

SPIRITUALITY OF THE EARLY CHURCH

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In his sermons and parables Christ frequently stated that the kingdom of God would be rejected by the Jews and accepted by the Gentiles, although the Jews remained the Chosen People. Jerusalem was in fact the cradle of the Church; the majority of the first converts were Jews and the early Church followed the Jewish observances until the Council of Jerusalem, about the year 51. The rule of conduct promulgated by the Council dispensed the Christians from the Jewish observances but, following the suggestion of St. James, obliged them to abstain from things sacrificed to idols, from blood, from things strangled and from fornication (Acts 15:28 ff). In spite of the protests and tactics of the Judaizers, the Gentile Christians ultimately prevailed and the conflict gradually subsided.⁽¹⁾

In the Didache or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, written sometime between 70 and 100, we find a great deal of information about the Christian life in the early Church. It mentions, for example, the organization of the hierarchy that emerged at this period: apostles, prophets, doctors, bishops, priests and deacons.⁽²⁾ The moral teaching of the Didache is explicit and severe, as a protection, no doubt, against the immorality and superstition of the pagan world in which the early Christians lived. It is probable that, except for the Gospel of St. John, his Letters and the Book of Revelation, the entire New Testament was composed before the writing of the Didache. Consequently the Didache is an important link between the Acts of the Apostles and the Apostolic Fathers, and it is to their writings that we turn for a more detailed description of the spirituality of the early Church.

THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

As the writings of the apostles were an authentic record of the teachings

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of Christ, so also the works of the earliest Christian writers, called the "Apostolic Fathers," were a transmission of the teaching of the apostles. They were, for the most part, men who had either known the apostles themselves or had known persons closely associated with them. Yet, the written documents of this period are few in number and, as Bouyer points out, "the importance of an oral tradition... makes the few original texts bequeathed to us from this period of quite secondary importance."⁽³⁾

The patrologist Coteher seems to have been the first to classify some of the early writers as "Apostolic Fathers" (in 1672). He listed them as follows:

-- Barnabas, considered by ancient writers such as St. Clement and Origen to be the apostle by the same name and a companion of St. Paul, but modern criticism rejects this theory and refers to a pseudo-Barnabas who was an intellectual and possibly a Gnostic. He was the author of a work consisting of 21 chapters and known as the Letter of Barnabas. It gives an allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament and not only insists that Christ is the culmination of the law and the prophets, but affirms that the covenant belongs exclusively to the followers of Christ. The Jews have been definitively rejected. Nevertheless, the Letter is permeated with a sense of joy at the reception of the good news of the Gospel, and the author lists hope, justice and love as the fundamental Christian virtues.

-- St. Clement of Rome, the third successor of St. Peter as Bishop of Rome, who addressed a Letter to the Church of Corinth in the year 95 or 96, during or immediately after the persecution by Domitian.

The occasion of the Letter was the division caused in the Church of Corinth by certain proud, ambitious and envious members. Recalling the former glory of the Church of Corinth, St. Clement pleads for a return to peace and unity in the name of Christ, who shed his blood for our salvation.

Hermas, author of The Shepherd, a work that enjoyed such prestige that St. Irenaeus, Tertullian and Origen considered it to be part of Sacred Scripture. Although he was once considered to be the Hernias referred to in St. Paul's Letter to the Romans (16:14), it is now believed that he was a brother of Pope St. Pius I, whose pontificate extended from 140 to 155.

The Shepherd consists of a description of five visions received by Hermas, and in the fifth vision the Shepherd appears and dictates to Hermas twelve precepts and ten parables. The work is valuable because it offers a rather complete description of the daily life of fervent Christians in the early Church.

--St. Ignatius of Antioch, bishop and martyr, who added the pseudonym "Theophorus" to his given name. He was a disciple of St. Peter, who named him as his successor to the See of Antioch. During his voyage to Rome, under arrest, St. Ignatius wrote seven letters that are marvelous testimonies of his steadfast faith and his ardent desire for martyrdom. In his letters he develops three themes that were characteristic of early Christian spirituality: Christ, the Church and martyrdom.

-- St. Polycarp, who had heard the preaching of St. John the Apostle and

was named by St. John to be the Bishop of Smyrna. He was also a dear friend of St. Ignatius of Antioch. In a letter written by St. Irenaeus to the Roman priest Florinus we find conclusive evidence that St. Polycarp is one of our most important links with apostolic times. St. Polycarp received the martyr's crown in 156.

