

The Sunday of the Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

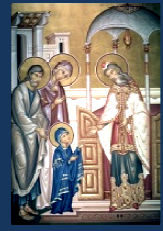
Holy Scripture commands us to honor our father and our mother. But did it ever occur to you that this applies also to our *spiritual* fathers and mothers? Today is the Sunday of the Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council, a day on which we remember those Holy Fathers of the Church who gathered together in the first council to make important determinations about our Faith and settle what were then very big questions and disputes—such as the Creed, which we read or chant in every Divine Liturgy, and the canon of Scripture, to name only two.

This commemoration also reminds us that our sources of authority in the Orthodox Church are significantly different from those of the Catholic and Protestant Churches. In today's ecumenist world, where we are constantly told that we're basically all the same and it only matters if you are a good person, it's critical for us to remember that these myths, lies. In Protestantism, it's essentially every man for himself because Protestants believe that the Holy Spirit guides each believer into knowledge of the truth. This error has produced literally thousands of Protestant denominations and sects in the world today. This is not the Orthodox Christian understanding of how the Holy Spirit works, for we know that God is the God of truth and order, not chaos, and that God the Son clearly established One Church, not many, during His lifetime on earth.

In Catholicism, the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, is believed to be unerringly and infallibly guided by the Holy Spirit when he teaches about faith and morals. In this role he is seen as the primary voice both of his Church and of God on earth. This is not, however, the understanding of our Church or the early Church about authority in the Church.

FOR US, THE HOLY SPIRIT SPEAKS THROUGH THE ENTIRE CHURCH

. . . and not just bishops and patriarchs, but also through Church Councils, the laity, the Fathers and saints of the Church, the divine services, and also our sacred arts—such as iconography and hymnography. Today's feast of the Fathers of the First Council is an opportunity for us to focus on the Holy Fathers as one of our sources of authority.



The Church Fathers were extremely important to Christians from the very beginning, although non-Orthodox Christians do not value them as we do and in many cases have not studied early Church history, so they do not know the facts. But during the age of the Church Councils (the fourth through the eighth centuries) the proclamation of those Councils began with these significant words: "Following the Holy Fathers..."

SO, WHAT EXACTLY IS A CHURCH FATHER?

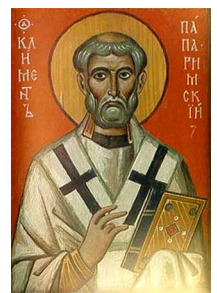
A Holy Father is, first, a member of the Orthodox Church and a saint--that is, a baptized believer, known for the holiness and great virtue of his life, who is now in heaven with Christ. Secondly, a Holy Father is one who teaches the Faith and is an explainer of Holy Scripture and Sacred Tradition. He gives witness to these by both his life and writings, enlightened by the grace of the Holy Spirit. He is not just someone with a degree in theology and little letters after his name. In fact, most of the Fathers had no such degree at all.

Also, a Holy Father is not self-appointed; he is chosen by God through the Church and revealed to the awareness of the whole Body of Christ as one who has spoken truthfully about divine things. Finally, his words must faithfully reflect the teachings of Holy Scripture and the Apostles; he may not teach things contrary to what has always been believed and taught in the Church; he must faithfully hand down what he has received, without adding anything, changing anything, and without innovation.

Many people today think that Christ's Church somehow "died out," or, as even many Protestants believe, that it apostatized during the first century after Christ--as if such a thing were really possible considering Christ's promise to be with His Church "even unto the end of the ages" (Matt. 25:20).

SO I WOULD LIKE TO SHARE WITH YOU A GLIMPSE OF THE EARLY CHURCH AS SEEN IN THE LIVES AND WRITINGS OF HOLY FATHERS, FROM THE TIME OF THE APOSTLES UNTIL ABOUT 200 A.D., ROUGHLY THREE GENERATIONS.

In his Epistle to the Philippians, St. Paul mentions a "true yoke-fellow" and "fellow-laborer" named "Clement" (Phil.4:3). You might be surprised to learn that secular history also knows this man; one of his letters is preserved in manuscript form in the British Museum, of all places! He is known as St. Clement the Roman.





He was martyred in 97 or 98 AD, and his letter is a wonderful witness concerning the understanding of Apostolic Succession in the early Church. He wrote:

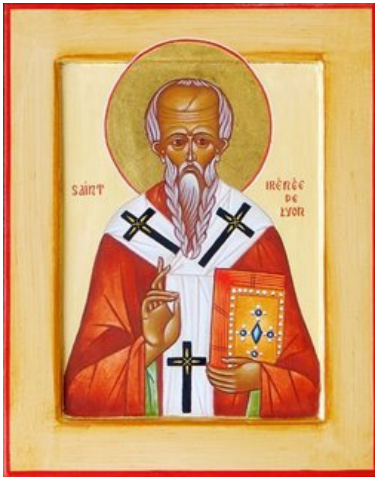
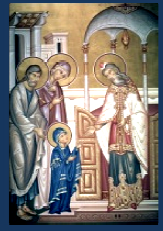
"The Apostles received the Gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ was sent forth from God. So then Christ is from God and the Apostles are from Christ. Both therefore came of the will of God in an appointed order. Having therefore received a charge...they went forth with the glad tidings.... Then, preaching everywhere in country and town, they appointed their first-fruits, when they had proved them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons unto all those that should believe.... They appointed these persons and then also provided a continuance, that when these should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed to their ministration."

