

Study Guide for

The Fathers

by POPE
BENEDICT XVI

Compiled by Amy Welborn

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NOTES

INTRODUCTION

The Fathers is a collection of the catecheses Pope Benedict XVI gave during his weekly Wednesday General Audiences during 2007 and 2008. The talks were given in either St. Peter's Square or, in less favorable weather, the Paul VI Hall next to St. Peter's Basilica.

These talks followed the series on the Apostles, also presented at the Wednesday audiences and collected in a previous volume. The subjects are those figures we usually call the "Early Church Fathers," sometimes further distinguished as "Greek Fathers" or "Latin Fathers," depending on the language and culture which informed their work. The Fathers whose lives and work are explored in this series were active from around the years A.D. 100 to 450.

These Early Church Fathers were the bishops, theologians, philosophers, preachers, teachers, priests, and lay people who were deeply engaged in both explaining Christian teachings to the pagan world and forming Christians more deeply in their faith. Unlike today, when theological work is largely conducted in the confines of a university for other academics, the Fathers were almost all also pastors of one sort or another, writing to help real people, both inside and outside the Church, understand what faith in Jesus Christ was all about and live it more faithfully and joyfully.

In order to appreciate Pope Benedict's talks on the Fathers more fruitfully, it will be helpful to remember a few impor-

tant background points about the context in which the Fathers wrote:

- Geographically, the Fathers lived in a ring of sorts around the Mediterranean Sea — from North Africa to Palestine and Syria in the Near East, to Asia Minor (now called Turkey) to Italy and southern Gaul (now called France). The major Episcopal sees frequently mentioned in the talks are Rome, Constantinople, Antioch (in present-day Turkey), and Alexandria (Egypt).
- By the end of the first century, Church structure had evolved into that which is still familiar to us today. Bishops were the pastors of dioceses. Priests, or presbyters, ministered in individual churches, and deacons assisted primarily with ministering to the poor. Bishops, as the successors of the Apostles, were the sign of unity and the primary catechists of the people in their dioceses, and their homilies and catecheses were greatly valued.
- The Bishop of Rome was recognized by many even in the early part of the second century as having a special role among the other bishops. This is mentioned by many of the Fathers. Councils and synods were convened to handle particular questions of pastoral practice and theology.
- For most of this period, persecution was a constant threat to Christians. The persecutions were not continual and Empire-wide, but they did come fre-

quently, and the possibility of martyrdom was never far from a Christian's mind.

- The legal status of Christianity changed over this period in the Roman Empire. Up until A.D. 313, the status of Christianity varied according to local policies, but it was largely “illegal,” if not always actively persecuted. In A.D. 313, the Emperor Constantine made the practice of Christianity legal, and in A.D. 380, the Emperor Theodosius I made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. Within the apparent simplicity of those benchmarks, however, there is a great deal of complexity and variance dependent on local situations and Imperial changes. (Emperor Julian the “Apostate,” for example, reigned from A.D. 355-360 and tried to reinstate traditional Roman pagan religion over and above Christianity.)
- As Christianity's status within the Empire changed, so did a bishop's relationship to the local government. By the end of the period covered by *The Fathers*, we will see bishops getting more involved in what we would call civil matters, usually in defense of the Church, orthodox Christian beliefs, or the poor.
- During this period, the Roman Empire was enduring terrific challenges, especially in the century leading up to St. Augustine: the financial pressures of an over-extended Empire as well as more frequent and more violent incursions from Germanic tribes (or “barbarians”) impacted the lives of everyone in the Empire's boundaries, including Christians.

Beyond these elements, it is also very important to understand the theological stresses that Christianity was enduring as it grew and developed in different cultures. These matters will come up frequently in these sessions, so it will be helpful to begin with a bit of background.

- Christianity's roots are in Jesus Christ's preaching, teaching, and presence, preserved and passed on by the Apostles he chose for that purpose.
- As Christianity grew beyond its original Jewish context, different questions arose from those seeking to understand Jesus' identity and mission from a non-Jewish background. Many of these questions were particularly informed by a philosophical perspective. Most of the Fathers were aware of this perspective and had even been trained in it. They were committed to helping others who had been formed in the context of pagan philosophies understand the message and identity of Jesus in meaningful ways.
- At times, radically different understandings of Jesus and the Christian faith developed within nominally Christian communities. You will find that the Fathers are very concerned with these incorrect and heretical movements which threatened the truth of the Gospel. Two, in particular, are mentioned frequently in these sessions:
 1. **Gnosticism:** Gnosticism is a broad term that covers many movements and groups, both Christian and pagan, that existed and even flourished in some areas between the 2nd and 5th centuries.

