

## DOCTORS OF THE CHURCH

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IN the midst of the church she shall open his mouth, and shall fill him with the spirit of wisdom and understanding, and shall clothe him with a robe of glory. She shall heap upon him a treasure of joy and gladness.”<sup>1</sup> This promise of the Holy Ghost to those who possess justice, and which is borrowed from that of the theologian *par excellence*, John the Beloved, is used as the Introit for the Mass of a Doctor of the Church. This is a title bestowed on certain great Saints who, by their teachings and writings, have championed the dogmas of the faith against heretical attacks or have exposed and clarified, in an exceptional manner, some of its doctrines.

Pope Benedict XIV, one of the greatest canonists in the history of the Church, lays down three conditions necessary for the gaining of his honor; namely, eminent doctrine, great holiness of life, and official sanction by the Church.<sup>2</sup> This Pope quotes Boniface VIII to the effect that: “The doctrine required in Doctors of the Church is such that by it the clouds of error are dispersed, obscurities are made clear and the hidden things of Scripture are brought to light.” The quality of sanctity they must have in common with all the Saints of God. The declaration of the Church is nowadays accomplished in a decree by the Sacred Congregation of Rites, approved by the Pope, which grants to the universal Church, in their honor, the Office and Mass of a Doctor. The promotion to this special rank among the Saints of God takes place, as a rule, many years, even centuries, after canonization. The only exception in the list of twenty-six Saints thus honored is St. Peter Canisius who was proclaimed a Doctor in the same decree that raised him to the altars as a canonized Saint.

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<sup>1</sup> Ecclesiasticus, xv, 5-6.

<sup>2</sup> *De Servorum Dei Beatificatione et Beatorum Canonizatione*, Lib. IV, Pars II, Cap. 11, No. 13.

It is interesting to note that this dignity has only been accorded to those Saints classified as Confessors, thus not including in their ranks such eminent writers and great Saints as Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus and Cyprian who sealed their belief with their blood, thereby gaining for themselves the even more glorious title of Martyr.

This body of twenty-six Doctors, the boast of the Church Militant and glory of the Church Triumphant, presents many varied aspects. They stretch from the fourth to the eighteenth century, from England to the Euphrates, from pope to deacon, from highest noble to humblest plebeian. Hermits, regulars and secular priests have place in this cosmopolitan group of intellectual and moral leaders. In their lives they show forth the Charity of God and in their writings the reflection of His Intelligence. Let us go down the list of these immortals whom the Church delights to praise and see who these bulwarks and protectors of the faith were, and why they merit their glorious title.

Eight of them bear the additional title of "Father of the Church." These were raised up by God, in the centuries immediately following the Apostolic Age, to defend the faith against the great heresies aimed at the basic doctrines of Christianity, and to define and explain, as clearly as human ability could, these fundamental mysteries. Because of the outstanding merit of their achievements and because of the great authority of their teachings in the Church, they well merit this additional honor. Half of these Fathers were natives of western Christian lands, while the other four lived in the East. We must remember that all of them lived centuries before schism tore from allegiance to Rome many of the eastern churches. For them the Spouse of Christ could be but one in head and members.

St. Athanasius (373),<sup>3</sup> the "Father of Orthodoxy," made Primate of Alexandria before he was thirty, was the most important figure of his time. While only a deacon he electrified the Council of Nicea by his passionate and cogent defense of the Catholic teaching on the Incarnation. His life was a succession of exiles from his See, engineered by his heretical enemies, aided by the civil power. Hunted, persecuted, forced to wander over the earth, he ever remained, by pen and word of

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<sup>3</sup> Dates given in each instance denote date of death.

mouth, the staunch and unwavering champion of the true religion.

Ranking immediately after St. Athanasius as a defender of the faith comes St. Basil (379), the great Bishop of Caesarea. This son of a Saint and brother of two others is hailed as the "Father of Oriental Monasticism" and forerunner of St. Benedict in the West. An exemplary bishop and administrator, his influence was paramount in civil as well as religious affairs from the Balkans to the Euphrates. His clergy were models of the priesthood. He battled unceasingly with the heretics, withstanding even the Arian Emperor Valens to his face. He taught and wrote continuously, especially on the doctrines of the Trinity and of the divinity of the Holy Ghost. Governing a See on the confines of the Empire, he read the signs that pointed to the imminent inroads of the barbarians and his greatest desire was for the closest union with the western churches. He died ten years before his friend from boyhood and brother Doctor, St. Gregory Nazianzus (389). This latter, poet, orator and theologian of the first rank, re-established the Catholic faith in Constantinople, capital of the Eastern Empire, where it had been almost entirely superseded by Arianism. Because of his ability in stamping out this heresy, he was called *Theologus* (the theologian), and, as a French critic says: "He summed up and closed the controversy of a century."

