

The Fathers of the Church

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The Church has many saints, but not all of them are called “Church Fathers.” This title is given to a specific group of them. A “father” is the person capable of nurturing people in Christ, of giving birth to them and/or raising them. Hence, “Church Father” is given to the saint who has fulfilled the conditions of holiness, so to speak—that is, who has been deified, united with God, and become a dwelling place for the Holy Spirit. He is included among the Church Fathers if, in addition to holiness, he possesses the ability to teach and defend the faith. Therefore, we find that most of the Church Fathers, the teachers, were highly proficient in both the sciences of this world and the of life in Christ.

These great saints studied and mastered the most important sciences of their time, and simultaneously, they lived with God. They harnessed the high secular sciences to serve the propagation of spiritual sciences, that is, life with the Lord, so that they became pure instruments in which the Holy Spirit dwells. There were Fathers who, through their spiritual and worldly knowledge, were able to convey the Gospel of Christ in the language of their time; that is, they spoke of Christ to the people of their era through their culture, concepts and terms so that they could understand. And there were spiritual fathers who progressed in their relationship with God and were enlightened by Him, becoming vessels of the Holy Spirit, and He spoke through them. Some remained unknown, others became known through their guidance, and some were clearly revealed by God after their passing. There are examples of such fathers even today, from all these categories.

The common characteristic we observe in the Holy Fathers, whose writings we study, is that they possessed the worldly culture of their time and were known for their intellect. Saints Basil the Great, John Chrysostom, Gregory the Theologian, and Maximus the Confessor, to name but a few, possessed brilliant minds and a high level of worldly culture. But this intellectual aspect was not separate from an enlightened heart enriched by the Holy Spirit. They were authentic teachers, and at the same time, they were sanctified by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

It is essential to remember this point because we are always susceptible to being drawn to one extreme or the other. We see currents that emphasize knowledge and others that emphasize a life of piety. The Fathers were not extreme in either direction, but gave each side its due, teaching that virtue lies in the middle ground between two extremes. Thus, the requirement of holiness was present among them alongside the requirement of secular knowledge.

A deeper examination of this phenomenon is necessary because the Christian world, in general, is witnessing an unbridled focus on reason, "scientific research" and "academia." These things are not inherently bad, for Christianity must address modern man in his own language, not in a language he does not understand, otherwise the Gospel will be lost. However, the problem arises when this focus is placed at the expense of life in Christ. Then we fall into the trap of acquiring what is called today "religious sciences," and the issue becomes cultural, not experiential.

Therefore, we observe, from time to time, conflicting currents within the Church, some emphasizing only the spiritual life, and others focusing exclusively on Christian culture and thought. This conflict may be overt or covert. The need remains crucial to cultivate a patristic sensibility that allows us to read them correctly and understand the spirit of their approach, not merely its letter.

It is essential to understand here that most of the Church Fathers were not academic professors in the modern sense of the word, but rather pastors, preachers, spiritual guides, physicians of the soul who treated people's spiritual ailments, or defenders of the faith against heresies. Much of their writing consists of articles or educational sermons addressed to the congregation, or apologetics explaining the Orthodox faith, demonstrating deviations from it and confronting heresies. Most of these writings were transcribed directly by their listeners. The Church Fathers did not deal exclusively with an intellectual elite, nor did they seek purely religious knowledge, although some of them, depending on their circumstances, engaged in dialogues or debates with philosophers or intellectuals, bearing witness to their faith. Their aim was to help people attain the fullness of Christ's stature. Through this sense of the importance of nurturing and educating

people to become like Christ, the Fathers defended the faith, explained the Bible, and confronted the challenges of the age.

The Church Fathers were not interested in transmitting abstract knowledge but rather delved into the details of people's lives. Saint John Chrysostom, for example, speaks in his sermons about theaters, costumes, and the minutiae of their daily lives, connecting all these points to sound Christian morality. The goal, therefore, was not to write books, but to lead people to the fullness of Christ's stature. Those who study the Gospel may misunderstand it; therefore, it is essential to understand its interpretation so that believers can live it.

The mental makeup of people today has become more focused on knowledge than on living it. Modern man approaches God with his intellect, not his heart. Schools of faith and theology have always existed, and sermons have been fundamental to worship services since the beginning of Christianity. The error lies not in seeking religious knowledge, but in pursuing it without concern for its application and lived experience. Believers today, due to the ease of information dissemination, are susceptible to the temptation of seeking religious knowledge more than living it, and this leads to the inflation of the intellect at the expense of the heart, rendering the religious institution dry and lifeless. Isn't this one of the reasons why so many are turning to monasteries in search of a living, not a packaged, faith? Indeed, many are now seeking inner peace in religious practices from the Far East devoid of Christ.

The benefit would be far greater if we helped people live in Christ and share His teachings in an understandable way, rather than simply filling them with religious information.