Christian Gnostics emphasized a secret knowledge about salvation that was accessible to only a few elites — *gnosis* is a Greek word that means “knowledge.” Gnostics tended to diminish Jesus’ human nature because they believed that the physical world was evil and suffering had no meaning.

2. **Arianism:** It is very important to understand Arianism, for it was a persistent and widespread problem within early Christianity and caused not only confusion but real schism. Arianism will emerge over and over in the following pages as a heresy against which the Fathers battled, sometimes even against the forces of the Empire itself.

Whole sections of the Church went over to Arianism — bishops embraced it, and they were supported by various Emperors who then gave their official support to Arian Christianity, persecuting and exiling orthodox Christians.

Arius was a presbyter from Alexandria in Egypt who taught that Jesus was more than human but not fully divine. That is, that he did not fully share in God’s nature and had been created. This was, as Pope Benedict points out, a “simple” solution to the complexities we encounter in the Gospel witness to Jesus, and like all simple solutions, it was very popular.

The Council of Nicaea was convened in A.D. 325 in part to discuss Arianism. The fruit of that

council is a statement we recite frequently at Mass: the Nicene Creed, which emphasizes that Jesus is “one in Being with the Father.”

The Council of Nicaea did not finish off Arianism, however. Many of the Fathers who ministered well after 325 were still encountering it in the beliefs of ordinary people, their fellow churchmen and Imperial officials.

Other theological controversies occupied the Fathers, and most of them, even apart from Arianism, tended to center around the question of Jesus’ identity and nature. The Fathers knew that fidelity to the Gospel and what the Apostles had taught required holding to Jesus’ full divinity and full humanity, as great a mystery as that might be. Contemplating that mystery and reflecting on what is at stake if we lose either one or the other aspect of Jesus’ nature occupied a central place in the Fathers’ thinking, and these discussions will help us understand why — and what it means for us.

The Early Church Fathers lived and ministered fifteen hundred years ago, but their writing is still fresh because so many of the questions they addressed are still our questions. What is faith? What is the Church? How should the Christian live? What is the Christian’s responsibility toward the poor? What role does Scripture play in my faith? Who is Jesus, what is the purpose of the Incarnation, and what does it mean that I — here and now — am redeemed by his death and resurrection? How can I discern God’s will in my life?

Further, despite the distance of years and difference in language and culture, many of the issues the Fathers dealt with still resonate: What does it mean to be faithful to Christ in a hostile culture? Will I suffer because of my faith? How should children be raised? What am I to make of the shortcomings and flaws of Church leaders? How can I live according to the truth Jesus teaches in a pluralistic society? What should the Church's relationship to the state be? When everything in our culture and society seems to be falling apart, where is God?

As readers of *The Fathers* know, Pope Benedict XVI is a fitting teacher to introduce us to these ancient writers who still speak with fresh voices today. Benedict, a great theologian in his own right, has the gift of being able to draw the central, pertinent issues from the text and apply them to the questions and tensions with which people in the 21st century live. He knows the Fathers well, he understands what it means to live in the contemporary world, he has deep faith in Christ, and he is committed, as the Fathers were, to communicating the truth of this faith in fidelity and love.

**HINTS FOR LEADING AN EFFECTIVE
GROUP STUDY OF THE FATHERS**

1. The group leader should have a clear sense of the purpose of the gatherings. *The Fathers* and this study guide are designed to help readers and participants grow in their understanding of the *content* and *nature* of faith in Jesus Christ,

assisted by the wisdom and insight of the Early Church Fathers. The emphasis is always on drawing connections between past and present, and on helping participants find answers to their own questions in their fellow disciples who lived so long ago, yet followed the same Jesus as part of his same Church.

This distinguishes this offering from a “faith-sharing” model, in which the emphasis is on participants sharing their stories and feelings about a topic and reacting to each others’ stories. There is a place for the faith-sharing model in adult catechesis. However, *The Fathers* is not designed with that goal in mind, but rather to feed the hunger many adults have to grow in understanding of the *content* of faith in Jesus Christ and how to experience that faith today in their own lives as Catholics. The Pope is primarily a teacher, and participants will gather to learn from him.

