

Theology of the Church Fathers

Church Structure part 2

The theology of the structure of the church developed rather quickly. As early as the letters of St. Paul we already see a rather robust understanding of the various level of the church hierarchy as well as the a general understanding of the nature of the church. As an example, St. Paul's *Letter to the Ephesians* was the core document through which St. Thomas Aquinas described the nature of the Church in his commentary on the letter. Since the beginning, a basic understanding of the Church was already on the minds of the people and put into action in their lives.

The Church

We need to start this discussion of the theology of the structure of the Church from the highest vantage point: The Church herself. We can imagine that as the church grew and spread across the Roman Empire that the individual communities would become isolated. We extrapolate that the divisions in the Christian churches today would be even more prevalent given that they are separated by large geographical spaces. Yet even with this separation and the challenges of union across the empire, especially during times of persecution, the Church remained united. How? How were they able to keep their union in the midst of so many challenges? The answer is simple: the Christians understood their faith as united in Jesus. Each local church was not a separate entity struggling against the challenges of the world but as part of a greater whole. They saw their struggles and challenges not as the problems of one area but as a shared experience across the Church. Union in Jesus was more than a mental construct or an eschatological idea, it was the reality of being a Christian. Therefore, to the early church, the Church was a spiritual unity that brought all Christians together as one body and united them as one.

The spiritual reality of the Church was far grander than a felt experience among the living Christians. The dead and the saints were as much a part of the church as the living people who inhabited their churches. Praying for the dead, asking for intercession from the martyrs, and remembering those saints who are in heaven made present to the people the reality of the Church as both a temporal and eternal reality, as both earthly and heavenly at the same time.

Unity in Jesus was more than a spiritual gathering of all the faithful in a common communion. Unity in Jesus meant a share faith, shared truth, a moral code, a way of living, and a common spiritual experience. The Mass united the people together as one people. Whenever they went to pray, and especially in union with their bishop, they are the Body of Christ present to the world and acting as one. This special union that Jesus offered made the Christian a Christian, it gave him an identity, caused her to take on a new persona to the world, and showed forth in the faithful the presence of God.

Lastly the Church was a heavenly reality. Everything we experience now is merely a shadow or image of the true nature of things to come. The Church existed in its fullness in Heaven and we are tending to that reality. The whole point of the Church, its mission, was to prepare people for Heaven and union with God. Therefore the Church existed in mission. Every Christian felt the

call to go and make disciples, to evangelize, to spread the message of the Gospel, and to bring more people into the fold. The images used to describe this reality included an ark, a ship sailing through the world to get to harbor, a herald, the calling of people into the fold, and a house or temple, in which the Holy Spirit dwelt.

The early church has a strong sense of the nature of the church as both an earthly and heavenly reality, as temporal and spiritual. This greater sense of union with Jesus united the churches across the world into one common communion, one reality, one brotherhood. But the church was more than a common communion. Her communion included a structure, a hierarchy, a way of life, and a code of belief. All these things made up the reality of the Church.

The Bishops

Who are the bishops? In a general sense, they are the leaders of the Church. But we need to dive deeper. Some people limited the bishops to this administrative role but most did not. The bishops were God's delegates to the world. Through them, the will of God was made manifest to the people. The bishops taught the true faith, preached the Gospel, were heralds of the message of Jesus, and the stewards of the graces of God. The bishops were the successors of the Apostles and their spiritual descendants. They held the keys to the kingdom of God and could dispense graces at their will in union with Jesus.

Even from the time of St. Paul, the bishops were held in such high regard and so valuable to the good of the church that strong boundaries were placed around them. St. Paul writes that anyone who is chosen to be a bishop must be married only once, be a good manager of his household, and a man of good character. Later, greater weight was placed on those who became bishops. Celibacy was required as early as the 2nd century to maintain challenges with duplicity in their lives and to encourage conformity with the life of Jesus. Anyone who sought the office of bishop was denied it. The theory was that no one should seek the office of bishop since it should only be given to one humble enough to realize its weight. A bishop was supposed to be a man of great acclaim who could preach well, orthodox in the faith, and a good administrator. Usually the people elect their own bishops, which had mixed results.

The Priests

For the first two centuries, the priesthood was seen in connection with the bishops. The priests would advise the bishop, help with administration, and assist with the Sacraments. As we enter into the 4th century, the shift to a full Sacramental understanding of the priesthood is already underway. By the time of St. John Chrysostom, the priesthood is fleshed out into a Sacramental reality. Priests were those set aside from the people to offer the Sacrifice, Mass, and to guide the people spiritually. As we turn back to the *Letter to the Hebrews*, the priesthood is connected to the priesthood of Jesus who offered himself on the wood of the Cross for our salvation. In the same way, the priest offers himself for the Church, in union with Jesus, for the salvation of the world.

