

INTRODUCTION

Patrology as a Subject

THE TERM "PATROLOGY" IS COMPOSED OF two Greek terms, πατήρ ("father") and λόγος ("teaching"), and hence, literally translated, means the teaching of the Fathers (of the church).

I. THE CONCEPT "FATHER"

The Christian honorary title "Father" represents the confluence of a host of common, human, OT, and Greco-Roman conceptions, such as (a) the father as progenitor of life and as head of the family, for whose welfare and authoritative leadership he was responsible; and as (b) the guardian and mediator of experience and tradition and thus as the authentic teacher, particularly of the faith. The Roman *pater familias* is the priest of the household cult. The OT understanding of parents is that they function as God's representatives in the family while the patriarchs are guardians of the promise and guarantors of the grace of the covenant with God (cf. Sir 44–50; Luke 1:55), who therefore deserve obedience and admiration.

This natural concept of the father extended to "the fathers" (the forebears), as well as to the "intellectual" and "spiritual father" (teacher, leader of a school of philosophers, rabbi). In this figurative sense the apostles of Christ (cf., e.g., 1 Cor 4:14f.) and the bishops of the church are the fathers of the believers, since in the act of baptism they are the progenitors of the new life, in the proclamation and interpretation of the faith they are their educators and teachers, and as leaders of the community they are the authorities and providers of the "family." Until the fourth century, therefore, the ancient church accorded the title "father" exclusively to bishops; only beginning with the fifth century was it also applied to priests (e.g., Jerome) and deacons (e.g., Ephraim the Syrian). Addressing the priest as "father" continues today in many languages (*pater*, "father," *père*, *padre*).

II. CHURCH FATHER – DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH – CHURCH WRITER

The concept of church father highlights one aspect of the complex conception of the father, namely, the bishop as the authentic tradent and guarantor of

the true faith who guards the continuity and unity of the faith in the unbroken tradition of the apostles and in communion with the church. He is the reliable teacher of the faith to whom one may appeal when in doubt. Although this authority does not render the respective church father inerrant in every detail—he has to be judged by Scripture as well as the *regula fidei* of the church as a whole—in agreement with the latter, however, he is an authentic witness of the faith and of the teaching of the church. From the fourth century, therefore, the bishops—beginning with the bishops of the Council of Nicea (325)—who distinguished themselves in the transmission, exposition, and defense of the faith were accorded the title “church fathers” or “holy fathers.” In his work *De spiritu sancto* (374/375) Basil the Great was the first to attach a list of church fathers (ch. 29) who supported his interpretation in terms of a “legitimation by the fathers” (*argumentatio patristica*). Augustine adopted the same method from 412 on, particularly in the controversy against Pelagianism, and during the Council of Ephesus (431) Cyril of Alexandria, in support of his own orthodoxy, ordered the reading of excerpts from their works, which the council officially accepted and incorporated in its records.¹ Finally, Vincent of Lérins in his *Commonitorium* (434) coined the classical concept of the *magistri probabiles* and developed the theory of legitimation by the fathers (ch. 41).

Because of their special significance as privileged witnesses of the living tradition of the church, the church fathers traditionally were determined by means of four criteria:

- a. *Doctrina orthodoxa*: Their theology as a whole had to be in agreement with the church’s common teaching, which does not denote absolute inerrancy in every detail.
- b. *Sanctitas vitae*: Holiness in the sense of the ancient church, in which the veneration of the saints was not based on explicit canonization but instead on the recognition and admiration of an exemplary life by the community of believers.
- c. *Approbatio ecclesiae*: The church’s recognition, though not necessarily explicit, of the person and his teaching.
- d. *Antiquitas*: They have to belong to the period of the ancient church.

