

OUTREACH AND RENEWAL

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OUTREACH AND RENEWAL

A First-Millennium Legacy for the
Third-Millennium Church

James McSherry



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ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used throughout the footnotes:

- ACW Ancient Christian Writers. Westminster, MD: Newman Press; New York: Paulist Press, 1946–.
- ANF The Ante-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996.
- CF Cistercian Fathers Series. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1970–.
- CUAP Catholic University of America Press.
- ECL *Early Christian Lives: Life of Antony by Athanasius, Life of Paul of Thebes by Jerome, Life of Hilarion by Jerome, Life of Malchus by Jerome, Life of Martin of Tours by Sulpicius Severus, Life of Benedict by Gregory the Great.* Translated by Carolinne White. London: Penguin Books, 1998.
- ECW *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers: The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians. The Epistles of Ignatius; The Epistle of Polycarp of Smyrna; The Martyrdom of Polycarp; Didache.* Translated by Maxwell Staniforth. Early Christian Writings. New York: Dorset Press, 1993.
- FCh Fathers of the Church. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1948–.
- JB Jerusalem Bible.
- NPNF A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church. Edited by Philip Schaff et al. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996–98; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999.

- WF *The Western Fathers: Being the Lives of SS. Martin of Tours by Sulpicius Severus, Ambrose by Paulinus, Augustine of Hippo by Possidius, Honoratus of Arles and Germanus of Auxerre.* Translated by F. R. Hoare. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1954.

PREFACE

Several years ago I read Daniel Conneely's *Letters of Saint Patrick*, in which the missionary's work is viewed in the context of the patristic era. The experience led me to revisit a group of spiritual guides whose names and inspiring exploits were common currency until the sixties of the last century but who have fallen from public view in recent times. The fathers of the Church were products of the late classical and early medieval world of a rapidly disintegrating empire. They served a body which was so beleaguered that one of their number, Gregory the Great, feared shipwreck from the storms through which he guided it.

The fathers' emulation of the ascetics and association with monasticism inspired their passionate commitment to sharing the Gospel message, defending it against attack, renewing the Church in its decline, and salving the fears and material needs of peoples enduring war, famine, and poverty. While both fathers and ascetics may have been larger than life in their willingness to endure sacrifice and criticism in support of the faith of fellow Christians, they never failed to retain their humanity. Their rich legacy supplies the theme of this study.

I am indebted to the scholars whose lucid assessments of the lives and works of the fathers were consulted during the research process. Their writings led me, in turn, to the translations of the sources on which much of *Outreach and Renewal* is based. I refer here not merely to monumental series like *Fathers of the Church* or *Ante-Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, but to the many individual renderings of patristic works acknowledged in the bibliography.

I wish to thank Father Mark Scott, executive editor of Cistercian Publications, for the patience and insight with which he steered the enterprise in the direction of publication. His advice and encouragement, delivered with sensitivity and humor, ensured that *Outreach and Renewal* advanced

much more smoothly and steadily than I could have anticipated. Sincere thanks also to Stephanie Nix, Colleen Stiller, and Lauren L. Murphy of Liturgical Press, valued guides through the demanding final stages of preparation for publication. Finally, not least to my wife Kathleen I express my gratitude for her understanding, tolerance, support, and invariably pertinent observations on the work in hand.

INTRODUCTION

Acts of the Apostles opens with the birth of the Church at Pentecost, when the disciples, “filled with the Holy Spirit,” answered Christ’s call to “proclaim the good news to the whole creation.”¹ Referring to the numerous people of differing origins and degrees who heard the apostolic message of salvation at that time, Saint Luke speaks of those who responded with faith remaining true to the “teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” Luke goes on to trace the progress of the faith from Palestine to Syria, through Asia Minor, to Greece and Rome. Just thirty years after Christ’s initial call to the apostles, Saint Paul was contemplating a journey to Spain.²

The successors of the apostles continued to praise the beneficent God who had created human beings in his own image and restored them to favor when they fell from grace. They urged the faithful to respond with love, worship, and acceptance of God’s will. Many of these spiritual guides were later acclaimed as fathers of the Church.³ Most of the fathers were bishops and ascetics; some were martyred in the early persecutions. In the apostolic tradition, they proclaimed the Good News of redemption, and reminded Christians that, as members of a community which is both human and divine, individual believers and the entire body of faithful are in perennial need of renewal.

Aware that human frailty had been a feature of even the apostolic era, the fathers of the fourth century were equipped to counter the decline in

¹ Acts 2:1–4; Mark 16:15.

² Acts 2:42–47; Rom 15:23–24.

³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.26.2, revised. Cleveland Coxe, Alexander Roberts, and James Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996) 497.

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faith and religious practice which accompanied the advent of religious freedom. Seeking to support believers and inspire them to persevere in their baptismal commitment, they invoked God's grace and gave a priestly witness which recalled the example of the martyrs. They also emulated the ascetics who, from the early fourth century, began to leave the imperial cities for the deserts of Egypt, where they served God and neighbor through prayer and self-sacrifice. Recognizing that these individuals were worthy of emulation, fathers like Basil, Jerome, Gregory of Nazianzen, and Ambrose adopted the same simplicity of life and dedication to God's service. They encouraged bishops and priests to live communally and frugally, sharing their resources in the spirit of the early Church.