Two documents are extant concerning him: his Letter to the Philippians and the account of his martyrdom, recorded in the Martyrium.

In 1765 the Oratorian Gallandi added to the list of Apostolic Fathers the names of Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis (said to have been among those who heard the preaching of St. John the Evangelist) and the unknown author of the Letter to Diognetus. Papias is the author of a work that explains the teaching of Christ and is valuable as a link with the preaching of the apostles, but only fragments of his work remain. The author of the Letter to Diognetus, however, would more properly be classified among the Greek apologists than among the Apostolic Fathers.

Finally, the Didache (mentioned previously) was discovered in 1873 by the Greek Archbishop Bryennios in the library of the Hospital of the Holy Sepulchre in Constantinople. The codex also contained two letters of St. Clement of Rome and the Letter of Barnabas. The author is unknown, as is the date of composition of the Didache. The presumption is that it was composed by a person of authority in the Church in either Syria or Palestine, but while some historians place the date of composition between the years 50 and 70, others place it anywhere from 70 to 100.

The doctrine contained in the Didache is eminently liturgical and sacramental and in that sense served well as a catechesis for the reception of baptism. There is also a distinction made between the precepts and the counsels and a reference to Christian perfection, although there is no attempt to classify Christians into vocations or states of life. The Church is seen as a community of saints and one enters the community through baptism, but within that community everything converges on the Eucharist.

And since the term "Christian" appears in the Didache, some historians have conjectured that the work was composed at Antioch, where the followers of Christ were first called Christians.⁽⁴⁾

It should be evident from the foregoing brief description that the Apostolic Fathers are not a homogeneous group. They differ in many respects -- as regards their authority, places of origin, subjects treated -- and to such an extent that the only thing they have in common is that all of them are witnesses to the spirituality of the primitive Church. Consequently, the various writings from the apostolic era do not have the same value for the history of spirituality; in fact, authors usually name the following as the most important documents: St. Clement of Rome's Letter to the Church of Corinth, the Didache and the letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch.

None of the writings offer a systematic and structured theology of the Christian life; that had to await the rise of the schools of theology under the guidance of St. Clement of Alexandria, Origen and St. Gregory of Nyssa.

Nevertheless, the experience of Christian living and the theology of the spiritual life were already developed and at least partially described in St. John the Evangelist, St. Paul, and their disciples, St. Ignatius of Antioch, St. Polycarp, Papias and the author of the Didache.

The Church was not yet "institutionalized" in this first century of its existence, nor was it "one and catholic" in the sense that we understand those terms today. There was, however, a hierarchical structure, with recognition of the primacy of St. Peter and his successors, and there was a liturgical tradition focusing on the Eucharist. The local churches, such as the Church of Corinth or of Philippi, enjoyed great autonomy, and within these churches there was as yet no organized grouping of Christians into various states of life such as religious life or presbyterate.

That would soon evolve, but for the present the distinctions were as often as not on the basis of charismatic gifts or ministries, as St. Paul described them in I Cor. 12-14. We can, however, describe the spiritual life of the early Church in general terms by listing its predominant themes or characteristics.

CHRISTIAN LIFE

First of all, early Christian spirituality was Christocentric, both because the words and deeds of Christ were still fresh in the minds of Christians (thanks to those who had been witnesses to the Lord) and because Christians lived in anticipation of the return of the risen Christ. "We should have but a very incomplete idea of the spirituality of this period," says Pourrat, "if we did not note the altogether preponderating position which the person of Christ holds in it Jesus is constantly set before the faithful as a pattern for the Christian and as the ideal of sanctity Jesus was to the first Christians no abstract ideal. The very definite feeling of his presence in the Church and in the hearts of the faithful was everywhere displayed."⁽⁵⁾ The presence of Christ was experienced especially in the liturgical context of Eucharist, prayer and biblical homily.

Of the writings that remain from this period, the Christological emphasis is especially noteworthy in the letter of St. Clement of Rome to the Church of Corinth, the letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch and the letter of pseudo-Barnabas. So intense was St. Clement's love for Christ that some have suggested that he may have been the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, but this theory is without foundation. Nevertheless, his Christocentric teaching is amply evident in his Letter to the Corinthians, and especially in the sublime passage contained in Chapter 36, where St. Clement refers to Christ, the High Priest, as our road to salvation and our protector and support in our weakness. He repeatedly uses the expressions "in Christ" and "through Christ", which still appear in the prayers of the Church's liturgy. Christ is the Mediator between God and the Church, and the entire economy of salvation is effected in three stages: Christ is sent by the Father; the apostles are sent by Christ; and from the apostles we receive

the good news of salvation.

