

The Church Fathers

The 2nd Century

History

Toward the mid-point of the 1st century, the persecutions of the Christians begun under Emperor Nero. This distrust of the Christians by the Romans, heightened by Nero, only increased into the next century. Christianity was now visibly present in the Roman Empire. Local churches were growing in numbers, the number of converts was increasing by the day, some Roman officials had converted, and the number of bishops was growing. The number of Christians grew from around 40 to 218,000 by the end of the 2nd century. Rome could no longer ignore the Christians residing in its cities. As the number of Christians grew, so did the discontentment towards them by the Romans. Although Nero began the more wide-scale persecutions, local persecutions were common. Acts of martyrdom were becoming as common as the gladiator matches. During this time, Rome was striving to maintain its peace and nothing was going to get in its way.

Within the Christian church other challenges were emerging. The growing number of Christians, who are now scattered across the Roman Empire, meant that consistency in teaching and practice were becoming problematic. Even since the dawn of Christianity problems emerged such as circumcision, structure of the Church, and adherence to Jewish laws. These were the beginning of the controversies to come. Although it didn't cause any major challenges to the church of the 2nd century, Gnosticism was on the rise. Beginning in the late 1st century, a guy named Simon gathered a group around him and headed out into the desert. This band of followers began a movement called Gnosticism. The Gnostics believed that Jesus gave them special knowledge that is shared only through qualified and chosen teachers. Those who are disciples of these qualified teachers, merit Heaven. Since this movement largely stayed to themselves and off in the desert, they didn't directly cause a problem. Yet, the new philosophies entering the Christian church did cause problems. People followed these ideas and brought them into common Christian practice.

Gnosticism is only an example of the new challenges facing the 2nd century. At the beginning of the century we have one of the greatest and most influential writers of the Greek age and the Church Fathers, St. Ignatius of Antioch. As bishop of Antioch before his martyrdom, his calling was to care for his flock. In his seven letters to the churches he gives us a broad picture of the challenges facing the 2nd century church.

Since the dawn of Christianity, many believers developed a sense of absolute freedom from the idea that Jesus came to set us free. With this new found freedom, they didn't need to obey Church law and authority since we are all brothers and sisters in the faith and so are equal. (St. Ignatius wrote an entire letter on this topic which most Protestant scholars claim is not authentic. Go figure.) Therefore these Christians believe that they no longer need Church authority, moral laws, the Christian community, the Sacraments, and more. Sounds like modern day Protestantism. St. Ignatius begins a new form of writing to counter these claim which will set off a whole new genera in Christian writing and engagement with the world. These letters are purely

prescriptive and directive to the people combining Scripture, revealed truths, apostolic authority, philosophy, and partly theology. We will read his writings in the next half of this series.

For now, I want to bring out some broad themes from St Ignatius' writings to help illustrate the challenges and developments of the 2nd century. First, authority. Yes, everyone struggles with authority and doesn't like being told what to do. As people who have been under Roman rule, the freedom of Christianity is incredibly enticing. No more sacrifices, festivals, and tributes to the Emperor. No more concerns about public decorum, slavery, or advancement in Roman society. So when St. Ignatius tells them that they need to respect their bishop as though he is bearing God to them, it was a little hard to take. But St. Ignatius goes further. Obedience to your bishop and religious leaders is obedience to God. See how he transforms this idea. He turns these simple concepts into spiritual concepts rooted in faith, Scripture, and tradition.

Another issue of the 2nd century was morality and apostasy. Apostasy is separating from the Church either by starting your own church or by defecting to the Romans by oath. The Romans commonly arrested Christians and gave them the option to recant their faith and swear allegiance to Rome instead of facing execution. Many chose the cowardly route of defecting from Christianity. Note: this act of defection was disgraceful. The Romans you were considered a coward who didn't hold up to their beliefs which further increased their distrust of Christianity. To the Christians, those who apostatized were no longer a member of the Church. The Christians looked down on anyone who apostatized as too weak to follow the beliefs of Christianity. In the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, which we will read in this session, one of the people named in the story apostatized and was scorned by the people.

Similar to the 1st century, morality is a major issue. The moral norms of the Church take on a new force in the 2nd century. Now that Christianity is public and persecuted, they can't take as many chances. Serious sins like apostasy, fornication, adultery, murder, and defecting to the Roman government are so heinous that they cannot be tolerated. Those who commit these crimes must go before the bishop and the gathered church, confess their sins, and be given a sentence by the bishop. Usually the sentence is excommunication. Later in the century, they will be given a route back into the Church through years of penance. Major sins are not the only problem. Minor sins deface the truths of Christianity. Therefore the members of the Church are strongly encouraged to hold a very high level of moral living, as we will see in the writings of the Church Fathers.

As the century comes to a close, a new issue will emerge in the Church and be dealt with in the 3rd century. Until the mid-2nd century Christianity was seen by the intellectual elite of Rome as a group of fanatics ready to be killed. Their ideas of love, forgiveness, reconciliation, and a god becoming human were so outlandish that they didn't take the Christian message seriously. As we come to the end of the 2nd century, the Church Fathers will begin to address this issue by speaking directly to the intellectual elite of Rome and especially to the philosophers. Great writers like St. Augustine of Hippo, St. Clement of Alexandria, and Origen will weave the philosophies of their time into their writings to appeal to the philosophers and give Christianity a new face. We will explore their contribution to the intellectual tradition in the next section.

