they are a random composition of different topics, direct fruits of Clement's customary teaching.

Overall, Clement's catecheses accompanied the catechumens and the baptized step by step on their way, so that with the two "wings" of faith and reason they might reach intimate knowledge of the Truth, which is Jesus Christ, the Word of God. Only this knowledge of the person who is Truth is the "true *gnosis,"* a Greek term which means "knowledge" or "understanding." It is the edifice built by reason under the impetus of a supernatural principle.

Faith itself builds true philosophy, that is, true conversion on the journey to take through life. Hence, authentic "gnosis" is a development of faith inspired by Jesus Christ in the soul united with him. Clement then distinguishes two steps in Christian life. The first step: believing Christians who live the faith in an ordinary way, yet are always open to

the horizons of holiness. Then the second step: "gnostics," that is, those who lead a life of spiritual perfection.

In any case, Christians must start from the common basis of faith through a process of seeking; they must allow themselves to be guided by Christ and thus attain knowledge of the Truth and of truth that forms the content of faith. This knowledge, Clement says, becomes a living reality in the soul: it is not only a theory, but it is also a life force, a transforming union of love. Knowledge of Christ is not only thought, but is also love which opens the eyes, transforms the person and creates communion with the *Logos,* with the divine Word, who is Truth and life. In this communion, which is perfect knowledge and love, the perfect Christian attains contemplation, unification with God.

Finally, Clement espouses the doctrine which claims that one's ultimate end is to liken oneself to God. We were created in the image and likeness of God, but this is also a challenge, a journey: indeed, life's purpose, its ultimate destination, is truly to become similar to God. This is possible through the co-naturality with God that humans received at the moment of creation, which is why, already in himself—already in himself—he is an image of God. This co-naturality makes it possible to know the divine realities to which humanity adheres, first of all out of faith, and second, through a lived faith the practice of virtue can grow until one contemplates God.

On the path to perfection, Clement thus attaches as much importance to the moral requisite as he gives to the intellectual. The two go hand in hand, for it is impossible to know without living and impossible to live without knowing. Becoming likened to God and contemplating him cannot be attained with purely rational knowledge: to this end, a life in accordance with the *Logos* is necessary, a life in accordance with truth. Consequently, good works must accompany intellectual knowledge just as the shadow follows the body.

Two virtues above all embellish the soul of the "true gnostic." The first is freedom from the passions (*apátheia*); the other is love, the true passion that assures intimate union with God. Love gives perfect peace and enables the "true gnostic" to face the greatest sacrifices, even the supreme sacrifice in following Christ, and makes him climb from step to step to the peak of virtue. Thus, the ethical ideal of ancient philosophy, that is, liberation from the passions, is defined by Clement and conjugated with love in the ceaseless process of making oneself similar to God.

In this way, the Alexandrian creates the second important occasion for dialogue between the Christian proclamation and Greek philosophy. We know that St. Paul, at the Aeropagus in Athens where Clement was born, had made the first attempt at dialogue with Greek philosophy—and by and large had failed—but they said to him: "We will hear you again."

Clement now takes up this dialogue and ennobles it to the maximum in the Greek philosophical tradition.

As my venerable predecessor, John Paul II, wrote in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio,* Clement of Alexandria understood philosophy "as instruction which prepared for Christian faith" (n. 38). And in fact, Clement reached the point of maintaining that God gave philosophy to the Greeks "as their own Testament" (*Strom*. 6, 8, 67, 1). For him, the Greek philosophical tradition, almost like the law for the Jews, was a sphere of "revelation"; they were two streams which flowed ultimately to the *Logos* himself.

Thus, Clement continued to mark out with determination the path of those who desire "to account" for their own faith in Jesus Christ. He can serve as an example to Christians, catechists, and theologians of our time, whom, in the same encyclical, John Paul II urged "to recover and express to the full the metaphysical dimension of faith in order to enter into a demanding critical dialogue with both contemporary philosophical thought and with the philosophical tradition in all its aspects."

Let us conclude by making our own a few words from the famous "prayer to Christ the *Logos*" with which Clement concludes his *Paedagogus*. He implores: "Be gracious . . . to us your children. . . . Grant us that we may live in your peace, be transferred to your city, sail over the billows of sin without capsizing, be gently wafted by your Holy Spirit, by ineffable Wisdom, by night and day to the perfect day . . . giving thanks and praise to the one Father . . . to the Son, Instructor and Teacher, with the Holy Spirit. Amen!" (*Paed*. 3, 12, 101).

—18 April 2007

Origen of Alexandria

His Life and Work

In our meditations on the great figures of the early Church, we now become acquainted with one of the most remarkable. Origen of Alexandria truly was a figure crucial to the whole development of Christian thought. He gathered up the legacy of Clement of Alexandria, on whom we meditated in the last chapter, and launched it for the future in a way so innovative that he impressed an irreversible turning point on the development of Christian thought.