The unknown author of the Letter of Barnabas was one of the earliest defenders of the divinity of Christ and he shares this honor with St. Ignatius of Antioch. Two great heresies were flourishing in the churches of the East: the one was a denial of the divinity of Christ, and it gained great acceptance in the churches of Magnesia and Philadelphia; the other was a denial of the humanity of Christ and was rampant in the churches of Tralles, Smyrna and Ephesus. St. Ignatius responded to both of these heterodox doctrines, as the following citations demonstrate:

There is one God, who manifested himself through Jesus Christ, his Son Be diligent therefore to be confirmed in the ordinances of the Lord and the apostles... in the Son and the Father and the Spirit God manifested himself through Jesus Christ, his Son, who is his Word proceeding from silence.⁽⁶⁾

[Christ] is in truth of the family of David according to the flesh... truly born of a virgin... truly nailed to a tree in the flesh for our sakes I know and believe that he was in the flesh even after the resurrection.⁽⁷⁾

Finally, St. Ignatius recognizes the unity between Christ and his Church and urges his readers to imitate Christ in order to be united with him as individual Christians:

My charter is Jesus Christ... his cross and his death and resurrection, and faith through him; wherein I hope to be justified.⁽⁸⁾

Even as where Jesus may be, there is the universal Church.⁽⁹⁾

Jesus Christ is our only teacher, of whom even the prophets were disciples in the Spirit and to whom they looked forward as their teacher.⁽¹⁰⁾

Even the things you do in the flesh are spiritual, for you do all things in union with Jesus Christ.⁽¹¹⁾

Do as Jesus Christ did, for he also did as the Father did.⁽¹²⁾

Secondly, early Christian spirituality was eschatological, for the primary concern of the first Christians was vigilant preparation for the parousia or second coming of Christ. This expectation was fortified by a literal interpretation of Revelation 20:1-10, which in turn gave rise to the doctrine called Millenarianism.⁽¹³⁾ On numerous occasions Christ had announced his second coming and he had likewise insisted that his followers are not of this world, that they have not here an abiding city. Consequently, the early Christians experienced the tension of living in an intermediate state; they were a Church in vigil, and since they felt that the second coming was imminent, they lived as if the Church was already in the last days.

The eschatological element is especially evident in the Didache, the letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch, Papias, and to some extent in the letter of pseudo-Barnabas. For example, we read in the Didache:

Watch for your life. Let not your lamps be quenched, nor your loins be loosed, but be ready, for we know not the hour in which our Lord will come.

Gather yourselves together frequently, seeking the things that are fitting for your souls; for the whole time of your faith shall not profit you unless

you be made perfect in the last time. For in the last days the false prophets and corrupters shall be multiplied, and the sheep shall turn into wolves, and love shall turn into hate.

Because of the increase of iniquity men shall hate and persecute and betray each other; and then shall the deceiver of the world appear as the Son of God, and shall do signs and wonders, and the earth shall be given over to his hands, and he shall do unlawful things that have never happened since the world began.

Then shall come the judgment of men into the fiery trial, and many shall offend and perish. But those who remain steadfast in their faith shall be saved from the power of the curse.

And then shall the signs of the truth appear: first the sign of the unrolling of heaven, then the sign of the sound of the trumpet, and the third shall be the resurrection of the dead.

Yet not of all the dead; but as it was said: "The Lord shall come, and all his saints with him."

Then shall the world see the Lord coming above the clouds of heaven.⁽¹⁴⁾

Thirdly, primitive Christian spirituality was ascetical, but the word "ascetical" should be understood in its original meaning of the practice and growth of the virtues rather than acts of austerity and self-denial. Later, asceticism would develop into a way of life practiced by a particular class of people within the Church, but in these early days asceticism was a logical consequence of the Christocentric and eschatological aspects of Christian spirituality.

