

Theology of the Church Fathers

Theology part 1

Introduction

The Church Fathers wrote a vast array of different kinds of texts based on the faith. As we have already discovered, these texts range from introductions to the Sacraments, spiritual works, homilies, and commentaries on Scripture. Although these texts are highly praised and some of the greatest examples of these genera in church history, no type of genera stands out amongst the Church Fathers like their theological texts. Their theology is grouped into two main types of writings: the defense of the faith and the exposition on the faith. Over the next two sessions, we will explore both of these types of writings in greater depth.

As we prepare to enter into the world of the theology of the Church Fathers, I feel it necessary to set the historical stage in such a way as to appreciate their purpose for writing and the scope of their study. Remember: the church's theology was developed by the Church Fathers. This means that most of them did not have dogmatic statements from which to work, other theologians to help them discern the way of God, or even the basics of the faith to give them boundaries. Instead, they developed the theology of the Church. When a pagan philosopher challenged the teachings of the church, the fathers needed to respond. When a local bishop, patriarch, or group of Christians was struggling with the Christian message, the fathers wrote to inspire and encourage the true faith. They responded to each need in the church through their writings so as to form the core beliefs of the Christian faith.

Christianity for the first six hundred years was not easy. The newly formed religion had a basis in the Jewish faith but was also very different from it. Although they had the historical and biblical foundation in Judaism, the Jews rejected them. Jesus didn't give a clear design or a formed theology from which to understand the basic message he preached. Their only sources were the teachings of the Apostles, the lived experience of the Christian people, and the Scriptures. Therefore, the theological writings of the Fathers are deeply Scriptural for both sources and inspiration.

From these early inspirations comes the bulk of the teachings of the Christian faith. What do we believe about God? How can God be three persons and yet one God? What do we believe about the nature of the Church and who we are? What are the Sacraments? How ought a Christian person to live? And so much more.

Theology as Defense

The world of the early church was a great challenge. The Jews didn't feel any need to evangelize, spread their faith, convert people, or even to defend their faith. The fact of their long history and continued survival was enough proof of the validity of their faith. Their faith was so strong that they were able to get the Roman government to give them an allowance to not worship the idols or participate in the Roman cultic practices. The only religion to be given this allowance. The

Roman cultic religions were strange in comparison to the monotheistic religions of their time. A central authority, central teachings or theology, or even a centralized form of worship was largely absent. Each local region had their own cultic deities whom they worshipped and in the style of that local area. The pantheon of deities held together the Roman cultic practices. Some practices permeated the entire region but these were largely based on the emperor and his desires. Within the pantheon of deities and their forms of worship was a second form of Roman beliefs called the philosophers. These philosophical movements ranged in the scope and the depth of their teachings. Some were widespread whereas others were localized; some were historically very strong whereas others were relatively new; some had a depth of reasoning and thought and others were relatively simple. This range in the philosophical movements shows the incredible diversity within the Roman society.

Christianity was an outlier to everything. This new religion proclaimed messages largely foreign to any of the world around it. Christianity was a religion on the move. Their desire was to spread the message and make converts. None of the religions and only some of the philosophical movements attempted to shape the world around them. Christianity proclaimed that God has come to be with us and lived among us. Only the Roman cultic religions had stories of demi-gods, not God, who walked among us. Some storied claimed that the Greek and Roman gods interacted with humans but not in good ways. Christianity proclaimed a message of truth. Truth works when it works. The philosophers of their time also claimed truth and a truth from reason. Therefore when the Roman philosophers and the Christians intellectuals met, debates raged.

What was the church to do against the pagan philosophers? These philosophers held to the idea that religions were simply a set of fables like the stories of the Greco-Roman gods or even the Jewish faith. Religion was not an intellectual pursuit but a series of stories and ideas. Christianity didn't have the weight of reason of those of the philosophers. In order to get any traction with these philosophers and stand on the belief that Christianity was more than a set of fables or stories and worthy of the title of true, the Church Fathers needed more.

