

Ask Fr. James

Who are the Church Fathers and why are they called "fathers?"

In the earliest years of Christianity there were some theologians who greatly influenced the growth of the church. These people came to be known as church fathers. They lived in the first 700 years of Christianity and were not necessarily saints or ordained. Those amongst them who were direct disciples of the twelve apostles are called Apostolic fathers. Their writings extensively had a significant impact on the early Christian church and on the decisions made in general assemblies, local synods and ecumenical councils. Some of them wrote in Greek (Eastern Catholics) and are called the Greek Fathers and others wrote in Latin (West or Latin Catholics) and are called the Latin fathers.

The fact that they are called church fathers seems to imply that only the men influenced the early church. Far from it. There were some women among them too, like Perpetua, Felicity, Marcella, Marcellina and other women ascetics and mystics, etc. We know from New Testament evidence of participation of women in the circles following Jesus and the role that other women played in the house churches established by Paul and in early Christian churches.

These early Christian leaders and authors were highly esteemed and the reason why "church fathers" was used to describe them was because the study of their contributions to the development of Christianity is known as the "patristics" from [patres, meaning fathers in Greek]. The term 'Church Fathers' was an honorary title given to them as they enjoyed a degree of prominence in the earliest years of Christianity as important teachers, bishops and writers who helped guide, shape and develop Christianity in those early years. The title "father" certainly reflects common acceptance of their teaching as 'orthodox' and was widely accepted on the principle of apostolic succession and in agreement with authentic traditions handed down from the apostles and also reflects commendation for the holiness of their life.

There is still ongoing interest in the early years of Christianity especially in biblical studies, particularly in the study of the New Testament as it compares with study of pagan classics of Greco-Roman authors like Virgil or Cicero. 'Patristic Studies' have continued to look to the Fathers for an authentic interpretation of Scripture. Indeed, recent work in archaeology has uncovered a wealth of materials: papyri, inscriptions, church building architecture and wall or mosaic decoration to prove (or disprove) the biblical records.

A non-exhaustive list of them included Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons, Tertullian, Perpetua, Origen, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, Athanasius, John Chrysostom, Augustine, and Cyril of Alexandria, Clement of Rome, Clement of Alexandria, Cyprian of Carthage, and Ambrose of Milan, the Cappadocian fathers such as Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, or Gregory of Nazianzus.