Following the teaching of St. Paul, St. Ignatius of Antioch had urged the imitation of Christ as a duty for all Christians. Martyrdom, of course, was considered the supreme example of the imitation of Christ, and of this, St. Ignatius gives the clearest and most inspiring testimony; but for the generality of Christians as yet untouched by persecution, the imitation of Christ was achieved by the practice of virtue. Thus, the early Christians were renowned for the virtues of fraternal charity, humility, patience, obedience, chastity and the practice of prayer, as we learn from the moral teaching of the Didache. To cultivate and safeguard these virtues, they soon found it necessary to resort to practices of austerity and some degree of separation from the world. Eventually the forms of asceticism most widely respected were the practice of celibacy, freely accepted by both sexes, and the continence of widows. Yet St. Clement and St. Ignatius never allowed the early Christians to forget that the greatest of all the virtues is charity. Thus, in lyrical terms reminiscent of St. Paul's hymn to charity, St. Clement writes:

Who can explain the bond of divine charity? Who is capable of describing its sublime beauty? The height to which charity raises us is ineffable. Charity unites us with God; charity covers a multitude of sins; it suffers all and bears with all. There is nothing base in charity, nothing of

pride. It does not foment schism; it is not seditious; it does everything in concord. Charity achieves the perfection of all the elect of God, but without charity nothing is pleasing to God. The Lord has gathered us all to himself in charity and by the charity he had for us, Jesus Christ our Lord, in obedience to the will of God, gave his blood for us, his flesh for our flesh, his soul for our souls. Now you see, dearly beloved, what a great and admirable thing is charity and that there are no words to describe its exalted perfection.⁽¹⁵⁾

We have seen that St. Ignatius of Antioch urged the imitation of Christ as a duty of all Christians; we have likewise seen that St. Clement of Rome praised charity as the bond of perfection. For St. Ignatius the greatest act of charity and the most perfect imitation of Christ was found in martyrdom. For that reason he wrote in his letter to the Romans: "Permit me to be an imitator of the Passion of my God." In the same letter to the Romans we find a passage that was extracted by Eusebius and through the efforts of St. Jerome has been handed down through the centuries as a stirring testimony to martyrdom as the perfection of charity and the sure means of union with Christ:

Pray for me, that God will give me both inward and outward strength, so that I may not only be called a Christian but found to be one I write to the churches and signify to them all that I am willing to die for God Suffer me to be food to the wild beasts, by whom I shall attain to God. For I am the wheat of God; and I shall be ground by the teeth of the wild beasts that I may become the pure bread of Christ Let fire and the cross, let the band of wild beasts, let the breaking of bones and the tearing of members, let the shattering in pieces of the entire body and all the wicked torments of the devil come upon me; only let me enjoy Jesus Christ.⁽¹⁶⁾

The relationship between asceticism and eschatology is likewise evident in the early Church. Living as they did under the impression that the second coming was imminent, though uncertain as to the exact hour, the first Christians realized that it profited them little to accumulate worldly possessions or to be preoccupied with the affairs of this life. They were expecting the Lord's return, and even when it became evident that the waiting period would be longer than first anticipated, they never lost sight of the parousia.

In the literature of the period, ascetical and moral instruction can be found in the *Didache*, the letter of St. Clement and the *Shepherd of Hermias*. Finally, in the *Letter to Diognetus*, the life of Christians is described as follows:

They dwell in their own fatherlands, but as if sojourners in them; they share all things as citizens, and suffer all things as strangers. Every foreign country is their fatherland, and every fatherland is a foreign country. They marry as all men, they bear children, but they do not expose their offspring. They offer free hospitality, but guard their purity. Their lot is cast "in the flesh," but they do not live "after the flesh." They pass their time upon the

earth, but they have their citizenship in heaven. They obey the appointed laws, and they surpass the laws in their own lives. They love all men and are persecuted by all men. They are unknown and they are condemned. They are put to death and they gain life.⁽¹⁷⁾

Fourthly, primitive Christian spirituality was liturgical. Bouyer notes that "it is to Clement, apparently, that we owe the meaning which Christianity was to attach precisely to this word, 'liturgy.' Using it in the traditional Greek sense of the public service rendered by an individual to the community, Clement applies it for the first time to Christian worship."⁽¹⁸⁾ The focal point of the liturgical life was the Eucharist and "nothing is more revealing both of the newness of Christianity and also of its permanent root in the ground of Jewish spirituality than an examination of the eucharistic formulas left to us by the primitive Church as compared with those of Judaism."⁽¹⁹⁾ The Didache contains a series of eucharistic prayers which are in reality Jewish blessings with Christian insertions.

We give thee thanks, our Father, for the holy vine of David, thy servant, which thou hast made known to us by Jesus Christ thy Servant. Glory be to thee forever.

