

OUR FATHERS IN HEAVEN
by Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet ye have not many fathers.
(I Cor. 4:15)

Who is a Church Father? The question arises time and again. It is important because we quote "the Church Fathers" as authorities for what we believe as Orthodox Christians. Then, too, there are those who disdainfully dismiss the Church Fathers, because, they say, one "Father" contradicts the other, and the so-called "Fathers of the Church" do not agree among themselves.

But is this true?

Before we so readily dismiss them, it might be a good idea if we checked to see if the Church has a criterion for determining who a Church Father is.

One good place to begin is the *Menaia* — the Church service books for every month of the year. Is there a service for him in the *Menaion*? That is a sure indication that he, at least, is a saint in the Church. For example, in my reading, I sometimes come across the expression "Saint Clement of Alexandria." And I ask myself, "Saint?" Now, where did *that* come from? I look in the *Menaion*. No Saint Clement of Alexandria anywhere. I look in the *Great Synaxarion of the Lives of the Saints*. Nothing.

Well, as a matter of fact, it turns out that he is not a saint after all. He was a kindly and erudite old man who wrote a lot of fine things about the Christian faith and passed away in the beginning of the third century. But he was also a bit too impressed by Greek philosophy, and so, the Church, although it admires his writings for the most part, nonetheless does not consider him a saint. One of his students was Origen, who, like his teacher, had an exceptionally brilliant mind, and wrote many fine things, but alas, some very wrong things, about the Christian faith — so wrong, in fact, that he was finally condemned for heresy by an Ecumenical Council. Yet, Origen is often quoted by some unknowing persons as a "Church Father" also, despite the fact that he was condemned for heresy by the Church. Now, that is certainly a contradiction!

Needless to say, there is no *Menaion* service for Origen. So, despite what some may claim to the contrary, he is most emphatically *not* a Church Father.

The same is true for Augustine. Although he must be admired for his repentance from his former way of life and his erudition, yet, like Origen, Greek philosophy and his personal speculations got the better of him.

It was Saint Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain who, in the beginning of the nineteenth century, entered Augustine's name into the list of saints on the date of June 15th. But Saint Nicodemus also noted that he was amazed at how many doctrinal errors there were in Augustine's writings. He surmised — wrongly, as it turns out — that "later Latin writers" had interpolated all those errors into Augustine's writings. Alas, such was not the case. In this case, if not in many others, the "later Latin writers" are innocent.

Perhaps the best definition of Augustine's status in the Orthodox Church can be found in William Gardner's book, *Notes of a Visit to the Russian Church*, published in London in 1882.

During a visit to the then Archimandrite (and later bishop) Ignatiy Brianchaninoff, Gardener had the following comments:

Speaking of Cassian, [the saintly Abbot Ignatiy] remarked: "You in the West, say, 'Saint Augustine,' but only 'Blessed Cassian,' whereas we, on the contrary, say '*Saint Cassian*,' but only 'Blessed Augustine'.... Augustine had more genius, eloquence, and learning than asceticism, and was a good deal of a disciple of Origen. The works of Origen are regarded by the Easterns as heretical; and Origen himself as all but a heretic; while the West has been very tender towards him....Augustine speaks very strongly of Predestination, which the Greeks have made to depend on foreknowledge; and we cannot but observe that both Luther and Calvin, though no doubt they misunderstood him, professed to follow Augustine as their teacher."

In other words, Augustine is admired for his devotion and erudition, but because of the many, many errors in his writings — in fact, virtually all of the errors of the West can be laid at his feet — he was mostly unknown and ignored, and certainly not an authority for the Orthodox Christian Church. Even in the West, he received whatever prominence he achieved primarily because of the political and theological policies of Charlemagne (+814). The most educated churchman of his time in the East — Saint Photius the Great, Patriarch of Constantinople (+891) — was completely unfamiliar with Augustine's writings.

In her remarkable book, *Byzantium — The Surprising Life of a Medieval Empire*, Judith Herrin, a Roman Catholic scholar at Oxford, candidly admits that, throughout the Middle Ages in the West, Augustine was known as "the *founding father* of the western Church" (p. 40).

If only some people today could grasp the full significance of that statement!

So, now we return to our original question: Who is a Church Father?