Linked by ties of friendship with both St. Gregory Nazianzus and St. Basil is St. John Chrysostom (407), "Golden Tongued," who is generally considered the most prominent Doctor of the Greek Church. We possess more of his works than of any other eastern Father. Called to govern the Church of Constantinople, he set himself to reform his flock, and, being no respecter of persons, did not exempt even court circles from criticism. This brought upon him the hatred of some of its highest members who, by intrigue, forced him twice into exile, during the second of which he died, a martyr to duty. As a theologian he quoted continually by East and West, and as an interpreter of Scripture he ranks among the foremost. Even during his lifetime, he was classed by St. Jerome among his "Famous Men."<sup>4</sup>

While the eastern Fathers were defining and defending, for

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<sup>4</sup> This book, *De Viris Illustribus*, is one of the earliest collection of Christian biographies.

the most part, the great Christological and Trinitarian doctrines, those of the West were busied more with the practical doctrines of Christian life, such as free will, grace, and the problem of evil. The most illustrious of these western Fathers, and he whom Bossuet calls the "Doctor of Doctors," was St. Augustine (430), Bishop of Hippo. Of him Rev. J. A. Zahm says: "In the great African Doctor we seem to have found united and combined the powerful and penetrating logic of Plato, the deep scientific conceptions of Aristotle, the knowledge and intellectual suppleness of Origen, the grace and eloquence of Basil and Chrysostom. Whether we consider him as philosopher, theologian or as exegetist . . . he still appears admirable . . . the unquestioned Master of all the centuries." In his writings he covered the entire range of Christian and philosophical thought. Many of his works, such as his *Confessions* and *The City of God*, rank as Christian classics. He has been called the "Eagle of Doctors," "Doctor of Grace," and, by Protestants and Catholics alike, is proclaimed the intellectual glory of Christendom.

St. Ambrose (397), Bishop of Milan, our next Father of the Church, converted St. Augustine by his eloquence. This great Saint, called by popular acclaim from the civil administration to the ecclesiastical government of Milan, comes down to us as one of the greatest bishops of history. Teacher of the clergy, writer on the divinity of Christ and the Holy Ghost, he is also called by St. Jerome the most eloquent and exhaustive of all apologists of the Catholic practice of virginity. Intrepid foe of Arianism, he likewise defended the Church from the encroachment of the secular power. In accord with his duty as a pastor, he withstood an empress and induced an emperor to do public penance for a public crime. Of him St. Augustine wrote: "He was one of those who speak the truth and speak it well, judiciously, pointedly, with beauty and power of expression."<sup>5</sup>

The next great Father we meet is St. Jerome (420), the "Father of Scriptural Studies," to whom the Church is indebted for the Vulgate translation of the Bible, for which his fame rests secure. But besides being a translator and commentator upon the Scriptures he is renowned as an historian and as a master of epistolary style. As a theologian he defended the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of the Blessed Virgin and the practices of asceticism.

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<sup>5</sup> Quotation cited from *Catholic Encyclopedia*, II, 94.

<sup>6</sup> *De Doct. Christ.*, iv, 21.

St. Gregory the Great (604), beloved of English-speaking people for sending to them their first apostle, St. Augustine of Canterbury, is the last of the western Fathers. As ambassador of Pope Pelagius II to Constantinople he wrote his great *Morals*, a series of lectures on the Book of Job. He was Pope from 590 to 604 and took over the guardianship of Italy from the impotent eastern emperors. A skillful administrator of church property, there was but one complaint against him, he emptied the treasury by his charities. Vigilant pastor and defender of the Primacy, he gained the name "Consul of God." Always the zealous reformer, he helped to standardize the liturgical practices of the Latin churches and he will ever remain one of the greatest occupants of the Fisherman's Throne.

