**Writings and Leaders from the Beginning of the Early Church**

The Church Fathers were important leaders and teachers in the early Church. D'Ambrosio defines the Church Fathers as “those great Christian writers who passed on and clarified the teaching of the apostles from approximately the second through the eighth centuries.” Therefore, the Church Fathers lived from about 100 A.D. to about 800 A.D. They can be divided up into two groups, with additional subgroups.

1. **The ante-Nicene Fathers** (those before the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D.);
   (a) **the Apostolic Fathers** (those who lived during the time of the apostles, they lived around 50 A.D. to about 150 A.D.);
   (b) **the Apologist Fathers** (those who defended the Faith from 150 A.D. to 325 A.D.)

2. **The post-Nicene Fathers** (those after the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D.);
   (a) Those who participated in “hammering out” “the central teachings of the faith” (they lived around 325 A.D. to about 600 A.D.);
   (b) Those Church Fathers who further taught and promulgated the Faith from 600 A.D. to 800 A.D.

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3 D'Ambrosio, *When the Church Was Young*, 2–3.
7 D'Ambrosio, *When the Church Was Young*, 5–6.
There were many highly influential figures and writings that helped guide the early Church. These leaders and writings include *Letter of Clement*, *The Teaching of the Lord According to the Twelve Apostles* (also known as the “Didache”), Ignatius of Antioch, *The Letter of the Church in Smyrna to the Church in Philomelium* (also known as the Martydom of Polycarp), the *Letter to Diognetus*, Justin, Irenaeus, and Clement.\(^{10}\)

*The Letter of the Church of Rome to the Church of Corinth* (also known as Clement’s First Letter\(^{11}\) or Letter of Clement\(^{12}\)) was written by the bishop of Rome (Clement)\(^{13}\) in about 96 A.D.\(^{14}\) In the letter, Clement reproves of a coup that had occurred within the Church of Corinth, where the established church leaders had been ousted.\(^{15}\) Clement promotes and defends apostolic succession,\(^{16}\) strongly condemns their action, explains to them the evils of schism, the value of unity, and explains how misguided it is for people to revolt against the established episcopate (the bishops, the successors of the apostles).\(^{17}\)

*The Teaching of the Lord According to the Twelve Apostles* is likely a combination of two older documents. The first appears to be “the earliest surviving Catechism,” and the second document appears to be a very early manual setting out how worship should be conducted.\(^{18}\) It is unknown when these documents were written, but they were likely already old by about 150 A.D.\(^{19}\) The *Didache* (as it is also known) sets out how baptisms should be conducted, that

\(^{10}\) D’Ambrosio, *When the Church Was Young*, 5–87.


\(^{12}\) D’Ambrosio, *When the Church Was Young*, 6.

\(^{13}\) Ibid.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 7


\(^{16}\) Ibid., 7

\(^{17}\) Clement, in *Early Christian Fathers*, ed. Cyril C. Richardson, 43–73.

\(^{18}\) D’Ambrosio, *When the Church Was Young*, 11–12.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 11
Christians are to worship on Sunday, the Lord’s Day (as opposed to the Sabbath, which is Saturday), and that Christians should pray the Our Father.20

Ignatius was the third bishop of Antioch (the first was Peter the apostle before he left for Rome, followed by Euodius).21 He was martyred around 110 A.D.22 While a prisoner on his march to his death from Antioch to Rome he wrote seven letters to different Christian communities.23 In the letters, Ignatius is adamant that Jesus is God, refuting those who “denied the divinity” of Jesus.24 Ignatius is also very clear “that Jesus is fully man,” refuting the Docetists who denied that Jesus had actually become human (they claimed that Jesus’s body was only an “appearance” or a “phantasm”).25 Ignatius also stresses the importance of unity,26 the importance of preserving the Church structure, and the need for the people to respect the bishops, priests, and deacons.27 For example, Ignatius writes, “Correspondingly, everyone must show the deacons respect. They represent Jesus Christ, just as the bishop has the role of the Father, and the presbyters [priests] are like God’s council and an apostolic band. You cannot have a church without these.”28

_The Martyrdom of Polycarp_ was written by Pionus, a follower of Polycarp.29 Polycarp was the bishop of Smyrna and knew the apostle John and Ignatius of Antioch.30 Polycarp was martyred in 155 A.D.31 Aside from the martyrdom of Stephen that is recounted in the Acts of the