By the turn of the 2nd century the Church Fathers had entered into a novel and new age within the scope of religion. In order to be viable as a religion of truth or as worth the intellectual elites of their era, the Church Fathers needed defenses of the Christian faith. Simple adages, stories, or statements were simply not enough. For too long religion was held captive to superstitions and the belief that religion was for the simpleton who needed only to believe. On this platform the Church Fathers would change the world. By combining rhetoric, logic, philosophy, and religion into one, they promoted, proclaimed, and advanced Christianity in ways that no other religion of the world would have dared. Christianity was now an intellectual religion with the power to defend itself against philosophers and the intellectual elite. Christianity was no longer a religion of stories but a religion founded on reasoned arguments, consistent teachings, and proofs for the defense of the faith. These new writings shaped the Christian faith and gave it a foundation that would help it to weather heresies, history, controversies, and its numerous antagonists.

Apologies

The Church Fathers wrote a specific kind of text called an “apology.” Unfortunately for us, this word has a totally different meaning from its historical use. Today we use the word “apology” to describe something we did wrong and want to rectify. In that usage, an “apology” by the early church seems like they are concluding that Christianity is wrong and therefore we are showing sorrow and contrition for our errors. This is far from the truth. Another way to define “apology” is as a defense. The historical use of the word “apology” is to defend the teachings or beliefs of a movement against those who criticize it.

How to read these defenses of the faith

These works of the Church Fathers can be some of the most challenging texts to read. We often are unfamiliar with the historical situation that led to writing these texts. To whom were they responding? What was the central issue? Yet, even without that setting we can still manage to read them. The second issue with reading these texts is that they tend to be dense and specific. Whereas many of the other texts we have read were meant to be read by Christians or people who were new to the faith, these texts are meant for the intellectual elite. The wording, word choice, and the technical language can be a challenge for novice readers. Yet, in the midst of this challenge are some of the most specific and grounded defenses of the faith.

Although they might be a challenge to read, taking the time to ponder their teachings is valuable. More often today than in the previous centuries we are also required to defend our faith and the basics of Christianity. The same reasons that led to the fathers writing these texts are the same issues we will find today. These writings can give us the reasons, the logic, and the Scriptural references we need to defend our faith.

St. Athanasius

Alexandria, Egypt was known for being an intellectual center for both the Greek and Roman world. Alexander the Great built his famous Library of Alexandria in this city and from this starting point the intellectual elites of the world saw this place as the center for learning in the Greek and later Roman worlds. Into this context St. Athanasius was born in either 296 or 298. He was a prominent figure of the Alexandrian world and received a wonderful education in Greek literature, philosophy, rhetoric, and law. We don’t know much more about his early years besides his birth and education.

Although the New Testament was largely set by his early life, he claimed that his greatest teachers were the Confessors. The Confessors were the men and women who continued to promote and teach the Christian faith even during major persecutions like those under Emperor Maximian. He was also strongly influenced by Bishop Alexander of Alexandria.

One day Athanasius and his friends were playing. Bishop Alexander came up to the boys and asked them what they were doing. They replied “baptizing.” Upon further inspection, the bishop

realized that the baptisms they were administering were valid. After questioning the boys further, he decided to train them for the priesthood.

After becoming a deacon, Athanasius' influence grew. He befriended many nuns and monks and even wrote the *Life of St. Anthony*, one of the few surviving stories of the lives of the desert fathers. Bishop Alexander took him as his secretary. During this time, Arius was rising to power and teaching that Jesus was only human and not divine. Bishop Alexander required a written defense of this teaching, which ultimately condemned Arius as a heretic.