2. The group leader should be a person who can effectively facilitate learning through discussion. That person should have the following qualities:

- The commitment to prepare beforehand, have a clear sense of the points to be covered, and introduce each session with a summary of the chapter to be discussed.
- A balance of openness, flexibility, confidence, and firmness. The group leader should have a welcoming personality so that all participants feel encouraged to speak. He or she must also have the confidence to respectfully end discussions that have gone off-course and to redirect those discussions. Allowing one per-

son to dominate a session is unfair to the other participants, and a group leader must keep this in mind and be sensitive to it.

- The willingness to say, “I don’t know the answer to that question. Let me look it up for the next time,” and move on.

3. Problems can sometimes arise in group discussions. Be aware, in particular, of the following:

- Dominant personalities: The best way to deal with dominant personalities in a discussion is to consciously and frequently encourage others to speak. If the problem persists, the individual who is presenting the problem can be cautioned privately.
- Too much information: Occasionally, individuals will use a group setting to unload personal problems or issues with the Church in ways inappropriate to the setting. When this happens, the group leader should respectfully but firmly redirect the discussion, giving due credit to the individual’s pain. Afterwards, depending on the nature of the individual’s issue, the group leader should suggest that the person contact a priest or perhaps should even alert a priest about the situation himself. Again, the leader’s primary responsibility is to the group as a whole.
- Quiet personalities: Individuals who don’t participate can be gently encouraged to speak, but not persistently. If some persons are content to listen and learn, let them do that — do not draw attention to them in a joking manner.

- **Going off topic:** Sometimes this is serendipitous; sometimes it is a problem. The group leader should be sensitive to this, careful to judge whether the course of a discussion is actually helpful to everyone present (is everyone engaged and interested?) or if it is just serving as a means for a small part of the group to dominate the discussion. If it is the latter, the discussion should be brought back to the topic. Participants' time is valuable, and their sacrifice to be present at the session should be respected.

PRACTICAL POINTERS

Place: It is best to have parish-sponsored events on the parish grounds.

Size: It is very difficult to have a group discussion with more than 15 to 20 people. If you have more than that register, consider breaking the group in two, adding a session, or even formatting the sessions along the lines of a class rather than a discussion.

Time: During children's religious education sessions; between Masses on Sunday mornings; on weekday mornings after children are dropped off at the parish school; or evenings are all good times for adult education in a parish. Different times appeal to different groups of people, which is why, if possible, it is good to try to have multiple sessions. Some older people, for example, don't like coming out at night, and people who work during the day prefer weekend or evening

times. At least one session should have child care provided, free of charge, so that younger parents may attend.

Materials: All participants should have a copy of *The Fathers*, this study guide, and, ideally, a Bible. If possible, participants should not be charged for materials, as this is immediately discouraging to some potential participants. Free-will offerings might be taken, but individually paying for the materials should not be a requirement or expectation for participation. Parishes might also consider making the materials available for those who cannot participate in the group study.

Number and length of sessions: There are six sessions in this study guide, but leaders should feel free to design their own program and be flexible, particularly since the material is divided into only six sessions. No sessions should be omitted, for everything Pope Benedict says in these talks is interrelated and his ideas build on each other. But leaders might find that some topics lend themselves to more than one session.

Sessions should be planned to be from 60 to 90 minutes in length, with time for a break and simple refreshments such as water and coffee. Whatever the planned length, stick to it out of respect for participants' busy lives and varied commitments.

USING THE STUDY GUIDE

All of the materials presented in the study guide are intended to support a helpful and enriching session. Leaders may use as many questions from either category as desired as well as

add their own. Prayers are designed to help enhance the catechetical experience — they are drawn from the rich, living tradition of the Church and are all related to the topic of each session.

PLANNING YOUR SESSION

Begin the session with the *Sign of the Cross* and the *Prayer to the Holy Spirit*:

Sign of the Cross

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

Prayer to the Holy Spirit

- V.** *Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of Your faithful and kindle in us the fire of Your love.*
- R.** *Send forth Your Spirit and we shall be created, and You will renew the face of the earth.*

*Let us pray: O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit instructs the hearts of the faithful, grant that by that same Spirit we may be ever wise and rejoice in His consolations. We make our prayer through Christ, our Lord.
Amen.*

Reading

Invite a participant to read aloud the excerpted passage from Pope Benedict in *The Fathers* given at the beginning of each set of questions. Then allow for a few moments of quiet

recollection and reflection on the passage (about one to three minutes).