Any man who sought to be a priest was denied the opportunity with the understanding that he misunderstood the weight of this responsibility. Much like the office of the bishop, those seeking

priesthood needed a level of humility in order to take on this responsibility. Priests of the early church struggled on many levels. They were the target of the Roman ire as Rome wanted to take out the hierarchy. The people saw them as less than the bishops and could therefore treat them as less. They often struggled to maintain pastoral care of their flock. The early church is remarkably silent on the life of a common priest compared to that of a bishop.

The Deacons

The diaconate remained largely unchanged since its institution by the Apostles. It was not held to the same regard or dignity as a priest or bishop. Deacons were servants of the church and their role was to assist the bishops and priests in their role as spiritual providers for the people. Deacons were usually used as intermediaries to higher ranks. The pope had seven deacons whom he sent as emissaries or to help with administration in the church. These deacons often became the successors of the pope.

The laity

However much we do not focus on the value and importance of the laity today, it was highly esteemed in the early church. The laity formed the fullness of the church. When the laity were united with their bishop, the full church was present. No one thought that the church was simply the bishop or the priest, regardless of their value as the intermediaries between God and man or as leaders of the church. A bishop needed people and the people needed the bishop. A priest needed his flock and the flock needed a shepherd. The two had to be connected and integrally united to be the Church.

The laity, the people of God, were as much responsible for the good of the church as the bishops. They had a mission, a purpose. They were expected to go and evangelize and bring people to the Church. They were expected to be at Masses, conferences of the bishops, celebrate the Holy Days, and perform spiritual works of their own. The early church highly prized the laity as the earliest martyrs, the great witnesses to the faith, and the spiritual support of the bishops and priests. The Church was simply not complete without them.

Did the laity have any power? Yes. On a basic level, the laity gave financial and spiritual support to the church and especially its hierarchy. Yet, their power extends beyond physical means. Often the laity either chose or approved a bishop or priest sent to them. This had mixed results. Often the bishops and the priests could not exercise their pastoral care without the support of the laity. They needed the people to respect and obey them before they could become their shepherd. The laity also stood behind their bishops stopping the government from taking over churches, imposing harsh rules, or even killing their bishops. The laity were hugely influential in the early church in both their support of the church in general and the hierarchy.

St. John Chrysostom

John was born in 347 in Antioch, modern day Turkey. We know nothing about his early life until at around the age of 20 he was baptized. He studied rhetoric and Greek under the pagan teacher

Libanius. When Libanius lay dying, he said to John, you would have been his successor and a master of rhetoric “if the Christians had not stolen him from us.” John was a gifted orator and a master of words giving him the title “Chrysostom,” which means “golden-tongued.

After years of poor health, he returned to Antioch and was ordained a priest. Now those years of studying rhetoric and Scripture were put to use. At the cathedral in Antioch he began to preach. People came from all over to hear him preach. Although his themes were not always easy to hear, the way he preached them softened their blow so that people could accept and use them.

In 397 he was nominated archbishop of Constantinople against his will. As patriarch, archbishop, he saw the wealth of the people of the city as a scandal. His mouth was opened and he preached against it. He reminded people of the Gospel message and the necessity of not withholding wealth from the poor and those who are starving. He deposed corrupt bishops who refused to help the poor, sought after wealth, and only cared about themselves. This style of preaching didn't make him many friends. Instead it incited the bishops and the nobles against him. Yet, since he was such a highly prized bishop by the people and such an elegant preacher, they couldn't do anything, yet.

Everything changed when he began to preach against the extravagance of the court of Empress Eudoxia. Her conscience now prickled, she went against Patriarch John. John was sent into exile but it was short lived. The people protested, so he returned from exile. Next, he was exiled again for preaching against the silver statue of Eudoxia that she erected. During this second bout of exile, he died due to poor health.

On the Priesthood

This work is one of the few surviving works by this influential bishop. The work describes the priesthood and the challenges inherent in it. He wrote this work as a warning to men pursuing the priesthood so that they would understand the challenges they face and make a good decision. The book is written as a dialogue with his friend Basil. The most common themes including humility, the sacrifice of the priesthood, and the reality of service in the church. St. John states that a man should only approach this office from a place of humility realizing that it unites him to the death of Jesus and not for gain or glory. The sacrifice of the priesthood means that the people are going to be upset and hate you. Lastly, service in the church is not easy. You may think that you have power when you really will not. The book is challenging to read as St. John wants to make clear some of the more distressing or disturbing parts of the life in the Church.