We give thee thanks, our Father, for the life and knowledge which thou hast made known to us by Jesus Christ thy Servant. Glory be to thee forever.

As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains, and being gathered together became one, so let thy Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into thy kingdom; for thine is the glory and the power, through Jesus Christ, forever.⁽²⁰⁾

According to the Acts of the Apostles, three important rites dominated the liturgy of the apostolic times: baptism, the imposition of hands and the breaking of bread. By baptism the candidate was admitted as a full-fledged member of the Christian community; the imposition of hands on baptized Christians conferred the Holy Spirit, and this was sometimes accompanied by special graces or charisms; but the most solemn ceremony of Christianity was the breaking of bread, done in memory of the Last Supper as Christ had commanded. It was in this ceremony more than any other that the Christian experienced -the presence of Christ. Here Christ, in his paschal mystery, was present; here the parousia or second coming was anticipated.

As in the Passover celebrated by Christ at the Last Supper, there were two distinct parts to the Eucharistic liturgy. First was the common meal, celebrated in the evening and accompanied by prayer formulas that were essentially Jewish. At the close of the meal the celebration of the Eucharist or the breaking of bread took place. The reception of the Eucharist was preceded by a prayer over the bread and wine and followed by a prayer of thanksgiving. As Evdokimov describes it: "At the time of the liturgy, the people are convoked first to hear and then to consume the Word."⁽²¹⁾ We should also note that the apostles and their disciples met three times each day for prayer, preferably at nine o'clock in the morning, at midday and at three in the afternoon.

Wednesdays and Fridays -- and later Saturdays -- were observed as days of penance.⁽²²⁾

Finally, early Christian spirituality was communal or social. From the beginning, as we know from the Acts of the Apostles, the common life was an essential element of the Church. Theologically, it provided a setting in which the Christians could practice fraternal charity; liturgically, it was required by the very nature of the Eucharistic liturgy and common prayer. Community life, in turn, required the sharing of common possessions, if only to prevent the separatist individualism that is occasioned by personal dominion. Of all the elements of the apostolic life, the common life was most fundamental, and of all the practices of the common life, the sharing of goods seems to have received the greatest emphasis. This, at least, is the testimony of the Acts of the Apostles:

These remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers The faithful all lived together and owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and shared out the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed. They went as a body to the Temple every day but met in their houses for the breaking of bread; they shared their food gladly and generously; they praised God and were looked up to by everyone. Day by day the Lord added to their community those destined to be saved (Acts 2:42-47).

The whole group of believers was united, heart and soul; no one claimed for his own use anything that he had, as everything they owned was held in common. The apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus with great power, and they were all given great respect. None of their members was ever in want, as all those who owned land or houses would sell them, and bring the money from them, to present it to the apostles; it was then distributed to any members who might be in need (Acts 4:32-35).

As the membership of the Church grew, however, the communal life could no longer be observed as it was in the days of the apostles. Changes were inevitable in a developing and expanding Church. As more and more Gentiles were converted, it became necessary to dispense them from the observance of certain Judaic customs that still prevailed in the Church. As the Church grew in numbers, becoming more universal and less parochial, it was not possible to preserve the close personal relationships in community that had previously characterized the local churches. Finally, with the end of the persecutions and the freedom granted to Christians to practice their religion openly and without fear, there was no longer any external pressure causing the Christians to cling together for mutual protection and security.

Unfortunately, the growth and expansion of the Church during the first few centuries did not proceed without conflict. Even before the persecutions ended, the Church was beset by internal crises caused by heresy, schism and controversy. The first crisis was that of the judaizing spirit caused by excessive nationalism; the second was the Hellenistic influence that gave

rise to the various forms of Gnosticism; the third was the exaggerated autonomy of the local churches that led to controversies about baptism, penance, Easter and hierarchical authority. The most perduring of these crises was the one caused by Gnosticism, which in one form or another has plagued the Church throughout the centuries.