Discussion

Begin the discussion with a starter question. For example, for the first session:

“What is your general impression, from reading these chapters, of the most pressing issues facing these Church Fathers?”

Use the response as a brief opportunity to help participants become comfortable and then move into whatever Questions for Study and Questions for Reflection you have decided to use to guide the discussion.

Spend most of the time on the Questions for Study, using the last fifteen minutes of the session for the Questions for Reflection.

Closing Prayer

Make the closing prayer simple. Have a participant read the suggested passage from one of the Church Fathers considered in the session, pause for a moment, and then invite participants to pray the Lord’s Prayer, perhaps with these words:

Leader: *“Let us now pray together the prayer Jesus taught the Apostles.”*

All: *“Our Father . . .”*

End with an intercessory prayer to one of the Church Fathers who were the focus of the session:

Leader: *Saint(s) insert name(s) ...*

Group: *Pray for us.*

All make the *Sign of the Cross*.

NOTES

SESSION 1

Clement, Ignatius of Antioch,
Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons,
Clement of Alexandria, Origen

Chapters One to Six

OPENING PRAYER AND READING

Begin the session with the *Sign of the Cross* and the *Prayer to the Holy Spirit* (see page 16).

Excerpt from *The Fathers*:

And let us pray to the Lord that he will give us thinkers, theologians, and exegetes who discover this multifaceted dimension, this ongoing timeliness of Sacred Scripture, its newness for today. Let us pray that the Lord will help us to read Sacred Scripture in a prayerful way, to be truly nourished with the true Bread of Life, with his Word. (page 40)

Quiet Reflection

NOTES

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Questions for Study

1. Who was Clement and why is it significant that he was writing to Christian communities in other cities?
2. What does Clement indicate were the root causes of the dissension in the Church in Corinth?
3. What points about the Church's identity did Clement recommend the Corinthian church especially focus on?
4. What do we know about the life of Ignatius of Antioch? What were the circumstances of the composition of his letters?
5. What was the focus of Ignatius's spirituality?
6. What, according to Ignatius, is the role of the bishop in the Christian community?
7. What is an apologist? How did Justin fill this role?
8. What role does the *logos* play in Justin's writing?
9. What was the difference between Justin's approach to pagan philosophy and his approach to pagan religion?
10. What was Irenaeus's connection to the Apostles?
11. What characterized the Gnostic dualism against which Irenaeus wrote?
12. How does the biblical doctrine of creation answer this heresy?

13. What is the “apostolic tradition” of which Irenaeus wrote?
14. What was Clement’s role in his Christian community?
15. What was the purpose of the catechesis Clement offered?
16. What, according to Clement, is the purpose of Christian knowledge? Why do we want to know anything?
17. How does Clement redefine pagan philosophy’s “liberation from the passions”?
18. What was “theology” to Origen?
19. What was Origen’s process in dealing with Scripture?
20. What were the three senses of Scripture of which Origen spoke?

NOTES

Questions for Reflection

1. These thinkers of early Christianity did not shy from engaging with non-Christian thinking. How would you describe their relationships to it? What seems to you to be their standard for what elements of non-Christian thinking to accept or reject?
2. Apologetics is still an important part of Christian expression. What issues have you experienced as being areas in which you or others you know are called upon to offer an “*apologia*”? Are there any resources you have found particularly helpful?
3. All of these thinkers — and most in this book — emerged from the East, the birthplace of Christianity. What do you know about the Eastern Catholic churches today? Have you ever attended an Eastern Catholic liturgy?
4. Irenaeus battled Gnostic heresies in which only an elite had access to the ultimate saving spiritual knowledge. Can you see any currents of this element of Gnostic thinking in the world today? Do you ever catch yourself thinking along these lines?
5. These thinkers were engaged in very creative work, but work that was very faithful to the tradition they had been handed by the apostles. What kind of creative, faithful ways of teaching and expressing faith are you aware of today? If you were in charge of evangelization

for the Church in your area, what kinds of approaches would you encourage?

