

THE GREEK FATHERS

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The Greek fathers by Adrian Fortescue

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ADRIAN FORTESCUE

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BY
ADRIAN FORTESCUE

Isti in generationibus gentis suæ gloriam adepti sunt et in diebus suis habentur in laudibus.—ECLI. cxliv, 7.



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ΝΙΚΟΛΑΩΙ ΤΩΙ ΟΡΘΟΔΟΞΩΙ
ΑΔΡΙΑΝΟΣ Ο ΚΑΘΟΛΙΚΟΣ
ΑΜΦΟΙΝ ΤΩΝ ΠΑΤΕΡΩΝ
ΤΟΥΣ ΒΙΟΥΣ

PREFACE

WHAT is a *Father*? The word is used in various senses. Bishops are our Fathers in God, and the Chief Bishop is called, as by a special title, the Holy Father. The name is also given correctly to priests who are members of religious orders and sometimes, incorrectly, to priests who are not. The members of a general Council are the "Fathers" of Nicæa, of Ephesus, of Trent. And then by common consent rather than by any formal rule we speak of certain famous Christian writers as the *Fathers of the Church*.

For anyone to be called a Father involves these four conditions. First, he must be an *Author*, whose works are still extant. The fathers are important because they are quoted as authorities in theology. Obviously, then, they are all people who wrote works that we can quote. St Antony the Hermit, St Lawrence, St Sebastian are not fathers because they have left no writings. Secondly, he must be a *Catholic*, who lived in the communion of the Church, whose writings are correct and orthodox. Otherwise the writer's authority is of no value as a witness of the Catholic faith. Apollinaris of Laodicea († c. 390) and Tertullian († 240) were learned and prolific authors; but they are not fathers because they were heretics. Thirdly, a father is a person of eminent *sanctity* as well as learning. The title is an honourable one given only to saints, or rather it includes and involves the title of saint.¹

¹The legal process of canonization is a late development. Alexander III in 1170 made the first rule about it. The present law dates from Urban VIII in 1634. None of the fathers was

So Clement of Alexandria (†c. 217) and Origenes (†254) are not strictly fathers, because they are not saints. As a matter of fact, the root of the matter in this case, too, is the want of orthodoxy that prevents them from being either saints or fathers. The fourth criterion is *antiquity*. This is the most difficult one to determine exactly. Antiquity of some kind is always supposed. The fathers are the great authorities for ancient tradition, they are witnesses of the faith in earlier times. The age of the fathers begins at once after that of the apostles; it is not so easy to say when it ends. No one calls St Thomas Aquinas (†1274) or St Francis de Sales (†1622) a father, because of their late date. The fathers end when the middle ages begin; and there is no clear line of division here. Practically, there is a chain of great Catholic writers, whom we call the fathers, in east and west; then after a time of comparative stagnation begins another line—that of the Schoolmen. It is in the case of a few saints who come in the intermediate time that one may doubt whether they are to be called the last fathers or the first mediæval writers. In the east the connected line ends with St Cyril of Alexandria (†444), in the west with St Gregory I (†604). After a long break come St John Damascene (†c. 754) in the east and St Bernard of Clairvaux (†1153) in the west. These two are generally called the last of the fathers, though St Bernard, at any rate, certainly belongs to the middle ages. By taking the eighth century as the limit, and by allowing St Bernard as the one later exception (since by common use

ever formally canonized. The title *saint* (it is much less of a technical term in Latin or Greek) was given originally by general consent, vaguely controlled by the local bishops.