CHRISTIAN GNOSTICISM

Because of the excesses to which it led, Gnosticism is generally condemned outright as an attempt to Hellenize Christianity by adapting the Gospel to Greek philosophy. This was not so from the beginning, however, for the first phase of Gnosticism was simply an effort to express in philosophical terms the moral and doctrinal content of Sacred Scripture. It is only later, toward the end of the second century, that some Gnostics promulgated the doctrine of the dual principle of creation and the erroneous conclusions that follow from such a doctrine. Thus, according to Bouyer, Gnosticism "was not originally a heterodox idea, either in Christianity or in Judaism. The Alexandrian Christians did not need to introduce it into orthodox Christianity, for the simple reason that it had always had an important place in it. Even with these Christians, even with Clement -- the Christian theologian doubtless most infatuated with Greek philosophy -- gnosis was never defined by the combination of Christianity and philosophy. As Clement says: '... Gnosis is the knowledge of the Name and the understanding of the Gospel'. "⁽²³⁾ As a matter of fact, Dupont concludes that the meaning of gnosis as used by St. Paul owes nothing to Greek philosophy and that even in later Hellenism (e.g., in Philo's works) gnosis refers to knowledge of God only as a result of the Greek Bibles."⁽²⁴⁾

In St. Paul, therefore, gnosis signified the knowledge of God, knowledge of the mysteries or secrets of God, and the understanding of the mystery of Christ (Eph. 3:i4-r9). In St. John, gnosis is united with love and takes on mystical qualities. Reflections of the Pauline and Johannine doctrine are found in the Didache, in the Shepherd of Hermias and in the letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch, but it is in St. Clement of Rome and the pseudo-Barnabas that the doctrine of gnosis is clearly set forth. Then, when heretical Gnosticism began to flourish, St. Justin and St. Irenaeus defended Christian gnosis against "pseudo-gnosis."⁽²⁵⁾ It has been said of St. Irenaeus that he destroyed Gnosticism and introduced orthodox Christian theology.

St. Justin's first defense of Christian doctrine was published around the year 150; his second defense appeared in 155; his Dialogue with Trypho around the year 160. According to St. Justin, Christianity is the one, true and universal religion because the truth is fully manifested in Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, the ancient religions and even the Greek philosophers possess the seed of truth, and to the extent that they do, they are partakers of Christ, the Word. Therefore, the teachings of the Greek philosophers are not entirely contrary to Christian truth and need not be rejected in toto. But St. Justin insists that natural reason alone is not sufficient for attaining salvation

or the complete truth; one also needs interior grace and external revelation. Accordingly, although St. Justin and the other Christian apologists tried to express the Christian truths in philosophical language, they were not philosophers primarily, but Christian theologians, defending and explaining the truths of revelation by reason. Revelation of the truth and acceptance of that truth through faith were always the starting point of their philosophizing.

As a witness to the faith and teaching of the Church, St. Justin speaks with great authority, and this is especially true of his description of the Eucharistic liturgy. He was one of the first apologists to divulge the "secret" of the liturgy which, up to that time, was carefully concealed from the pagans.

On the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together in one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits. Then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray

Having ended the prayers, we salute one another with a kiss of peace. There is then brought to the president of the brethren bread and a cup of wine mixed with water. And he taking them, gives praise and glory to the Father of the universe, through the name of the Son and the Holy Spirit, and offers thanks at considerable length for our being accounted worthy to receive these things at his hands. And when he has concluded the prayers and thanksgivings, all the people present express their assent by saying Amen

And when the president has confected the Eucharist, and all the people have expressed their assent, those who are called by us deacons give to each of those present to partake of the bread and wine mixed with water, over which the thanksgiving was pronounced, and for those who are absent they carry away a portion.

And this food is called among us the Eucharist, of which no one is allowed to partake but the person who believes that the things which we teach are true, and who has been washed with the washing that is for the remission of sins and unto regeneration, and who is living as Christ has enjoined. For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these, but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Savior, having been made flesh by the Word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise we have been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of his Word, and from which our blood and flesh by transmutation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.

For the apostles, in the memoirs composed by them, which are called Gospels, have thus delivered unto us what was enjoined upon them: that Jesus took bread and, when he had given thanks, said: "This do ye in remembrance of me; this is my Body"; and that, after the same manner, having taken the cup and given thanks, he said: "This is my Blood." And he

gave it to them alone Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God made the world, and Jesus Christ our Savior on the same day rose from the dead.⁽²⁶⁾