6. Justin Martyr felt that certain elements of his pagan life had actually worked to prepare him for his Christian life. Are there any elements of your life before your fuller coming to faith that you feel have prepared you for deepening your faith today?
7. Ignatius and Origen both longed for martyrdom. What do you think about that?
8. Several of these thinkers indicate the importance of the bishop of Rome. How do you see the importance of the papacy expressed in the Church and the world today?

NOTES

CLOSING PRAYER

Quote from *The Fathers*:

“Be gracious ... to us your children.... Grant us that we may live in your peace, be transferred to your city, sail over the billows of sin without capsizing, be gently wafted by your Holy Spirit, by ineffable Wisdom, by night and day to the perfect day ... giving thanks and praise to the one Father ... to the Son, Instructor and Teacher, with the Holy Spirit. Amen!” (St. Clement of Alexandria — on page 34)

Briefly pause.

Lord’s Prayer

Leader: *St. Clement of Alexandria ...*

Group: *Pray for us.*

All make the *Sign of the Cross*.

NOTES

SESSION 2

Tertullian, Cyprian,
Eusebius of Caesarea,
Athanasius of Alexandria,
Cyril of Jerusalem

Chapters Seven to Eleven

OPENING PRAYER AND READING

Begin the session with the *Sign of the Cross* and the *Prayer to the Holy Spirit* (see page 16).

Excerpt from *The Fathers*:

Today, too, so many centuries later, Eusebius of Caesarea invites believers, invites us, to wonder, to contemplate in history the great works of God for the salvation of humankind. And just as energetically, he invites us to conversion of life. Indeed, we cannot remain inert before a God who has so deeply loved us. The proper instance of love is that our entire life should be oriented to the imitation of the Beloved. Let us therefore spare no effort to leave a transparent trace of God's love in our life.
(page 61)

Quiet Reflection

NOTES

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Questions for Study

1. Where did Tertullian live? What was his linguistic contribution to Christian theological writing?
2. What were Tertullian's intentions in his apologetics work?
3. What did Tertullian say about martyrdom?
4. Why did Tertullian separate from the Church?
5. Why was Cyprian's pastoral ministry in Carthage so challenging?
6. The Lord's Prayer was very important to Cyprian. What does he say about its importance and meaning for Christians?
7. What happened at the Council of Nicaea that made it, as Pope Benedict says, a "hinge" moment?
8. What is significant about Eusebius's historical work? What was his purpose in writing it?
9. What were Arius's teachings?
10. In what ways did Athanasius suffer as he defended orthodox teaching against Arianism?
11. What did Athanasius say was at stake in the conflict between Arianism and orthodox Christianity? What truths about God and humanity are lost in denying Jesus' full humanity and full divinity?

12. What was the relationship between Athanasius and St. Anthony of Egypt?
13. What were the difficulties in Cyril's early "career"?
14. We remember Cyril of Jerusalem for his catechesis. What were the three dimensions of the catechesis he offered and how did they relate to each other?

Questions for Reflection

1. Tertullian wrote of martyrdom that rather than diminishing the number of Christians, it acted as a "seed." Why do you think this is so? When the Church is not undergoing active persecution, is there anything that can act as a "seed" for bringing people to Christ?
2. Tertullian separated from the Church because of his perfectionism and rigorism. Have you ever been tempted in this way or known others who have been? What might be a response to this temptation?
3. Many of these Fathers preached, taught, and wrote under threat of persecution, sometimes even from others who called themselves Christian. Yet, they remained uncompromising in their statements of faith. What can you take away from that?
4. Cyprian wrote of the importance of a Christian's unity with the entire Church. How has unity with the Church helped you in your relationship with Christ?

5. How do you think Cyprian's words on prayer might enrich your own prayer life? What can you learn from him?
6. Eusebius hoped that his historical writings would help readers understand the truth of the Christian faith. What elements of the Church's history do you find most helpful in living your faith? What historical figures inspire you? What events help you make sense of life in the Church and world today?
7. The Arian heresy was a continuing presence in the lives and ministries of the Fathers in this section. What perspective does this give on religious conflicts and disagreements today?
8. Athanasius and Cyril of Jerusalem were both exiled several times. Have you ever felt as if you'd been sent into "exile"? Did that experience weaken or strengthen you?
9. Cyril's catechetical talks were for catechumens and new Christians. What, in your experience, are inquirers into the Catholic faith and new Catholics most interested in learning about?

