

Studies in Patrology II

Ante-Nicene, Nicene, and Post-Nicene Fathers

Written by: Dr Medhat Ibrahim
Seminarian Deacon, Theological College, El-Mina, Egypt

Development of the Apostolic Fathers' Writing:

- 1) The first stage is entitled, "The first three centuries." This stage is the most important one in our Apostolic Fathers' writings. The writers in this era are those who lived in contact with the holy apostles themselves. As the founders of the Coptic Church, they witnessed the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. Such teachings encompassed topics as The Holy Trinity, Incarnation, and Church Codes, Laws, and Rituals.

The Apostolic Fathers were considered the "first century" writers and were those writers who saw the holy Apostles and were their disciples. Late writers termed the "second century" writers were in direct contact with the Apostolic Fathers' disciples. Writers of the third century were not of the Apostolic Era so therefore they arranged Apostolic and Apostolic Fathers' Teachings for the great church teachers of the fourth century.

- 2) The second stage (300 AD-480 AD) extended from the time of St Athanasius, the Apostolic to the time of St Cyril the Great in the east and St Augustine in the west. Many great leaders in the Church arose in this era and theological debates entered into regarding The Holy Trinity in the east and the Work of Grace in the west.

The first division of the second stage extended from 300 AD to 360 AD. During which time the theological argument regarding the doctrine of The Holy Trinity appeared and Orthodox doctrine had been determined.

The second division extended from 360-430 AD. During this division Orthodox doctrine and its teachings had become well established. The most famous of these writings were written by St Cyril the Great. St Cyril's writings were considered the best written of all the fathers before him. Therefore, St Cyril is considered the last of our Apostolic Fathers.

- 3) The third stage (430- seventh century) was the stage in which the theological argument over "Christology" erupted. This stage extended from the Council of Ephesus (431 AD) to the Council of Chalcedon and the Second Council of Constantinople (553 AD). Also during this third stage, our holy fathers defended the Church against heresies of that day preserving the Orthodoxy doctrine, as we know it today. It should be noted that their defense of Orthodoxy often led them to torture and martyrdom, as with St Discorus, the 25th Pope of Alexandria and St Severus of Antioch.

The Authority of Fathers in the Coptic Church:

Every Christian should comply with our Fathers' teachings as determined by councils, the Creed, and the Council Laws. It is also of importance that every Christian participates in the Divine Liturgy. Every Christian should share the "praying with those saints who formulated

the Divine Liturgy” according to the Orthodox doctrine. In this manner every Orthodox Christian is in commitment with those saints in the same manner as the monk who must be in commitment with monasticism laws and founders.

The Fathers have teaching authority upon all Christians, whether in the Church, on the entire earth and over all generations. No generation should for whatever circumstances or causes, ignore the Fathers and the Councils’ Laws, as this will be considered as deviant to our holy tradition, which is the most valuable heritage, our church possesses.

It should be noted that our Fathers discussed and examined every problem presented dealing with church faith and discipline. Their opinions in the west and east were in agreement regardless of location or time. They were the Lord’s voice. So if there is an argument in the church regarding a particular issue one must turn back to the holy Fathers through their laws and teachings and through all the sources of our church’s holy traditions and heritage for the solution.

Fathers’ Writings in the First Three Centuries:

A) Apostolic Fathers

- 1) St Clement of Rome (102 AD)
Letter to Corinthians (90 AD)
Second Letter to Corinthians
Two Letters to Virgins
- 2) St Ignatius of Antioch (107 AD)
Seven Letters
- 3) St Polycarp, the Martyr (70-156 AD)
Letter to Philippians
- 4) Papias Bishop of Hierapolis (130 AD)
Explanation of our Lord’s Sayings
- 5) Letter of Barnabas
Anti-Jewish Epistle, “The End of First Century”
- 6) Didache
“The End of the First Century”
- 7) The Shepherd of Hermas
“The Second Century”

B) The Defenders:

- 1) The Apologies of Quadratus to Hadrian (124 AD)
- 2) The Apologies of Aristides of Athens (140 AD) to Antonius Pius
- 3) The Apologies of Aristo of Pella to the Jews (140 AD)
- 4) Tatian of Syria (172 AD)
- 5) St Justin, the Martyr (165 AD)
- 6) The Apologies of Apollinaris of Hierapolis (172 AD)
- 7) Melito of Sardis (190 AD)
- 8) Athenagoras of Athens (177 AD)
- 9) Theophilus of Antioch (181 AD)
- 10) Letter to Diogenes (second century)
- 11) Minos Phipex (second century)

C) Martyrs Works

- 1) Martyrdom of St Polycarp
- 2) Martyrdom of St Justin and His Friends
- 3) Letters to Churches of France
- 4) Martyrs of Siptian

D) Writings Against Heresies:

- 1) Against Heresies “Most of Them Are Lost”
- 2) St Irenaeus, Bishop of Lion (140-202 AD) Against Monitions-Letter about authority of councils

E) Foundations of Theological Writings:

In the East

- 1) Alexandria
St Clement of Alexandria (125 AD)
Origen (185-254/255 AD)
St Dionysius of Alexandria (264 AD)
Fathers of Theological School of Alexandria
Apostolic Laws (third century)
- 2) Antioch and Palestine
Uolias, the African (240 AD)
- 3) Asia
St Gregory the Theologian (213-270 AD)
St Methodios of Olympia (311 AD)

In the West

- 1) North Africa
Tertullian (180-220 AD)
St Cyprian (200-258 AD)
Arnopis (280-310 AD)
Laktantios (317 AD)
- 2) Rome
Hippolytus, Degrees of Priesthood

The Role of Fathers in our Contemporary Life:

Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself used the word “father”, not only for God but also for people. As in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, “the rich man died and was buried in Hades where he was in great pain. He looked up and saw Abraham, far away, with Lazarus at his side. The rich man called out “father Abraham” and this means “the father on earth.”

Also St Paul, the Apostle, gave us an example of the meaning of “father” in the Christian Church. The saint’s first letter to the Corinthians 4:15 states, “for even if you have ten thousand guardians in your Christian life, you will have only one Father. For in your life in union with Christ Jesus I have become your father by bringing the Good News to you.” Here, St Paul used the word “father” as it is literally, meaning the birth through the Holy Spirit. Therefore this means that St Paul gave them the holy Christian life through preaching and suffering and by this St Paul allowed them to call him “father.” This is the name for those he gave holy birth to through baptism.

The same is also for our Coptic Church Fathers’ who gave their congregation the new holy birth through baptism and by renewing this birth by the Holy Sacrament of Repentance and Confession.

They also bring their congregations to the Lord Jesus Christ through teaching and preaching with the Holy Gospel and the Lord's Teachings.

Moreover, they offered themselves as living examples for every one of their congregations as the holy image of our Lord Jesus Christ in the life while on earth. So by this meaning, our church's holy Fathers shared with St Paul, the Apostle, as they were Fathers for their congregations and for the entire church in the following generations and forever.