We must now return to the eastern churches and mention their four remaining Doctors. There was St. Ephrem (373), "The Sun of Syria," "The Harp of the Holy Ghost," the greatest Doctor of the Syrian church though remaining all his life a deacon. He is noted as a preacher and as a commentator of the Old and New Testaments. Most of his sermons and homilies were written in verse and Mgr. Lamy, a French critic, claims to have found in these and in his hymns seventy-six different rhythms and airs. Then we have St. Cyril of Jerusalem (386), who governed that See during the troublous time of the late fourth century. His catechetical instructions to candidates for Baptism are among the finest things that have been saved from Christian antiquity. He is explicit in his defense of the Real Presence and of the Primacy of Peter. St. Cyril of Alexandria (444) acted as the representative of Pope Celestine I against Nestorius and was the leading figure in the Council of Ephesus which condemned that heretic and proclaimed once more the doctrine of the oneness of Christ's Person. St. John Damascene, who died as Bishop of Jerusalem around the year 760, will never be forgotten. He was the great defender of the use of images in the Church against the Iconoclasts of the East. As a theologian he is famous for gathering together the doctrines of his great predecessors. His *Fountain of Wisdom* is the first attempt at a *summa theologica*. As a philosopher he commented on the *Organon* of Aristotle a full century before the Arabs, who owe much to him.<sup>7</sup> He is also noted for his defense of Mary's divine maternity. Called, because of his eloquence, "The Golden

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<sup>7</sup> *Catholic Encyclopedia*, VIII, 460; Wm. Turner, D. D., *History of Philosophy* (Boston, 1903), p. 223.

Stream," he is the last of the Greek Doctors. To the work of these great Fathers and Doctors is due the fact that even those churches of the East that have fallen into schism have not lost the essentials of the true faith. But for them, under God, the powerful heresies, aided too often by the civil power, would have destroyed all eastern Christendom.

Returning to the West, to what is now France, we find the name of St. Hilary (368) high on the list of Doctors. This "Athanasius of the West," as he is often called, is noted for the clarity and fluency of his theological language, many of the phrases he coined being still in use. Then comes St. Peter Chrysologus (450), Bishop of Ravenna, universally admired for his zeal and piety. His eloquence won for him the title of "Golden Speech." His writings include brief and concise homilies on the Scriptures, explanations of the Creed and refutations of Arius and Eutyches.

St. Leo the Great, who ruled the Church from 440 to 461, is, after Gregory the Great, one of the most important popes of the early centuries. A strict disciplinarian and zealous for the purity of the faith, he checked abuses and fought heresy wherever it cropped up. He possessed high moral authority even in civil matters, on one occasion saving Rome from plunder by the Vandals. Many of his sermons and letters have come down to us, the latter being of special importance to students of Church history.

Next we come to the great Bishop of Seville, St. Isidore (636), probably the most learned man of his time, who by his genius welded into one people the discordant races then inhabiting the Spanish Peninsula. He renewed the culture of the whole country, introduced Aristotle to his people long before the Saracens had overrun the land,<sup>8</sup> and wrote a cyclopedia of universal knowledge in which many pieces of classical learning were saved to future ages. Besides all this he was a scripturist, an historian, and wrote compendiums on theology and liturgy.

St. Bede, "The Venerable," is the only Englishman in the list of Doctors. Spending his whole life in the quiet of his monastery, he nevertheless influenced deeply the scholarship both of his own country and of the Continent. His *Ecclesi-*

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<sup>8</sup>*Catholic Encyclopedia*, VIII, 186; Cardinal Zepherin Gonzales, O. P., *Historia de la filosofia* (French translation by R. P. G. de Pascal: Paris, 1890), pp. 114-115.

*astical History of the English People* is the foundation of all present knowledge of early English history. In addition to this memorable work he is known as a great scriptural interpreter and commentator. He was a simple, humble monk, beloved by all, and desiring always to be either learning or teaching.

In the early Middle Ages there are three Saints who have place on this roll of honor. The first is St. Peter Damian, who died in 1072 as Cardinal-Bishop of Ostia. His great work was in purifying the Church and clergy from the scandals and laxity of life prevalent in his day. Friend of the great Hildebrand, later Pope Gregory VII, he aided the latter in his strenuous efforts to reform abuses. He was so continually on journeys as papal ambassador that he is usually depicted in ecclesiastical art as a pilgrim, holding in his hands a papal brief. After him we have St. Anselm (1109), the Italian monk, who became Archbishop of Canterbury. A zealous pastor, he defended the rights of the Church and the Holy See even against his king. His philosophical and theological works, the best known of which is *Cur Deus Homo*, a treatise on the Redemption, make him one of the forerunners of Scholastic theology. The third in this period is St. Bernard (1153), restorer of primitive discipline among the Cistercians and preacher of much-needed reforms to monks, clergy and faithful. He denounced the exaggerated rationalism of Abelard and Gilbert Porretanus, urged the Second Crusade up and down Europe, and was ever, by word and pen, the ardent champion of devotion to the Mother of God. Together with his numerous sermons and homilies he wrote many theological works such as *De Amore Dei*, *De Gratia et Libero Arbitrio* and *De Officiis Episcoporum*.