He was a true "maestro," and so it was that his pupils remembered him with nostalgia and emotion: he was not only a brilliant theologian but also an exemplary witness of the doctrine he passed on. Eusebius of Caesarea, his enthusiastic biographer, said, "His manner of life was as his doctrine, and his doctrine as his life. Therefore, by the divine power working with him he aroused a great many to his own zeal" (cf. *Church History* 6, 3, 7).

His whole life was pervaded by a ceaseless longing for martyrdom. He was seventeen years old when, in the tenth year of the reign of Emperor Septimius Severus, the persecution against Christians was unleashed in Alexandria. Clement, his teacher, fled the city, and Origen's father, Leonides, was thrown into prison. His son longed ardently for martyrdom but was unable to realize his desire. So he wrote to his father, urging him not to shrink from the supreme witness of faith. And when Leonides was beheaded, the young Origen felt bound to welcome the example of his father's life.

Forty years later, while preaching in Caesarea, he confessed: "It is of no use to me to have a martyr father if I do not behave well and honor the nobility of my ancestors, that is, the martyrdom of my father and the witness that made him illustrious in Christ" (*Hom. Ez.* 4, 8). In a later homily—when, thanks to the extreme tolerance of the emperor Philip the Arab, the possibility of bearing witness by shedding one's blood seemed no longer to exist—Origen exclaims: "If God were to grant me to be washed in my blood so as to receive the second baptism after accepting death for Christ, I would depart this world with assurance. . . . But those who deserve such things are blessed" (*Hom. Iud.* 7, 12). These words reveal the full force of Origen's longing for baptism with blood.

And finally, this irresistible yearning was granted to him, at least in part. In the year 250, during Decius's persecution, Origen was arrested

and cruelly tortured. Weakened by the suffering to which he had been subjected, he died a few years later. He was not yet seventy.

We have mentioned the "irreversible turning point" that Origen impressed upon the history of theology and Christian thought. But of what did this turning point, this innovation so pregnant with consequences, consist? It corresponds in substance to theology's foundation in the explanation of the Scriptures.

Theology to him was essentially explaining, understanding Scripture; or we might also say that his theology was a perfect symbiosis between theology and exegesis. In fact, the proper hallmark of Origen's doctrine seems to lie precisely in the constant invitation to move from the letter to the spirit of the Scriptures, to progress in knowledge of God. Furthermore, this so-called allegorism, as von Balthasar wrote, coincides exactly "with the development of Christian dogma, effected by the teaching of the Church Doctors," who in one way or another accepted Origen's "lessons."

Thus, Tradition and the magisterium, the foundation and guarantee of theological research, come to take the form of "Scripture in action" (cf. *Origene: Il mondo, Cristo e la Chiesa* [Milan, 1972], 43). We can therefore say that the central nucleus of Origen's immense literary opus consists in his "threefold interpretation" of the Bible.

But before describing this "interpretation," it would be right to take an overall look at the Alexandrian's literary production. Saint Jerome, in his *Epistle* 33, lists the titles of 320 books and 310 homilies by Origen. Unfortunately, most of these works have been lost, but even the few that remain make him the most prolific author of Christianity's first three centuries. His field of interest extended from exegesis to dogma, to philosophy, apologetics, ascetical theology, and mystical theology. It was a fundamental and global vision of Christian life.

The inspiring nucleus of this work, as we have said, was the "threefold interpretation" of the Scriptures that Origen developed in his lifetime. By this phrase, we wish to allude to the three most important ways in which Origen devoted himself to studying the Scriptures: they are not in sequence; on the contrary, more often than not they overlap.

First of all, he read the Bible, determined to do his utmost to ascertain the biblical text and offer the most reliable version of it. This, for example, was the first step: to know truly what is written and what a specific scriptural passage intentionally and principally meant.

He studied extensively for this purpose and drafted an edition of the Bible with six parallel columns, from left to right, with the Hebrew text in Hebrew characters—he was even in touch with rabbis to make sure he properly understood the Bible's original Hebrew text—then the Hebrew text transliterated into Greek characters, and then four different translations in Greek that enabled him to compare the different possibilities for

its translation. Hence comes the title of *Hexapla* ("six columns"), attributed to this enormous synopsis. This is the first point: to know exactly what was written, the text as such.

Second, Origen read the Bible systematically with his famous *Commentaries*. They reproduced faithfully the explanations that the teacher offered during his lessons at Alexandria and Caesarea. Origen proceeded verse by verse with a detailed, broad, and analytical approach, with philological and doctrinal notes. He worked with great precision in order to know completely what the sacred authors meant.

Last, even before his ordination to the priesthood, Origen was deeply dedicated to preaching the Bible and adapted himself to a varied public. In any case, the teacher can also be perceived in his *Homilies*, wholly dedicated as he was to the systematic interpretation of the passage under examination, which he analyzed step by step in the sequence of the verses.