The second outstanding defender of Christian doctrine against the heterodox Gnostics was St. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, who probably suffered martyrdom in 202. In his monumental work, *Against Heresies*, St. Irenaeus refuted the errors of Marcion, who taught a heretical dualism and denied the humanity of Christ. After demonstrating that Marcion's Gnosticism must necessarily lead either to dualism or pantheism, St. Irenaeus presents a synthesis of orthodox Christian theology. Like St. Justin, he rested his case on the deposit of faith as found in Scripture and handed down by apostolic tradition: "The only true and life-giving faith, the Church has received from the apostles and imparted to the faithful. For the Lord of all gave to his apostles the power of the Gospel, through whom also we have known the truth, that is, the doctrine of the Son of God; to whom also the Lord declared: 'He who hears you, hears me...'. The Church is the Church of God Where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God."⁽²⁷⁾

While Tertullian was defending the synthesis composed by St. Irenaeus -- sometimes almost too zealously -- Clement of Alexandria and his disciple Origen were expounding a truly Christian Gnosticism at the School of Alexandria. For Clement the Christian life is composed of stages through which the individual passes to the state of perfection; the various stages are called "mansions of the soul." The mansions are classified as holy fear, faith and hope, and finally charity. Actually, not all souls reach the final stage and therefore Christians are divided into those of "ordinary faith" and those who are true gnostics (perfect faith).⁽²⁸⁾ The gnostic or perfect Christian is characterized by contemplation, obedience to the precepts, and the instruction of good men. Contemplation, of course, is for St. Clement the summit of gnosis, which consists in knowing God, seeing God and possessing God. Therefore, gnosis is closely related to prayer (which, says St. Clement, tends to become interior, silent and constant) and to charity, in which gnosis becomes firmly established.⁽²⁹⁾ God is love," says St. Clement, "and he is knowable to those who love him."⁽³⁰⁾ The final state of Christian gnosis is apatheia, which is the result of complete control of the passions and desires as well the detachment from created things. It is the peace and unity that flow from charity.⁽³¹⁾

Origen, severely ascetical in his personal life and hailed as the first scientific exegete in the Church and the first to produce a systematic manual of dogmatic theology, was placed in charge of the School of Alexandria in 203 at the age of eighteen. In his treatise on prayer, which had a profound influence on later monastic spirituality, he teaches a mysticism that reaches the Trinity through Christ. Though he speaks of gnosis, as did St. Clement, the treatment is not the same, as Bouyer points out:

The greatest difference between the two gnoses is that Clement's so easily turns back on itself, in order to understand itself, to describe itself,

and perhaps to savor itself. Origen's, on the contrary, hardly describes itself at all..., wholly taken up as it is with its one unique object: the mystery of Christ, contemplated in the Scriptures. It was in this way, probably, that Origen exercised the deepest and most enduring influence on all later Christian spirituality."⁽³²⁾

Perfection, says Origen, consists in becoming as much like God as possible, and in order to do this, the soul must progressively detach itself from this world and gain mastery over its desires and passions. To achieve this, the soul must acquire a knowledge of self by means of examination of conscience and it must also imitate the life of Christ. However, Origen agrees with St. Clement in stating that only the perfect attain to gnosis; the multitudes do not.

Once the soul has passed from the state of a beginner to an advanced state, its spiritual combat is no longer with itself but against the devil. But when the soul approaches the state of the perfect, it enjoys various types of visions and the wisdom or gnosis that constitutes the mysticism of the Logos. At this point, participation in the mystery of Christ terminates in the Trinity and in the mystical marriage. In this state, says Origen, the soul "is divinized in what it contemplates."⁽³³⁾ and "it is raised to friendship with God and to communion with him by participating in the divinity."⁽³⁴⁾

By the third century there were communities of Christians in France (Lyons, Vienne, Marseilles, Arles, Toulouse, Paris and Bordeaux), in Spain (León, Mérida and Zaragoza), and in Germany (Cologne, Trier, Metz, Mainz and Strassburg). Carthage was the center of Christianity for North Africa and in Egypt the focal point was at Alexandria. Beyond Europe and the countries of northern Africa, Christianity had spread to Asia Minor, Armenia, Syria, Mesopotamia, Persia, Arabia, and perhaps to India.

This does not mean that the expansion of Christianity was peaceful and unimpeded; on the contrary, it encountered serious obstacles because of occasional doctrinal disputes from within and because of periodic persecutions by Roman authority. With the conversion of Constantine, Christianity was accepted as a legitimate religion and during the reign of Theodosius I (379-395) it became the official religion of the empire. Meanwhile, under Pope Damasus, who governed the Church from 366 to 384, the monastic movement spread quickly to Egypt, Syria and Asia Minor. At the same time, the *Life of Antony the Hermit* by St. Athanasius was a major factor in the rise of monasticism in Italy and France.

