

# The Early Church Fathers

**Q: What was the early Christian Church like? Shouldn't we try to be more like it today?**

To help answer this question, every Christian should be aware of a body of writings that come to us from the early centuries of Christianity. They are collectively known as the Early Church Fathers and are acknowledged by both Catholic and Protestant scholars alike.

While we don't regard them with the same authority as Sacred Scripture or as having a doctrinal status of infallibility, they certainly provide a fascinating window to the beliefs of the early Church.

All of these writers are Catholic. Most of them are bishops, and some were taught by the Apostles themselves, or their disciples. Many were even martyred for the Faith. Theirs is an unarguably credible testimony of the first centuries of Christianity.

So what was this early Church like? Unanimously, the Early Fathers present to us the Church essentially as we see it today. They are profoundly, stunningly Catholic! We can find every major doctrine of Catholic faith clearly presented in their writings: the Eucharist, Baptism, Confession, Marian doctrines, the Authority of the Church, the Primacy of Peter and much more.

In this, our first installment of the Church Fathers, we clearly see them teaching that Jesus founded an authoritative Church on Peter, creating an office to be passed on. In this way, the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles would be maintained just as the Church had received them.

We will start with St. Irenaeus (≈190 AD), 2nd bishop of Lyons. He was taught by St. Polycarp who was taught by St. John. He is considered one of the greatest theologians of the immediate post-Apostolic era.

*“...pointing out here the successions of the bishops of the greatest and most ancient Church known to all, founded and organized at Rome, ...that Church which has the tradition and the faith which comes down to us after having been announced to men by the Apostles. For with this Church, because of its superior origin, all the Churches must agree, that is, all the faithful in the whole world; and it is in her that the faithful everywhere have maintained the Apostolic tradition.”*

St. Cyprian (≈250 AD), Bishop of Carthage and martyr writes: *“It is on him [Peter] that He [Jesus] builds the church, and to him that He entrusts the sheep to feed. And although He assigns power to all the apostles, yet He founded a single chair, thus establishing by His own authority the source and hallmark of the churches’ oneness. No doubt the others were all that Peter was, but a primacy is given to Peter, and it is thus made clear that there is but one church and one chair. ...If a man does not hold fast to this oneness of Peter, does he imagine that he still holds the faith? If he deserts the Chair of Peter upon whom the church was built, has he still confidence that he is in the church?”* Strong words indeed!

St. Augustine (≈400 AD), Doctor of the Church, and one of the greatest theologians of history, also writes, *“For, if the order of succession of bishops is to be considered, how much more surely, truly and safely do we number them from Peter, to whom, as representing the whole Church, the Lord said: ‘Upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it’ (Mt. 16:18). For, to Peter succeeded Linus, Linus to Clement (of Rome), Clement to Anacletus etc....Siricius to Anastasius.”* (St. Augustine here recounts all the Popes from Peter to Anastasius, who was pope in his present time).

And finally, a quote from St. Ignatius, 3rd Bishop of Antioch, taught by St. John himself and martyred for the faith in 110 AD at Rome. His testimony to the authoritative structure of the Church at such an early date

is stunning to many, especially those who themselves do not attend churches with bishops or any Apostolically appointed leaders.

*“When you are obedient to the bishop as you would be to Jesus Christ, you are living, not in a human way, but according to Jesus Christ.”* He would also write that, *“In the same way all should respect the deacons as they would Jesus Christ, just as they respect the bishop as representing the Father, and the priests as the council of God and the college of the Apostles. **Apart from these there is nothing that can be called a Church.**”* Awesome!

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