Also in his *Homilies,* Origen took every opportunity to recall the different dimensions of the sense of Sacred Scripture that encourage or express a process of growth in the faith: there is the "literal" sense, but this conceals depths that are not immediately apparent. The second dimension is the "moral" sense: what we must do in living the Word; and finally, the "spiritual" sense, the unity of Scripture which throughout its development speaks of Christ.

It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to understand the christological content, hence, the unity in diversity of Scripture. It would be interesting to demonstrate this. I have made a humble attempt in my book *Jesus of Nazareth* to show in today's context these multiple dimensions of the Word, of Sacred Scripture, whose historical meaning must in the first place be respected.

But this sense transcends us, moving us toward God in the light of the Holy Spirit, and shows us the way, shows us how to live. Mention of it is found, for example, in the ninth *Homily on Numbers*, where Origen likens Scripture to [fresh] walnuts: "The doctrine of the Law and the Prophets at the school of Christ is like this," the homilist says; "the letter is bitter, like the [green-covered] skin; second, you will come to the shell, which is the moral doctrine; third, you will discover the meaning of the mysteries, with which the souls of the saints are nourished in the present life and the future" (*Hom. Num.* 9, 7).

It was especially on this route that Origen succeeded in effectively promoting the "Christian interpretation" of the Old Testament, brilliantly countering the challenge of the heretics, especially the Gnostics and Marcionites, who made the two Testaments disagree to the extent that they rejected the Old Testament.

In this regard, in the same *Homily on Numbers,* the Alexandrian says, "I do not call the law an 'Old Testament' if I understand it in the Spirit. The law becomes an 'Old Testament' only for those who wish to

understand it carnally," that is, for those who stop at the literal meaning of the text. But "for us, who understand it and apply it in the Spirit and in the gospel sense, the law is ever new, and the two Testaments are a new Testament for us, not because of their date in time but because of the newness of the meaning. . . . Instead, for the sinner and those who do not respect the covenant of love, even the gospels age" (cf. ibid., 9, 4).

I invite you—and so I conclude—to welcome into your hearts the teaching of this great master of faith. He reminds us with deep delight that in the prayerful reading of Scripture and in consistent commitment to life, the Church is ever renewed and rejuvenated. The Word of God, which never ages and is never exhausted, is a privileged means to this end. Indeed, it is the Word of God, through the action of the Holy Spirit, which always guides us to the whole truth (cf. Benedict XVI, *Address at the International Congress for the 50th Anniversary of* Dei Verbum, *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 21 September 2005, 7). And let us pray to the Lord that he will give us thinkers, theologians, and exegetes who discover this multifaceted dimension, this ongoing timeliness of Sacred Scripture, its newness for today. Let us pray that the Lord will help us to read Sacred Scripture in a prayerful way, to be truly nourished with the true Bread of Life, with his Word.

His Thought

We have examined the life and literary opus of the great Alexandrian teacher, identifying his threefold interpretation of the Bible as the life-giving nucleus of all his work. Now we take up two aspects of Origenian doctrine that I consider among the most important and timely: his teachings on prayer and the Church.

In fact, Origen—author of the important and ever timely treatise *On Prayer*—constantly interweaves his exegetical and theological writings with experiences and suggestions connected with prayer. Notwithstanding all the theological richness of his thought, his is never a purely academic approach; it is always founded on the experience of prayer, of contact with God. Indeed, to his mind, knowledge of the Scriptures requires prayer and intimacy with Christ even more than study. He was convinced that the best way to become acquainted with God is through love and that there is no authentic *scientia Christi* without falling in love with him.

In his *Letter to Gregory,* Origen recommends:

> Study first of all the *lectio* of the divine Scriptures. Study them, I say. For we need to study the divine writings deeply . . . and while you study these divine works with a believing and God-pleasing intention, knock

> at that which is closed in them and it shall be opened to you by the porter, of whom Jesus says, "To him the gatekeeper opens."
>
> While you attend to this *lectio divina*, seek aright and with unwavering faith in God the hidden sense which is present in most passages of the divine Scriptures. And do not be content with knocking and seeking, for what is absolutely necessary for understanding divine things is *oratio,* and in urging us to this the Savior says not only "knock and it will be opened to you," and "seek and you will find," but also "ask and it will be given you." (*Ep. Gr.* 4)

The "primordial role" played by Origen in the history of *lectio divina* instantly flashes before one's eyes. Bishop Ambrose of Milan, who learned from Origen's works to interpret the Scriptures, later introduced them into the West to hand them on to Augustine and to the monastic tradition that followed.

As we have already said, according to Origen the highest degree of knowledge of God stems from love. Therefore, this also applies for human beings: only if there is love, if hearts are opened, can one person truly know the other. Origen based his demonstration of this on a meaning that is sometimes attributed to the Hebrew verb *to know*, that is, when it is used to express the human act of love: "Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived" (Gen 4:1). This suggests that union in love secures the most authentic knowledge. Just as the man and the woman are "two in one flesh," so God and the believer become "two in one spirit."