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20 Ibid., 14–16
21 Ibid., 18
22 Ibid., 19
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., 22
25 Ibid., 24
26 Ibid., 25–26
28 Ibid., 99
29 D’Ambrosio, _When the Church Was Young_, 31.
30 Ibid., 29
31 Ibid., xiii
The Letter to Diognetus was written in about 129 A.D., and defends and explains the Christian faith.\textsuperscript{34} It is written for pagans, and it even explains certain aspects of the Christian faith by using Platonic language and themes (since the pagan readers would have been familiar with Plato).\textsuperscript{35} Just like the unknown author of the Letter to Diognetus, Justin also wrote two defenses of the faith addressed to pagans. Justin’s First Apology (written about 150 A.D.) and Second Apology were written in order to explain the faith to non-believers and defend Christians.\textsuperscript{36} Justin addresses the accusations that Christians were atheists, practiced incest, and were cannibals.\textsuperscript{37} Interestingly, with regard to the charge of cannibalism, Justin, instead of conveniently shying away from the issue and explaining how the Eucharist was simply symbolic, Justin rather absolutely confirms the Christian belief in the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist.\textsuperscript{38} Justin wrote “but as Jesus Christ our Savior being incarnate by God’s word took flesh and blood . . . . we have been taught that the food consecrated by the word of prayer . . . is the flesh and blood of that incarnate Jesus.”\textsuperscript{39} It is also noteworthy that Justin himself was a philosopher and took pains to recognize that although Greek philosophy did not contain the fullness of truth, it did contain aspects of truth.\textsuperscript{40} As D’Ambrosio wrote, Justin saw that “Plato and the others had made many mistakes. But what amazed Justin was just how much they

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 31
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 35–37
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 38
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 41
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 49, 56
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 49
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 55
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 55
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 51–53
actually got right.”  

From Justin’s teachings “it followed that there could be no divorce between faith and reason, between religion and philosophy.” Justin was martyred in 165 A.D., ten years after Polycarp was martyred.  

In opposition to Gnosticism, Irenaeus wrote Against the Knowledge Falsely So-Called (often called Against Heresies). This five-volume work was finished in about 185 A.D. The Christian Gnostics claimed to have secret hidden knowledge passed down to them from Jesus Christ. One of Irenaeus’s arguments against this loose collection of heresies is that the Faith of the Catholic Church was true because the bishops “could trace their lineage back in a continual, unbroken line to the apostles.” Who should you trust, those who were directly taught and personally appointed by the successors of the apostles, who themselves (those successors on up the line) were directly taught and personally appointed by the apostles – or those claiming to possess secret knowledge that is at odds with the teaching of those successors (the bishops)?  

Within his writings, Irenaeus also argued against the Ebionites, the Marcion heresy, and the Montanus heresy. The Ebionites refused to recognize the newness of Christianity vis-à-vis Judaism, maintained the Jewish customs, and denied the divinity of Jesus. Marcion taught that the God of the Old Testament and the God of New Testament were two completely different gods. Montanus claimed to have received new revelations from God and held himself out as a prophet.
Clement served as the second head of the first Christian school beginning in about 200 A.D.\textsuperscript{51} Clement followed Justin’s lead in recognizing philosophy as important and that there were seeds of truth in Greek philosophy, and takes that idea further by recognizing that it “prepares the way for Christianity” and that Greek philosophy, particularly logic, can and should be used to defend the Faith.\textsuperscript{52} Clement wrote that Greek philosophy, with regard to defending truth (i.e., the Catholic Faith) “is said to be the proper fence and wall of the vineyard.”\textsuperscript{53} It has been said of Clement that “he proved that faith and philosophy, Gospel and secular learning, are not enemies but belong together.”\textsuperscript{54}

What has most impressed me is how the early Church Fathers and writers, particularly the \textit{Letter of Clement} and the writings of Ignatius, so strongly promote unity, argue against schism, and defend the structure of the Church and apostolic succession – a structure that we still see to this very day in the Catholic Church and line of succession of that can still be shown among the Catholic bishops. The abhorrence of schism and dissolution and the promotion of unity – a unity of doctrine, structure, and worship – appear to be of paramount concern among these very early Church Fathers.

\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Ibid.}, 78
\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Ibid.}, 80
\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Ibid.}, 80
\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Ibid.}, 86
Bibliography