In 1295 Pope Boniface VIII first bestowed the honorary title “doctor of the church” upon the Latin church fathers Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, and Gregory the Great. Pope Pius V, in his breviary of 1568, accorded the same honor to the Greek fathers Athanasius, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, and John Chrysostom. Since that time they have been honored as the “four great Western and Eastern doctors of the church” and as such have found their way into many artistic portrayals. The concept of doctor of the church agrees with that of church

¹Cf. B. Studer, “Argumentation, patristic,” *EECh* 1:72; B. Studer, *Epocha patristica* (vol. 1 of *Storia della teologia*; Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 1993), 457–61.

father, though it is not restricted to antiquity. Hence the fourth criterion above is replaced with that of outstanding scholarly achievement (*eminens doctrina*). The church fathers' explicit elevation to the status of doctors of the church intends to highlight and honor their extraordinary significance as outstanding tradents of the faith and of the ecclesiastical teaching: Isidore of Seville (1722), Peter Chrysologus (1729), Leo the Great (1754), Hilary of Poitiers (1851), Cyril of Alexandria and Cyril of Jerusalem (1882), John of Damascus (1890), and Ephraim the Syrian (1920).

Ancient Christian writers who do not meet one or more of the first three criteria of a church father but are part of the Catholic Church are called "church writers." All other ancient Christian, albeit not ecclesiastical, writings (apocrypha, heretical works, etc.) are considered part of the wider circle of "early Christian" or "ancient Christian" literature.

The limitation of the concept of the father to antiquity did not come about until the modern period. Jean Mabillon (1632–1707) still regarded Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153) as the last of the Fathers. Jacques-Paul Migne (1800–1875) concluded his monumental collection of the *Patrologia graeca* with Gennadius II of Constantinople (d. after 1472)—and hence included the entire corpus of the Byzantine literature—and that of the *Patrologia latina* with Pope Innocent III (d. 1216). While the limitation to antiquity is generally accepted today, the time frame is by no means beyond dispute. Traditional introductions—including the present one—conclude with Isidore of Seville (d. 636) in the West and with John of Damascus (d. ca. 750) in the East. There are good reasons, however, for the increasing calls to conclude the era of the Fathers in the mid- to late fifth century, though this has not taken hold up to now. (On the division of patristics into periods of time, cf. the introductions of parts 2 to 4).

III. PATROLOGY – PATRISTICS – HISTORY OF LITERATURE

Throughout the formation of this subject, even within the confessional boundaries of Catholic and Protestant churches, the following three different designations or definitions have developed:

a. Since the seventeenth century, *patristics* has denoted the *theologia patristica*, especially the dogmatics of the Fathers in contrast to the *theologia biblica*, *scholastica*, etc.

b. The concept of *patrology* was first introduced by the Protestant theologian Johannes Gerhard (d. 1637) as the title of his posthumously published work *Patrologia sive de primitivae ecclesiae christianae doctorum vita ac lucubrationibus* (*Patrology, or the Life and Works of the Early Christian Teachers*) (Jena, 1653), in the sense of historical and literary studies of the Fathers.

c. An animated discussion about the scope and objective of the discipline of patristics arose around the turn of the twentieth century, in the wake of the general upturn in historical and philological research. The prevailing thought was that it

had to be considered and treated consistently as part of literary studies in general—that is, as *ancient Christian* or *early Christian literary studies*—without denying its theological character on account of its subject. On the other hand, a second definition of Christian literary studies distinguishes the latter from patrology and patristics as a nontheological discipline of the philology of ancient Christian writers.

On the whole, all three designations for the subject are used more or less without differentiation today; conversely, the discussion about its precise definition does not abate. Since we are not in a position to address in detail here the arguments adduced, the present work will use only the designations “patristics/patristic” and “patrology” as follows:

- *patristics/patristic*: the period of the Fathers/belonging to the time, to the writings, to the thought, etc., of ancient Christian literature.
- *patrology*: the study of ancient Christian literature.

Nevertheless, patrology is not thereby identified with literary studies in general but instead intentionally retains the concept of father in the designation so as to clarify that the subject issue here is necessarily a theological one, the undeniable core element of which is the Fathers of the church and, in the ecclesiastical sense, their writings. Still, since all of ancient Christian literature and its environment have to be considered in order to understand and explain the Fathers in their broader context, modern patrology is the study of ancient Christian literature in its entirety, in all its aspects, bringing all the appropriate methods to bear.

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