The prayer of the Alexandrian thus attained the loftiest levels of mysticism, as is attested to by his *Homilies on the Song of Songs*. A passage is presented in which Origen confessed: "I have often felt—God is my witness—that the Bridegroom came to me in the most exalted way. Then he suddenly left, and I was unable to find what I was seeking. Once again, I am taken by the desire for his coming and sometimes he returns, and when he has appeared to me, when I hold him with my hands, once again he flees from me, and when he has vanished I start again to seek him" (*Hom. in Cant.* 1, 7).

I remember what my venerable predecessor wrote as an authentic witness in *Novo Millennio Ineunte,* where he showed the faithful "how prayer can progress, as a genuine dialogue of love, to the point of rendering the person wholly possessed by the divine Beloved, vibrating at the Spirit's touch, resting filially within the Father's heart."

"It is," John Paul II continues, "a journey totally sustained by grace, which nonetheless demands an intense spiritual commitment and is no stranger to painful purifications. . . . But it leads, in various possible ways, to the ineffable joy experienced by mystics as 'nuptial union'" (n. 33).

Finally, we come to one of Origen's teachings on the Church, and precisely—within it—on the common priesthood of the faithful. In fact, as the Alexandrian affirms in his ninth *Homily on Leviticus,* "This discourse concerns us all" (*Hom. in Lev.* 9, 1). In the same *Homily*, Origen, referring to Aaron's prohibition, after the death of his two sons, from entering the *Sancta sanctorum* "at all times" (Lev 16:2), thus warned the faithful:

> This shows that if anyone were to enter the sanctuary at any time without being properly prepared and wearing priestly attire, without bringing the prescribed offerings and making himself favorable to God, he would die. . . .
>
> This discourse concerns us all. It requires us, in fact, to know how to accede to God's altar. Oh, do you not know that the priesthood has been conferred upon you too, that is, upon the entire Church of God and believing people? Listen to how Peter speaks to the faithful: "Chosen race," he says, "royal, priestly, holy nation, people whom God has ransomed."
>
> You therefore possess the priesthood because you are "a priestly race" and must thus offer the sacrifice to God. . . . But to offer it with dignity, you need garments that are pure and different from the common clothes of other men, and you need the divine fire. (ibid.)

Thus, on the one hand, "girded" and in "priestly attire" mean purity and honesty of life, and on the other, with the "lamp ever alight," that is, faith and knowledge of the Scriptures, we have the indispensable conditions for the exercise of the universal priesthood, which demands purity and an honest life, faith, and knowledge of the Scriptures.

For the exercise of the ministerial priesthood, there is of course all the more reason why such conditions should be indispensable.

These conditions—a pure and virtuous life, but above all the acceptance and study of the Word—establish a true and proper "hierarchy of holiness" in the common priesthood of Christians. At the peak of this ascent of perfection, Origen places martyrdom. Again, in his ninth *Homily on Leviticus,* he alludes to the "fire for the holocaust," that is, to faith and knowledge of the Scriptures which must never be extinguished on the altar of the person who exercises the priesthood. He then adds: "But each one of us has within him" not only the fire; but he "also has the holocaust and from his holocaust lights the altar so that it may burn forever. If I renounce all my possessions, take up my cross, and follow Christ, I offer my holocaust on the altar of God; and if I give up my body to be burned with love and achieve the glory of martyrdom, I offer my holocaust on the altar of God" (*Hom. in Lev.* 9, 9).

This tireless journey to perfection "concerns us all," in order that "the gaze of our hearts" may turn to contemplate Wisdom and Truth, which are Jesus Christ. Preaching on Jesus' discourse in Nazareth—when "the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him" (cf. Lk 4:16-30)—Origen seems to be addressing us:

> Today, too, if you so wished, in this assembly your eyes can be fixed on the Savior.
>
> In fact, it is when you turn the deepest gaze of your heart to the contemplation of Wisdom, Truth, and the only Son of God that your eyes will see God. Happy the assembly of which Scripture attests that the eyes of all were fixed upon him!
>
> How I would like this assembly here to receive a similar testimony, and the eyes of all—the non-baptized and the faithful, women, men, and children—to look at Jesus, not the eyes of the body but those of the soul! . . .
>
> Impress upon us the light of your face, O Lord, to whom be the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen! (*Hom. in Lk* 32: 6)

—25 April and 2 May 2007

Tertullian

We continue to speak of the ancient Church's great personalities. They are teachers of the faith also for us today and witnesses of the perennial timeliness of the Christian faith.

I wish to discuss now an African, Tertullian, who from the end of the second and beginning of the third century inaugurated Christian literature in the Latin language. He started the use of theology in Latin. His work brought decisive benefits that it would be unforgivable to underestimate. His influence covered different areas: linguistically, from the use of language and the recovery of classical culture, to singling out a common "Christian soul" in the world and in the formulation of new proposals of human coexistence.