NOTES

CLOSING PRAYER

Quote from *The Fathers*:

“You have been caught in the nets of the Church. Be taken alive, therefore; do not escape, for it is Jesus who is fishing for you, not in order to kill you but to resurrect you after death. Indeed, you must die and rise again.... Die to your sins and live to righteousness from this very day.” (St. Cyril of Jerusalem — on page 70)

Briefly pause.

Lord’s Prayer

Leader: *St. Cyril of Jerusalem ...*

Group: *Pray for us.*

All make the *Sign of the Cross*.

SESSION 3

Basil, Gregory Nazianzus,
Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom

Chapters Twelve to Fifteen

OPENING PRAYER AND READING

Begin the session with the *Sign of the Cross* and the *Prayer to the Holy Spirit* (see page 16).

Excerpt from *The Fathers*:

The perfection we desire to attain is not acquired once and for all; perfection means journeying on, it is continuous readiness to move ahead because we never attain a perfect likeness to God; we are always on our way. The history of every soul is that of a love which fills every time and at the same time is open to new horizons, for God continually stretches the soul's possibilities to make it capable of ever-greater goods. God himself, who has sown the seeds of good in us and from whom every initiative of holiness stems, "models the block..., and polishing and cleansing our spirit, forms Christ within us." (page 96)

Quiet Reflection

NOTES

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Questions for Study

1. What characterized the monasticism that Basil created?
2. According to Basil, what is the impact on human beings of acknowledging God's mystery?
3. Gregory Nazianzus experienced inner conflict in regard to the trajectory of his life. What was this conflict? How did he resolve it?
4. What was Gregory's situation when he came to Constantinople as bishop?
5. What was "theology" to Gregory Nazianzus? What was its source?
6. Why was affirmation of Jesus' full humanity important to Gregory Nazianzus?
7. What was Gregory Nazianzus's account of what happens to a soul pursuing holiness in prayer?
8. What was the relationship between the two Gregoryses, Basil and Macrina?
9. What was the shape and emphasis of the ministry of Gregory of Nyssa?
10. Gregory of Nyssa wrote a great deal about human nature and dignity. What, to him, was the source of human dignity? How does our awareness of who we are impact our actions in the world?

11. What does “Chrysostom” mean? Why was this an appropriate “nickname” for John?
12. How did John Chrysostom’s early life prepare him for pastoral ministry?
13. What were the conflicts in Constantinople? Why was John exiled?
14. According to John Chrysostom, what are the ways in which God helps us come to know him?

Questions for Reflection

1. Many of the figures in these sessions were related by blood or friendship. Jerome’s community of friends and fellow workers was very important to him. How do your friends and loved ones support you in faith? How do you support them?
2. Basil wrote of the great importance of the Eucharist, even encouraging daily reception. How does the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist strengthen you? How would you explain this to someone who didn’t understand it?
3. In writing about Basil, Pope Benedict says that we can learn from him the importance of “attentive, critical, and creative participation in today’s culture.” What does that mean to you? What are the challenges for you in taking that stance? What might be the fruit for you and others?

4. Gregory Nazianzus, like several other of the figures in these sessions, experienced conflict between his own desires and where he eventually ended up serving God. Do you experience conflicts like that? What would you say to someone who was trying to discern their way through that kind of conflict?
5. Gregory of Nyssa spoke very strongly of the Christian's responsibility to the poor and what a Christian's relationship to possessions is. How do you see your possessions? How do you relate your own material condition to the poor?
6. Gregory of Nyssa spoke of prayer as a protection against the evils of this world. How have you experienced prayer as a "protection"?
7. Arianism continued to be a great problem in the lives and ministries of the Fathers in this session. Do you see any comparable issues today that draw people away from a full understanding of Jesus' nature?

NOTES

8. John Chrysostom spoke of the ways in which God offers to help us know him — through Scripture, through the Church. How can this perspective help those who might see religion as nothing but an “obligation”?