This controversy was far from over. Having been deposed and stripped of his authority, Arius left for Caesarea where he gained support from the local bishops. His power growing, the only way to settle the debate was through a Council. Athanasius was present as the secretary of Bishop Alexander at the Council of Nicaea and watched the great debate rage. Rejoicing that the Council settled the debate and the truth of the faith had been proclaimed, it seems like peace was to reign over the Church.

Shortly after the Council, Bishop Alexander died and Athanasius succeeded him having been elected by an unanimous popular acclaim. Now consecrated as the bishop of Alexandria, he set to work defending the Council of Nicaea and fighting against Arianism.

This would become a hard and arduous road. Through Eusebius, Emperor Constantine II was convinced that Arius should be allowed back in Communion with the Church and commanded Athanasius to reinstate him. Athanasius refused. While all this was going on, the Meletians charged Athanasius with exacting tribute for linens, sending gold to Philomenus, treason against the emperor, and authorizing someone to destroy a chalice. All false claims. Although declared innocent, they came at him with more accusations. Now Arius attacked using the claim that he murdered a Meletian bishop. Ignoring the summons to the council of Caesarea that would settle the case, Emperor Constantine forced him to attend the Council of Tyre which was filled with his opponents. Having decided his case before he arrived, Athanasius was condemned and sent into exile.

For six and a half years he communicated with his flock by letter. In 338, he returned to Alexandria to find Arius and Emperor Constantine had died. Yet, the situation was not improved. His enemies wanted him to remain in exile. New accusations emerged including sedition, promoting bloodshed, and detaining his own use of corn. Eusebius won a second order of deposition of Athanasius sending him back into exile allowing for an Arian bishop to take the helm at Alexandria.

In 345, Athanasius was completely vindicated on all accounts and allowed to return home. The people rejoiced to see the return of their bishop who had been gone a total of 8 years at this point. The persecutions began anew. Now physical attacks escalated against him. While celebrating the vigil Liturgy in Egypt, a group of soldiers forced their way into the church and killed some of the congregants. Athanasius escaped and hid for another 6 years.

Following the death of Emperor Constantius, Emperor Julian revoked all sentences and allowed him to return home. He remained for only a few months before Emperor Julian exiled him for

thwarting his plans to paganize the Christian world. For two years he remained in the desert before Emperor Julian died allowing him to return home.

After a few more banishments and returns, Athanasius spent a total of 17 years in exile having been exiled five times. The final years of his life were lived in peace until his death in 373. He is known by many titles: Athanasius the Confessor, The Pillar of the Church, The Father of Orthodoxy, and Champion of Christ's Divinity.

On the Incarnation – St. Athanasius

Most people would read the title of this work and assume that St. Athanasius is going to write on the birth of Jesus or his early life. He does nothing of the sort. The work is divided into two main chunks: *Against the Gentiles* and *On the Incarnation*. These two works have the same basic focus: to remove the scandal of the Cross. One of the biggest controversies in the early church was the scandal of the Cross. How could God die much less on a Cross? How could the most inhumane form of death be a symbol of life? The Cross stood in the way for so many people who wanted to accept Christianity but couldn't see past the brutality of the Cross. Athanasius had a reply.

The entire work centers on the Cross as the manifestation (incarnation) of God to the world. The disciples clearly didn't understand Jesus, his teachings, his purpose, or his ways. The moment they grasped the entirety of Jesus and the importance of the Incarnation was on the Cross. As Jesus died, the truth of God was manifest to the world. Therefore, the purpose and meaning of the Incarnation was made clear through the scandal of the Cross. Athanasius continues, the Word of God was manifest on the Cross, the Cross is the clearest sign of God becoming human.

Some challenge Athanasius in that he doesn't emphasize atonement as the reason for the Cross. Well, he didn't intend to. St. Athanasius had one intent on writing this work: to show the necessity of the Cross and remove its scandal from the minds of the people.

The final parts of his work defend his idea against the Gentiles and other philosophers of his time. He concludes by stating their errors and showing the necessity of the Cross against the most common criticisms.