We do not know the exact dates of Tertullian's birth and death. Instead, we know that at Carthage, toward the end of the second century, he received a solid education in rhetoric, philosophy, history, and law from his pagan parents and tutors. He then converted to Christianity, attracted, so it seems, by the example of the Christian martyrs.

He began to publish his most famous writings in 197. But a too-individualistic search for the truth, together with his intransigent character—he was a rigorous man—gradually led him away from communion with the Church to belong to the Montanist sect. The originality of his thought, however, together with an incisive efficacy of language, assured him a high position in ancient Christian literature.

Tertullian's apologetic writings are above all the most famous. They manifest two key intentions: to refute the grave accusations that pagans directed against the new religion; and, more proactive and missionary, to proclaim the gospel message in dialogue with the culture of the time.

His most famous work, *Apologeticus*, denounces the unjust behavior of political authorities toward the Church; explains and defends the teachings and customs of Christians; spells out differences between the new religion and the main philosophical currents of the time; and manifests the triumph of the Spirit that counters its persecutors with the blood, suffering, and patience of the martyrs: "Refined as it is," the African writes, "your cruelty serves no purpose. On the contrary, for our community, it is an invitation. We multiply every time one of us is mowed down. The blood of Christians is effective seed" (*semen est sanguis christianorum! Apologeticus* 50, 13).

Martyrdom, suffering for the truth, is in the end victorious and more efficient than the cruelty and violence of totalitarian regimes.

But Tertullian, as every good apologist, at the same time sensed the need to communicate the essence of Christianity positively. This is why he adopted the speculative method to illustrate the rational foundations of Christian dogma. He developed it in a systematic way, beginning with the description of "the God of the Christians": "He whom we adore," the Apologist wrote, "is the one, only God." And he continued, using antitheses and paradoxes characteristic of his language: "He is invisible even if you see him; difficult to grasp even if he is present through grace; inconceivable even if the human senses can perceive him; therefore, he is true and great!" (cf. ibid., 17, 1–2).

Furthermore, Tertullian takes an enormous step in the development of Trinitarian dogma. He has given us an appropriate way to express this great mystery in Latin by introducing the terms "one substance" and "three persons." In a similar way, he also greatly developed the correct language to express the mystery of Christ, Son of God and true Man.

The Holy Spirit is also considered in the African's writings, demonstrating his personal and divine character: "We believe that, according to his promise, Jesus Christ sent, by means of his Father, the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, the sanctifier of the faith of all those who believe in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (ibid., 2, 1).

Again, there are in Tertullian's writings numerous texts on the Church, whom he always recognizes as "mother." Even after his acceptance of Montanism, he did not forget that the Church is the mother of our faith and Christian life.

He even considers the moral conduct of Christians and the future life. His writings are important, as they also show the practical trends in the Christian community regarding Mary most holy, the sacraments of the eucharist, matrimony, and reconciliation, Petrine primacy, prayer. . . . In a special way, in those times of persecution when Christians seemed to be a lost minority, the Apologist exhorted them to hope, which in his treatises is not simply a virtue in itself but something that involves every aspect of Christian existence.

We have the hope that the future is ours because the future is God's. Therefore, the Lord's Resurrection is presented as the foundation of our future resurrection and represents the main object of the Christian's *confidence*: "And so the flesh shall rise again," the African categorically affirms, "wholly in every man, in its own identity, in its absolute integrity. Wherever it may be, it is in safe keeping in God's presence, through that most faithful Mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ, who shall reconcile both God to man and man to God" (*Concerning the Resurrection of the Flesh,* 63, 1).

From the human viewpoint, one can undoubtedly speak of Tertullian's own drama. With the passing of years he became increasingly

exigent in regard to the Christians. He demanded heroic behavior from them in every circumstance, above all under persecution. Rigid in his positions, he did not withhold blunt criticism, and he inevitably ended by finding himself isolated.

Many questions still remain open today, not only on Tertullian's theological and philosophical thought, but also on his attitude in regard to political institutions and pagan society. This great moral and intellectual personality, this man who made such a great contribution to Christian thought, makes me think deeply. One sees that in the end he lacked the simplicity, the humility to integrate himself with the Church, to accept his weaknesses, to be forbearing with others and himself.

When one only sees his thought in all its greatness, in the end, it is precisely this greatness that is lost. The essential characteristic of a great theologian is the humility to remain with the Church, to accept his own and others' weaknesses, because actually only God is all holy. We, instead, always need forgiveness.

Finally, the African remains an interesting witness of the early times of the Church, when Christians found they were the authentic protagonists of a "new culture" in the critical confrontation between the classical heritage and the gospel message.