Martyrdom in the 2nd century

Martyrdom was not new to Christians of the 2nd century. Having endured persecution since the dawn of the Church, they understood the idea that becoming Christian meant that you were probably going to be killed for the faith. The feel and value of martyrdom took a drastic turn. As more people became martyrs, they understood martyrdom in a uniquely spiritual and theological way. These martyrs were following Christ in the best way possible: by giving their lives. The mark of the true Christian is one who is willing to die for the faith. As this new trend developed they saw in martyrdom something more. These martyrs poured out their blood for the Church like Jesus on the Cross. They became the perfect self-offering like the bread and wine used for the Mass. They withstood the challenges of fire, beasts, and swords and so witnessed to the power of God and the Gospel.

Saint of the Day: St. Irenaeus of Lyons

St. John the Apostle began his tour of the Mediterranean world spreading the message of Jesus. He met a guy name Polycarp who became his disciple, was ordained a bishop, and became the bishop of Smyrna. In the town of Smyrna, a young man, raised in a Christian household, met St. Polycarp and became his disciple, Irenaeus. Irenaeus was well educated and quick to learn. He quickly mastered the teachings of his teacher, Polycarp, was ordained a priest and sent to Lyons, France. He continued his ministry under the Bishop of Lyons, Pothinus. During his time in France, where a major heresy started to challenge the Church. Montanism claimed that certain people possessed a special type of prophesy in which they were given more valuable revelations. At first those who had this special gift of prophesy spoke about special days of prayer and fasting encouraging the people to greater devotion. As the moment picked up, the prophets of Montanism began to preach that they were possessed by God and spoke as God. At this point the Church stepped in to both understand and combat this heresy. Irenaeus, having proved himself in the church in Lyons, was sent by the people of France to help the Pope combat this heresy. Providentially, this mission to Rome spared Irenaeus' life since a major persecution of the Christians erupted in Lyons shortly after he left. Upon returning to France after settling the dispute in Rome, he was named Bishop of Lyons.

As a bishop, Irenaeus was known for his apostolic teaching, his clear articulation of the faith, his zeal for evangelization and the conversion of the people of Lyons, and his energy. He preached with such zeal and energy that many people throughout the region of modern day France came to conversion. Actually, so many people converted under his leadership that they began to create their own ideas of Christianity. As these errors continued to spread throughout his diocese, he took to the challenge by writing and preaching against them. His two most famous surviving works are *Against Heresies* and *Demonstration of the Apostolic Teaching*. Irenaeus' style was simple. First, note and name the error. Second, explain the absurdity of these errors. Third, teach the truths of the faith. His style may seem blunt to us, but it worked well in combating the many heresies that wreaked havoc upon his diocese. St. Irenaeus' teachings are so valuable that he is

one of the most often quoted Church Fathers in the Second Vatican Council showing the unbroken lineage of faith from the time of the Apostles.

Like most of the early Church Fathers, we know little about his origins, life, and death. We presume that he continued his work as Bishop of Lyons until his death. Nowhere in the history of the Church is it noted that he died a martyr. Pope Francis named St. Irenaeus a Doctor of the Church in 2022.

The Martyrdom of Polycarp

Intro:

St. Polycarp was a bishop of the 2nd century. At the age of 84, he was martyred by being burned alive and then stabbed to death. This work, called a martyrology, is the story of his martyrdom. This work is the earliest story of a martyrdom of the Church dating to around 160 AD. The story not only gives us an account of his life but also historical details and theological details.

The beginning:

The story begins with some basic details. Who he is? What is going on? Some of these details are rather important for us. Another man, named Quintus, had already encouraged a group in the church to turn themselves in to the Roman government. He, being one of them, was arrested and forced to take the oath to Caesar or die. Quintus chose to defect from the faith and the reader feels the pain of the Christians as they watch this man, whom they earlier admired, reduced to nothing. Polycarp, however, was encouraged to hide and flee since he is a bishop. His response, “regardless of where I hide or flee they will find me. I might as well stay.” The story continues with his arrest, trial, and valor of Polycarp. Recall: the Romans greatly valued valor and courage. Watching this 84 year-old man stand up to the Romans was deeply impressive.

The Martyrdom:

The next part of the story chronicles his martyrdom in great detail. He was condemned to death and chose to die by being burned alive. Here the story takes some important twists. Not only does Polycarp choose his method of execution but the story tellers are comparing it to the life of Jesus. He was condemned to death, chose his execution method, stripped of his clothes, burned alive, and his blood put out the fire showing the power of God. The final details are the most unique. As he was burning, he smelled like baking bread. The martyrs are fulfilling the gift made to them in the Eucharist.

The ending:

The final section of the work are later editions to prove to the reader the authenticity of the work. This story was passed down for generations as one of the greatest and most important examples of martyrdom.