The vigor of the ascetic movement was such that, by the fifth and sixth centuries, Gaul and Ireland in the far west had become noted centers of monasticism. A number of influential biographies celebrated admired ascetics like Antony the desert father and Martin of Tours. Antony's story was written in the mid-fourth century. Martin's was published in 398. The same year saw the appearance of Augustine's *Confessions*, in which the writer traces his personal journey from arrant pride to humility, from unbelief to a faith worthy of the desert ascetics. Just over fifty years later, Patrick, an obscure bishop whose life of mission resembled Martin's, wrote his brief and moving *Confession*. A millennium and a half later, Christians still gain inspiration from these spiritual testimonies.

The role of the fathers was defined by Augustine when, in the early fifth century, he described his predecessors as "brilliant advocates" placed by God at different times and in different places for the good of the Christian body and the inspiration of believers.⁴ On their difficult and often dangerous mission they were fortified by a strong sense of spiritual comradeship, captured by Gregory of Nazianzen in his oration on the death of Basil. In the famed bishop, whom he had known since boyhood, he found the "faithful friend" of Ecclesiasticus, "a sturdy shelter" and "a treasure" whose excellence was immeasurable. And since Basil was also "a child of light, a man of God," he was "truly a gift from God."⁵

⁴ Augustine, *Against Julian*, 2.10.33, trans. Matthew A. Schumaker, *The Fathers of the Church*, 35 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1981) 97.

⁵ Gregory of Nazianzen, *Oration 11.1*, trans. Martha Vinson, *FCh 107:30*; *Sir 6:14-15*.

The patristic era began with Clement of Rome, who was martyred around AD 100. Its approaching end was signaled by the death of Gregory the Great in 604. In the course of those centuries, fathers of east and west met the spiritual, moral, and material needs of fellow Christians. Clement's generation endured persecution by the Roman state. By Gregory's time, persecution was long past. However, with the empire moving toward extinction, entire societies were suffering the horrors of invasion and internecine warfare, which further undermined belief and practice.

From first to last, the fathers preached the Gospel with a confidence that was alive to the realities of Christian living. In a surviving letter, Clement sought to resolve disagreements and divisions among Christians. Five centuries later, in a time of extreme social disruption, Gregory saw the Church as a ship threatened on every side by dangerous billows, with some of its timbers damaged by the buffeting.⁶ From the beginning, the faith was threatened by dangers from within and without. Direct attack through misrepresentation and persecution was answered by apologists and martyrs. Divisions, heresies, or schisms involving individuals or groups in the believing community were combated by the fathers and resolved by Church councils.

The work of the fathers and ascetics did not end with the death of Saint Gregory, for devoted followers continued to propagate patristic teaching through the first millennium and beyond. Within a century of the pope's passing, the English monk Bede was relaying the Good News in works that retained their popularity for centuries. Lauding Gregory as his inspiration and the source of his country's conversion, he hailed the contribution of Irish ascetics to the spiritual regeneration of the north of England. It was an achievement facilitated by Ireland's comparative freedom from the ravages of barbarian invasion.

Irish commitment to monasticism had begun with the missions of Palladius and Patrick, which were initiated thirty years after the death of Martin of Tours. It was a period dominated by some of the most influential patristic teachers. Ireland's early adherence to the monastic ideal was rewarded early in the second millennium, when, at the nadir of its own decline, its church was supported by Anselm and Bernard, ascetics who were among the most celebrated followers of the fathers.

⁶ Gregory the Great, Letters 1.43, trans. James Barmby, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997) 87–88.

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In the seventh century, English monks led a mission to the pagan lands of western continental Europe, a venture which culminated in the work of Boniface, apostle to the German people. Boniface's mission proved to be a stepping-stone to Charlemagne's famed social and religious renaissance, whose leading scholastic lights were products of the cathedral schools and monasteries of Europe. Drawing on the teachings of the fathers, they promoted education of the clergy, study of the Scriptures, and renewal of the liturgy. Though it incorporated a darker aspect, this renewal was of great assistance to future generations of Christians through its transcription and preservation of the Scriptures, the works of the fathers, and, not least, the *Rule of Saint Benedict*.

During the final centuries of the first millennium, as fragmentation of the Carolingian Empire brought further religious decline, ascetic followers of the fathers led another revival. Cluny was founded in the early tenth century. In the eleventh, Pope Gregory VII, a former monk, emulated his sixth-century namesake by inviting monastic communities to join him in a major work of spiritual renewal.

It was in the context of Gregory's reform that Christians benefited from the works and example of two ascetics whose influence has persisted into the present century. Anselm developed Augustine's synthesis of philosophy and theology, reason and faith in writings that are still fresh and accessible. Bernard's continuing contribution to monasticism is universally acknowledged. His letters illuminate the great issues of the twelfth century, while the biblical commentaries, passion for asceticism, and fearless defense of the faith have seen him hailed as "last of the fathers." Anselm should share that honor, for the witness and writings of both men helped to ensure an effective presentation of the apostolic teaching through the second millennium and beyond.