In his famous affirmation according to which our soul "is *naturally* Christian" (*Apologeticus* 17, 6), Tertullian evokes the perennial continuity between authentic human values and Christian ones. Also in his other reflection borrowed directly from the gospel, according to which "the Christian cannot hate, not even his enemies" (cf. *Apologeticus* 37), is found the unavoidable moral resolve, the choice of faith which proposes "nonviolence" as the rule of life. Indeed, no one can escape the dramatic aptness of this teaching, also in light of the heated debate on religions.

In summary, the treatises of this African trace many themes that we are still called to face today. They involve us in a fruitful interior examination to which I exhort all the faithful, so that they may know how to express in an always more convincing manner the *rule of faith,* which—again, referring to Tertullian—"prescribes the belief that there is only one God and that he is none other than the Creator of the world, who produced all things out of nothing through his own Word, generated before all things" (cf. *Concerning the Prescription of Heretics* 13, 1).

—30 May 2007

St. Cyprian

We come now to an excellent African bishop of the third century, St. Cyprian, "the first bishop in Africa to obtain the crown of martyrdom." His fame, Pontius the Deacon, his first biographer, attests, is also linked to his literary corpus and pastoral activity during the thirteen years between his conversion and his martyrdom (cf. *Life and Passion of St. Cyprian* 19, 1; 1, 1).

Cyprian was born in Carthage into a rich pagan family. After a dissipated youth, he converted to Christianity at the age of thirty-five. He himself often told of his spiritual journey, "When I was still lying in darkness and gloomy night," he wrote a few months after his baptism,

> I used to regard it as extremely difficult and demanding to do what God's mercy was suggesting to me. I myself was held in bonds by the innumerable errors of my previous life, from which I did not believe I could possibly be delivered, so I was disposed to acquiesce in my clinging vices and to indulge my sins. . . .
>
> But after that, by the help of the water of new birth, the stain of my former life was washed away, and a light from above, serene and pure, was infused into my reconciled heart. . . . A second birth restored me to a new man. Then, in a wondrous manner every doubt began to fade. . . . I clearly understood that what had first lived within me, enslaved by the vices of the flesh, was earthly and that what, instead, the Holy Spirit had wrought within me was divine and heavenly. (*Ad Donatum,* 3–4)

Immediately after his conversion, despite envy and resistance, Cyprian was chosen for the priestly office and raised to the dignity of bishop. In the brief period of his episcopacy, he had to face the first two persecutions sanctioned by imperial decree: that of Decius (250) and that of Valerian (257–258).

After the particularly harsh persecution of Decius, the bishop had to work strenuously to restore order to the Christian community. Indeed, many of the faithful had abjured or at any rate had not behaved correctly when put to the test. They were the so-called *lapsi*—that is, the "fallen"—who ardently desired to be readmitted to the community.

The debate on their readmission actually divided the Christians of Carthage into laxists and rigorists. These difficulties were compounded by a serious epidemic of the plague, which swept through Africa and gave rise to anguished theological questions both within the community and in the confrontation with pagans. Last, the controversy between St.

Cyprian and Stephen, bishop of Rome, concerning the validity of baptism administered to pagans by heretical Christians, must not be forgotten.

In these truly difficult circumstances, Cyprian revealed his choice gifts of government: he was severe but not inflexible with the *lapsi,* granting them the possibility of forgiveness after exemplary repentance. Before Rome, he staunchly defended the healthy traditions of the African Church; he was deeply human and steeped with the most authentic gospel spirit when he urged Christians to offer brotherly assistance to pagans during the plague; he knew how to maintain the proper balance when reminding the faithful—excessively afraid of losing their lives and their earthly possessions—that true life and true goods are not those of this world; he was implacable in combating corrupt morality and the sins that devastated moral life, especially avarice.

"Thus he spent his days," Pontius the Deacon tells at this point, "when at the bidding of the proconsul, the officer with his soldiers all of a sudden came unexpectedly upon him in his grounds" (*Life and Passion of St. Cyprian* 15, 1). On that day, the holy bishop was arrested and, after being questioned briefly, courageously faced martyrdom in the midst of his people.

The numerous treatises and letters that Cyprian wrote were always connected with his pastoral ministry. Little inclined to theological speculation, he wrote above all for the edification of the community and to encourage the good conduct of the faithful.

Indeed, the Church was easily his favorite subject. Cyprian distinguished between the *visible,* hierarchical Church and the *invisible*, mystical Church but forcefully affirmed that the Church is one, founded on Peter. He never wearied of repeating that "if a man deserts the Chair of Peter upon whom the Church was built, does he think that he is in the Church?" (cf. *De unit.* [*On the Unity of the Catholic Church*] 4).

Cyprian knew well that "outside the Church there is no salvation" and said so in strong words (*Epistles* 4, 4 and 73, 21); and he knew that "no one can have God as Father who does not have the Church as mother" (*De unit.* 6). An indispensable characteristic of the Church is unity, symbolized by Christ's seamless garment (ibid., 7). Cyprian said this unity is founded on Peter (ibid., 4) and finds its perfect fulfillment in the eucharist (*Epistle* 63, 13).