As Father Michael Azkoul writes, "The historic Orthodox Church honors the Fathers as 'teachers of the Faith' *par excellence*. We receive their witness with obedient reverence....Who is a 'church father'? Who is it that the Church recognizes as speaking for her?....The title "father" is given to those teachers of the Faithful and defenders of the Christian Revelation who came after the Apostles, that is, those whom God has chosen in every generation to explain and preserve His Gospel 'once delivered to the saints' (Jude 3)....Gradually, [the term 'Father'] came to include Christian writers — usually bishops, sometimes monks, rarely laymen — who *in no fundamental way depart from the Apostolic Tradition in faith or piety*...."

"[The Fathers] shared a common Faith which they applied according to need and circumstance. Thus, what sometimes appears to be opposition between them — the diversity of religious formulations, the terminological differences, the *theologoumena* (pious inferences from the Christian Truth), the variety of problems which they addressed — do not imply contradiction of one another or the Faith they received, guarded and explained."*

That is also why we say that we follow "the consensus of the Fathers." We do not, for example, follow one Father, to the exclusion of the others. We do not call ourselves

* *An Orthodox Patrology*, Father Michael Azkoul, St. Louis, MO, p. 12-16 (unpublished).

"Basilians," or "Chrysostomites," or "Palamites" as others call themselves "Lutherans," or "Calvinists."

What is the basis of a Church Father's authority? Why do we call them "God-bearing" and "God-inspired"? Father John Romanides writes the following in *An Outline of Orthodox Patristic Dogmatics* (p. 41):

In their defense of infallibility, the Papal theologians claim that a successor of the Apostles could also be infallible and God-inspired. The case, however, of Peter and of the other Apostles, who were present at the Transfiguration and at Pentecost, is quite different, because it rests on the fact that they received deification when they saw the glory of Christ and became eyewitnesses of his Godhead. As a consequence, their doctrine on the Trinity and on God is infallible, *because they had had a direct experience of the Glory of the Godhead of Christ* [emphasis mine], which made them infallible Apostles of the truth of his Godhead, of the Trinity, of Grace, of the Church, etc. In contrast to the Apostles, the Popes, who teach heresies, cannot possibly claim infallibility for themselves. From the Orthodox perspective, the Popes could only be true successors of Peter *if they participate in the same deification as he did* [ditto]. For the Orthodox, divine inspiration and infallibility belong to those who receive the revelation. In the Old Testament, they are called Patriarchs and Prophets, and in the New Testament, Apostles. In the Church, they are called Saints and Fathers, who share in the same experience with the above and, therefore, this teaching is the same with that of Holy Scripture, and they rightly became interpreters of it.

Many prominent Church writers of antiquity have no place in the Church's service books, as we have noted, and hence, they are not Saints or Fathers of the Church. Again, as Father Michael Azkoul notes:

If such writers had not simply apostatized, if they were not anathematized by Church councils, they were deprived of any ecclesial privilege because of their doctrinal errors, which were too many and too serious, for too long, or they lacked the piety which Orthodoxy expects of her spokesmen. Some of what these theologians have written is profound and useful, but they nonetheless speak for themselves, not for the Church, since their opinions derive from personal experience.*

Saint Leo the Great, Pope of Rome (+461), writes that God raises up "*reverent witnesses to the one Faith* which justifies the saints of all ages," "the Faith which is no discovery of earthly wisdom...but rather what was taught by the Only-begotten Son Himself, and established by the Holy Spirit" (*Serm. LXXCII, 6; PL 52:415A*).

*Father Michael Azkoul notes further, if you eliminate from the patristic rolls Augustine, Origen and Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Tatian, Eusebius of Caesarea, Didymus the Blind, Evagrius Ponticus, and such others who have never received the Church's accolade, the charge of "contradiction" between the Fathers quickly loses validity. See *Once Delivered to the Saints*, Father Michael Azkoul, St. Nectarios Press, Seattle, WA, p. 14.

And finally, "it is the Church herself who determines which among those 'witnesses' are her spokesmen, not the heterodox and the unbeliever with their own biases" (*ibid*, p. 13).

The *true* Fathers of the Church are, as Saint Leo the Great tells us, the "reverent witnesses to the one Faith."