During the wonderful thirteenth century we have two friars in whom culminated the greatest intellectual revival the Church has ever witnessed. The one, St. Thomas Aquinas (1274), the "Angelic Doctor," by his immense labor for, and devotion to, the cause of truth, gathered together the wisdom of the past, and gave to the Church that marvelous synthesis of Catholic doctrine, the *Summa Theologica*, by which he became her most authoritative teacher. Besides the undying fame this masterpiece has won for him, he is renowned as a preacher, teacher, international diplomat, poet and mystic, and has been proclaimed by the Church Patron of Schools, of Studies and of Purity. He is called "Angelic," not alone by reason of his purity of life, but also because of his glorious intellect which seemed more than

human, the entire working of which he placed unreservedly at the service of religion. The other is his friend, the great Franciscan, St. Bonaventure, who is called the "Seraphic Doctor" because all that he wrote and all that he did had for sole aim, to show forth the Love of God. In theology he treats every subject considered by the Schoolmen. Made a Cardinal much against his will, he was ordered by the Pope to prepare the questions to be discussed at the forthcoming Council of Lyons, during which (1274) he passed to his reward.

There are but four more names to mention in this list of Doctors of the Church, all of whom lived after the Protestant revolt of the sixteenth century. In Spain St. John of the Cross (1591), the "Mystical Doctor," was the unswerving helper of St. Theresa in reforming the Carmelite Order. His mystical writings, which seem based entirely on his own experience, trace the paths of sanctity in a language at once poetical and inevitably logical. While he was depicting the beauties of the interior life, St. Peter Canisius, one of the glories of the Society of Jesus, was writing and preaching incessantly throughout Central Europe to gain back to the true fold those led astray by the so-called Reformers. A papal theologian during the Council of Trent and secret nuncio of Pius IV in delivering the decrees of that Council in Germany, he did much for the cause of Catholicism by his ceaseless labors.

St. Francis De Sales, Bishop of Geneva (1622), the "Gentleman of God," is our next Doctor of the Church and is also one of the most loved Saints of modern times. Though a renowned preacher and defender of the faith, for which reason he has been hailed by the Church as Patron of the Catholic Press, he is more known today as a director of souls. Besides his well known *Introduction to a Devout Life* which is filled with true solid piety and common sense, he was the author of many other works on spiritual and ascetic subjects.

The last of the Doctors, in point of time, is St. Alphonsus Ligouri who died in 1787. Called by many the "Prince of Moral Theologians," no name has greater weight in questions of practical morality. He was the Founder of the Redemptorist Congregation and a stern adversary of Rigorism and Jansenism, weeds that, under the guise of greater reverence for God, choked down true love for Him.

Thus have passed before us, in review all too brief, these models of holiness, peers of thought, leaders in the intellectual



life of Holy Mother the Church and defenders of her doctrine and discipline. A full study of the life of any one would teach many lessons. They were not plaster saints, wrapped up in self-contemplation, but real men, zealous for God's glory and guarding the honor of His Spouse the Church, revealing her in all the facets of her wondrous beauty to her children of all ages. They were human, sometimes with very human failings, but always they were men who placed the integrity of the Christian faith above all else. Because they loved justice, the Holy Ghost kept his promise, and their minds were filled with wisdom and understanding and now, in Heaven, He has rewarded them with a "robe of glory" for having fought so well the good fight. In reading their lives, their two most characteristic qualities may be summed up in the lines of Patmore:

"Humility and greatness grace the task  
Which he who does it deems impossible."

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## AT MIDNIGHT MASS

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*BRO. CAMILLUS BOYD, O. P.*

The hills are mantled with the night,  
December winds have chilled the earth,  
When lo! the heavens fill with light  
And angels tell the Christchild's birth.

O Little Babe of Mary born,  
The Promised One of ages long,  
No wealth bedecks Thy natal morn  
Though angels sing Thy cradle song.

At Midnight Mass in prayer we kneel  
Whilst Thou art born on altars bright.  
Let us, Sweet Babe, Thy presence feel—  
Our heart, Thy manger be tonight.