"God is one and Christ is one," Cyprian cautioned, "and his Church is one, and the faith is one, and the Christian people is joined into a substantial unity of body by the cement of concord. Unity cannot be severed. And what is one by its nature cannot be separated" (*De unit.* 23).

We have spoken of his thought on the Church but, last, let us not forget Cyprian's teaching on prayer. I am particularly fond of his treatise on the Our Father, which has been a great help to me in understanding and reciting the Lord's Prayer better.

Cyprian teaches that it is precisely in the Lord's Prayer that the proper way to pray is presented to Christians. And he stresses that this prayer is in the plural in order that "the person who prays it might not pray for himself alone. Our prayer," he wrote, "is public and common; and when we pray, we pray not for one, but for the whole people, because we the whole people, are one (*De Dom. orat.* [*Treatise on the Lord's Prayer*] 8).

Thus, personal and liturgical prayer seem to be strongly bound. Their unity stems from the fact that they respond to the same Word of God. The Christian does not say "*my* Father" but "*our* Father," even in the secrecy of a closed room, because he knows that in every place, on every occasion, he is a member of one and the same Body.

"Therefore let us pray, beloved Brethren," Cyprian wrote,

> as God our Teacher has taught us. It is a trusting and intimate prayer to beseech God with his own word, to raise to his ears the prayer of Christ. Let the Father acknowledge the words of his Son when we pray, and let him also who dwells within our breast himself dwell in our voice. . . .
>
> But let our speech and petition when we pray be under discipline, observing quietness and modesty. Let us consider that we are standing in God's sight. We must please the divine eyes both with the position of the body and with the measure of voice. . . .
>
> Moreover, when we meet together with the brethren in one place, and celebrate divine sacrifices with God's priest, we ought to be mindful of modesty and discipline—not to throw abroad our prayers indiscriminately, with unsubdued voices, nor to cast to God with tumultuous wordiness a petition that ought to be commended to God by modesty; for God is the hearer, not of the voice, but of the heart *(non vocis sed cordis auditor est)*. (3–4)

Today too, these words still apply and help us to celebrate the holy liturgy well. Ultimately, Cyprian placed himself at the root of that fruitful theological and spiritual tradition which sees the "heart" as the privileged place for prayer.

Indeed, in accordance with the Bible and the Fathers, the heart refers to the intimate depths of the person, the place in which God dwells. In it occurs the encounter in which God speaks to man, and man listens to God; man speaks to God and God listens to man. All this happens through one divine Word. In this very sense—re-echoing Cyprian—Smaragdus, Abbot of St. Michael on the Meuse in the early years of the ninth century, attests that prayer "is the work of the heart, not of the lips, because God does not look at the words but at the heart of the person praying" (*Diadema monachorum* [*Diadem of the monks*] 1).

Let us make our own this receptive heart and "understanding mind" of which the Bible (cf. 1 Kgs 3:9) and the Fathers speak. How great is our need for it! Only then will we be able to experience fully that God is our Father and that the Church, the holy Bride of Christ, is truly our Mother.

—*6 June 2007*

Eusebius of Caesarea

In the history of early Christianity, there is a fundamental distinction between the first three centuries and those that followed the Council of Nicaea in 325, the First Ecumenical Council. Like a "hinge" between the two periods are the so-called conversion of Constantine and the peace of the Church, as well as the figure of Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea in Palestine. He was the most highly qualified exponent of the Christian culture of his time in very varied contexts, from theology to exegesis, from history to erudition. Eusebius is known above all as the first historian of Christianity, but he was also the greatest philologist of the ancient Church.

It was to Caesarea, where Eusebius was born probably in about the year 260, that Origen had fled from Alexandria. And in Caesarea, Origen founded a school and a huge library. A few decades later, the young Eusebius educated himself with these books. In 325, as bishop of Caesarea, he played a lead role at the Council of Nicaea. He signed the creed and the affirmation of the full divinity of the Son of God, who is consequently defined as "one in being with the Father" (*homooúsios tõ Patrí*). The creed we recite every Sunday in the holy liturgy is practically the same.

A sincere admirer of Constantine, who had given peace to the Church, Eusebius in turn was esteemed and respected by Constantine. As well as with his works, Eusebius also celebrated the emperor with panegyrics, which he delivered on the twentieth and thirtieth anniversary of Constantine's ascendance to the throne and upon his death in the year 337. Two or three years later, Eusebius died too.