Another early Church Father, a disciple of the Apostle John, is St. Ignatius of Antioch, martyred in 109 A.D. He was the child whom our Lord took into his arms in Matthew's Gospel. Seven of his letters have survived; and in these he gives advice to Christians in different cities. He speaks not only of bishops, but of priests and deacons, and of what unity in the Church means:



"For as many as are of God and of Jesus Christ are with the bishop; and as many as shall repent and enter into the unity of the Church, these also shall be of God, that they may be living after Jesus Christ Whosoever the bishop is, there let the people be, even as where Jesus is, there is the Universal Church... Be ye careful therefore to observe one Eucharist, for there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup unto union in His blood; there is one altar, as there is one [local] bishop, together with the priesthood and deacons."

Notice that this Church Father specifically does not say that we should be in submission to the Bishop of Rome; nor does he say that we can just do our own thing. He specifies the *local* bishop as the sign of unity within the Church.



Finally I mention St. Irenaeus of Lyons, in France, who died in 202 A.D. He had been a disciple of St. Polycarp, who in turn was a disciple of the Apostle John. You can see here the living continuity of the Faith. In his last years St. Polycarp was the sole survivor of the Apostolic Age, the last man still living who had personally known the Apostles. For this reason he was treated with great respect and veneration and "numerous disciples gathered around him to hear from his lips the last living echo of Apostolic teaching" (as we learn from his life).

The three generations of early Holy Fathers which I've briefly outlined for you, brings us to the dawn of the third century, having covered roughly the first 170 years of the Church's life, from the Ascension of Christ in 33 A.D. to the death of Irenaeus in 202. You can see that each of these Fathers was acutely aware of his living connection with the Apostles and the Teaching he had received from them. And there were many other early Fathers whom I have not mentioned.

NOW, WHAT WERE THESE FATHERS, AND THOSE THAT CAME AFTER THEM IN THE NEXT SEVERAL CENTURIES, LIKE?

The Fathers of earlier times were pious, careful and strict. They were unconcerned about their outward appearance, their face and hair, caring not whether their face or hair looked good. They kept their heads down with piety and respect and avoided a direct gaze at anyone's face. They were shy. They did not converse or laugh, though they were quick to smile. They saw the spiritual life as something very serious, and so they maintained a proper sobriety about it. There actually have been Fathers like this even up to our own time and in our own day—but they are all in the old historic Orthodox countries.

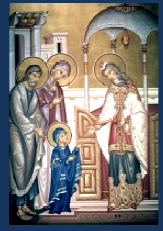
HOW ARE THEY DIFFERENT FROM US, HERE IN THE WEST, TODAY?

To begin with, the holy Fathers of the Church in Greece, on the Holy Mountain, in Russia, Romania, Serbia, etc., constantly feed spiritually on the writings of the Fathers who have come before us, both the ancient and the more recent. Do we do this? They feel the presence

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Sunday Sermon

Fr Ambrose Young
Entrance of the Theotokos Skete



and activity of all the saints of the Church. They are scholars of saints' lives, experts in chanting, in divine services, in feasts and vigils, and, not surprisingly, in *miracles*, too. Are we lovers and champions of any of these things? We know the answer, don't we? Sadly, the answer is no—and therefore we are not part of the golden chain, the unending continuum, that reaches from our day all the way back to the Fathers of the First Council and beyond them to the Apostolic Fathers and Christ Himself, and which must link up with the generation of our children and grandchildren, so that the golden chain is not broken.

Always there were (and still are) Holy Fathers—and Holy *Mothers*, too!—of the Church. It is wrong to speak, as some academic Orthodox scholars and so-called “theologians” in America do today, of the Age of the Fathers having come to an end. As long as the Holy Spirit continues to guide the Church into all truth, as our Lord promised that He would, there will continue to be Holy Fathers. Only--as our poor, tired old world slowly begins to grind towards its end--there are today fewer and fewer Fathers like the great ones of old. And there are, tragically some Orthodox who want us to be more like Catholics and Protestants than like our forefathers in the Faith. Let us not be like these modernists and innovators.

So today we recall and remember with joy and gratitude the Holy Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council, as well as those Fathers that came before and after them and even into our own time. We honor them by reading their writings and cherishing their teachings and passing them on to our own children and grandchildren, so that they will not be lost.

O Holy Fathers of the Orthodox Church, pray to God for us!

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.