References

1. Cf. P. Carrington, *The Early Christian Church*, 2 vols., London, 1957-1960; F. Mourret, *A History of the Catholic Church*, tr. N. Thompson, B. Herder, St. Louis, Mo., 1931; L. Bouyer, *The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers*, tr. M. P. Ryan, Desclée, New York, N.Y., 1960.
2. In Acts 20:17-28 the words *episkopoi* (bishops) and *presbyteroi* (presbyters) are used interchangeably. In his commentary on St. Paul's Letter to Titus (1:5), St. Jerome states that in those early days bishops were sometimes called presbyters. Cf. F. Prat, "Evêques," in *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, ed. A. Vacant et al.,

Paris.

3. L. Bouyer, op. cit., p. 167.

4. For further details on the Apostolic Fathers, see F. Mourret, op.cit.; B. Altaner, *Patrology*, Herder and Herder, New York, N.Y., 1960; L. Bouyer, op. cit.; K. Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2 vols., Cambridge, 1959; P. Pourrat, *Christian Spirituality*, tr. W. H. Mitchell and S. P. Jacques, Newman, Westminster, Md., Vol. I, 1953; J. Lawson, *A Theological and Historical Introduction to the Apostolic Fathers*, New York, N.Y., 1961.

5. Cf. P. Pourrat, op.cit., Vol. I, p. 56.

6. Letter to the Magnesians, 8 and 13.

7. Letter to the Smyrnaeans, 1.

8. Letter to the Philadelphians, 8.

9. Letter to the Smyrnaeans, 8. It seems that St. Ignatius was the first to use the term "catholic" Church. He also defended the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the primacy of the Bishop of Rome.

10. Letter to the Magnesians, 9.

11. Letter to the Ephesians, 9.

12. Letter to the Philadelphians, 7.

13. The basic notion of Millenarianism was that the second coming of Christ will be preceded by a thousand years during which the kingdom of God will be established on earth. There was no agreement on the starting point of the millenium. Cf. L. Bouyer, op.cit., pp. 171-174.

14. *Didache*, 16.

15. Letter to the Corinthians, 49-50.

16. Letter to the Romans, 4-5, *passim*.

17. Cf. K. Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Vol. 2, pp. 359-361.

18. L. Bouyer, op.cit., p. 175.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 176.

20. *Didache*, 9. Chapter 10 contains thanksgiving prayers.

21. P. Evdokimov, *The Struggle with God*, Paulist Press, Glen Rock, NJ., 1966, p. 192.

22. For details on liturgy of early Church, cf. L. Duchesne, *Christian Worship: Its Origin and Evolution*, tr. M. L. McClure, 5th edition, London, 1949; G. Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, 2nd edition, London, 1945; D. Attwater, *Introduction to the Liturgy*, Helicon, Baltimore, Md., 1961; A. A. King, *Liturgies of the Past*, Bruce, Milwaukee, Wis., 1959; W. J. O'Shea, *The Worship of the Church*, Newman, Westminster, Md., 1957; O. Rousseau, *The Progress of the Liturgy*, Newman, Westminster, Md., 1951.

23. Cf. L. Bouyer, op.cit., p. 211.

24. Cf. J. Dupont, *Gnosis, la connaissance religieuse dans les épîtres de saint Paul*, Louvain, 1949.

25. Cf. L. Bouyer, op. cit., pp. 216-236; 245-256. According to heretical Gnosticism there are three classes of persons: 1) the pneumatics, an elite class of persons who are predestined to be saved, no matter how they live; 2) the psychics, who live according to the Spirit as best they can, but cannot be saved without God's help; and 3) the hylics, who live according to the flesh and are predestined to damnation.

26. *First Apology*, 65-67, *passim*.

27. *Against Heresies*, III, Preface; 1, 6, 3; III, 1, 1.

28. This doctrine is found in *Stromata*, 2 and 7.

29. Cf. *Stromata*, 2; 6; 7.

30. Cf. *Stromata*, 5.

31. *Stromata*, 6. The concept of *apatheia* was taken up later by the Cappadocians and Evagrius Ponticus. It is also one of the bases on which some scholars have attempted to attribute a pagan element to early Christian spirituality. Cf. L. Bouyer, op.cit., pp. 273-274.

32. Cf. L. Bouyer, op. cit., p. 282.

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33. Commentary on John, 32:27.
34. Contra Celsum, 3, 28; 32, 27.