Eusebius was an indefatigable scholar. In his numerous writings, he resolved to reflect and to give an up-to-date report on the three centuries of Christianity, three centuries lived under persecution, drawing abundantly on the Christian and pagan sources preserved in particular in the great library of Caesarea. Thus, despite the objective importance of his apologetic, exegetical, and doctrinal works, the imperishable fame of Eusebius is still mainly associated with the ten books of his *Ecclesiastical History*. He was the first person to write a history of the Church that continues to be of fundamental importance, thanks to the sources which Eusebius made available to us forever. With this chronicle, he succeeded in saving from the doom of oblivion numerous events, important figures, and literary works of the ancient Church. Thus, his work is a primary source of knowledge of the early centuries of Christianity.

We might wonder how he structured this new work and what his intentions were in compiling it. At the beginning of his first book, the historian lists in detail the topics he intends to treat in his work:

> It is my purpose to write an account of the succession of the holy Apostles, as well as of the times which have elapsed from the days of our Savior to our own; and to relate the many important events which are said to have occurred in the history of the Church; and to mention those who have governed and presided over the Church in the most prominent dioceses and those who in each generation have proclaimed the divine Word either orally or in writing.
>
> It is my purpose also to give the names and number and times of those who through love of innovation have run into the greatest errors, and, proclaiming themselves interpreters and promoters of a false doctrine have, like fierce wolves, unmercifully devastated the flock of Christ . . . and to record the ways and the times in which the divine word has been attacked by the Gentiles, and to describe the character of the great men who in various periods have defended it in the face of blood and of tortures . . . and finally, the mercy and benevolence which our Savior has afforded them all. (cf. 1, 1, 1–3)

Thus, Eusebius embraced different spheres: the succession of the Apostles as the backbone of the Church, the dissemination of the message, the errors and then persecutions on the part of the pagans, and the important testimonies which are the light in this chronicle.

In all this Eusebius saw the Savior's mercy and benevolence. So it was that he inaugurated, as it were, ecclesiastical historiography, extending his account to 324, the year in which Constantine, after defeating Licinius, was acclaimed as the one emperor of Rome. This was the year before the important Council of Nicaea, which subsequently offered the "summa" of all that the Church—doctrinally, morally, and also juridically—had learned in the previous three hundred years.

The citation we have just quoted, from the first book of the *Ecclesiastical History*, contains a repetition that is certainly intentional. The christological title *Savior* recurs three times in the space of a few lines with an explicit reference to "his mercy" and "his benevolence."

Thus, we can grasp the fundamental perspective of Eusebian historiography: his is a "Christocentric" history, in which the mystery of God's love for humankind is gradually revealed.

Eusebius recognized with genuine amazement that

> Jesus alone of all those who have ever existed is even to the present day called Christ [that is Messiah and Savior of the world] by all men throughout the world, and is confessed and witnessed to under this name, and is commemorated both by Greeks and Barbarians and even to this day is honored as a king by his followers throughout the world, and is admired as more than a prophet, and is glorified as the true and only High Priest of God. And besides all this, as the preexistent *Logos*

> of God, called into being before all ages, he has received august honor from the Father, and is worshiped and adored as God. But most wonderful of all is the fact that we who have consecrated ourselves to him honor him not only with our voices and with the sound of words, but also with complete elevation of soul, so that we choose to give testimony unto him rather than to preserve our own lives. (cf. 1, 3, 19–20)

Another feature thus springs to the fore that was to remain a constant in ancient ecclesiastical historiography: it is the "moral intention" that presides in the account. Historical analysis is never an end in itself; it is not made solely with a view to knowing the past; rather, it focuses decisively on conversion and on an authentic witness of Christian life on the part of the faithful. It is a guide for us too.

Thus, Eusebius strongly challenges believers of all times on their approach to the events of history and of the Church in particular. He also challenges us: what is our attitude with regard to the Church's experiences? Is it the attitude of those who are interested in it merely out of curiosity, or even in search of something sensational or shocking at all costs? Or is it an attitude full of love and open to the mystery of those who know—through faith—that they can trace in the history of the Church those signs of God's love and the great works of salvation wrought by him? If this is our attitude, we can only feel stimulated to a more coherent and generous response, to a more Christian witness of life, in order to bequeath the signs of God's love also to the generations to come.

"There is a mystery," Cardinal Jean Daniélou, an eminent Patristics scholar, never tired of saying: "History has a hidden content. . . . The mystery is that of God's works which constitute in time the authentic reality concealed behind the appearances. . . . However, this history which he brings about for man, God does not bring about without him. Pausing to contemplate the 'great things' worked by God would mean seeing only one aspect of things. The human response lies before them" (*Saggio sul mistero della storia,* Italian edition [Brescia, 1963], 182).

Today, too, so many centuries later, Eusebius of Caesarea invites believers, invites us, to wonder, to contemplate in history the great works of God for the salvation of humankind. And just as energetically, he invites us to conversion of life. Indeed, we cannot remain inert before a God who has so deeply loved us. The specific demand of love is that our entire life should be oriented to the imitation of the Beloved. Let us therefore spare no effort to leave a transparent trace of God's love in our life.

—13 June 2007