CLOSING PRAYER

Quote from *The Fathers*:

“If you are healthy and rich, alleviate the need of whoever is sick and poor; if you have not fallen, go to the aid of whoever has fallen and lives in suffering; if you are glad, comfort whoever is sad; if you are fortunate, help whoever is smitten with misfortune. Give God proof of your gratitude, for you are one who can benefit and not one who needs to be benefited.... Be rich not only in possessions but also in piety; not only in gold but in virtue, or rather, in virtue alone. Outdo your neighbor’s reputation by showing yourself to be kinder than all; make yourself God for the unfortunate, imitating God’s mercy.” (St. Gregory Nazianzus — on pages 88-89)

Briefly pause.

Lord’s Prayer

Leader: *St. Gregory Nazianzus ...*

Group: *Pray for us.*

All make the *Sign of the Cross*.

SESSION 4

Cyril of Alexandria,
Hilary of Poitiers,
Eusebius of Vercelli,
Maximus of Turin

*Chapters Sixteen to Eighteen
and Twenty*

OPENING PRAYER AND READING

Begin the session with the *Sign of the Cross* and the *Prayer to the Holy Spirit* (see page 16).

Excerpt from *The Fathers*:

The Christian faith is first and foremost the encounter with Jesus, “a Person, which gives life a new horizon.” St. Cyril of Alexandria was an unflagging, staunch witness of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word of God, emphasizing above all his unity, as he repeats in 433 in his first letter to Bishop Succensus: “Only one is the Son, only one the Lord Jesus Christ, both before the Incarnation and after the Incarnation. Indeed, the Logos born of God the Father was not one Son and the one born of the Blessed Virgin another; but we believe that the very One who was born before the ages was also born according to the flesh and of a woman.”

Over and above its doctrinal meaning, this assertion shows that faith in Jesus the Logos born of the Father is firmly rooted in history because, as St. Cyril affirms, this same Jesus came in time with his birth from Mary, the Theotòkos, and in accordance with his promise will always be with us. And this is important: God is eternal, he is born of a woman, and he stays with us every day. In this trust we live, in this trust we find the way for our life. (pages 116-117)

Quiet Reflection

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Questions for Study

1. Cyril of Alexandria is remembered for his defense of Christian orthodoxy against Nestorius. What did Nestorius claim?
2. What did Cyril say was wrong with Nestorius's teaching? Why was this conflict just as much about Jesus as it was about Mary?
3. What was at stake in this controversy? What is the deeper reality that concerned Cyril?
4. Why was Hilary of Poitiers exiled? What did Hilary do during his exile?
5. How did Hilary's approach combine adherence to truth with pastoral sensitivity?
6. How, according to Hilary, do we come into relationship with Christ? How does this change us?

NOTES

7. What role do the words of baptism play in the thought of Hilary?
8. Where did Eusebius of Vercelli live and minister? What was the spiritual condition of this area?
9. What role did his monastic establishments play in his ministry?
10. What was Eusebius's time in exile like? What did he accomplish?
11. How did Eusebius encourage his clergy and people to keep their spiritual balance?
12. What were the conditions in Turin during the ministry of Maximus?
13. To whom were many of his homilies addressed? Why?
14. What did Maximus have to say about wealth?
15. How did Maximus come to be involved in a role in the civic life of the community?

NOTES

Questions for Reflection

1. The Fathers in this session, as well as in the rest of the book, grappled with questions of Jesus' identity. Why was this not a simply academic question? Why was it so important to them? How does our sense of Jesus' identity impact our own spiritual lives?
2. Eusebius emphasized monastic establishments as centers for spiritual renewal and pastoral ministry in his area. Why do you think he did this? Why was monasticism such an important factor in Christian life for the next millennium? What role does monasticism play in today's Church and world?
3. Maximus spoke strongly to the people of his community about their relationship to wealth and material things. What do you think he would say to us today?
4. Pope Benedict cites Hilary's "spirit of reconciliation" in dealing with those who cannot quite affirm the fullness of faith. Are there areas of life in which you have reached out and built relationships with those with whom you disagree? What is the foundation of such a relationship?
5. These Fathers ministered in communities in which Christianity was still a minority and often found itself in conflict. How did they minister in those situations? What can you learn from them about living in such an environment, in which the general culture stands in conflict with the Gospel?

CLOSING PRAYER

Quote from *The Fathers*:

“Obtain, O Lord,... that I may keep ever faithful to what I have professed in the symbol of my regeneration, when I was baptized in the Father, in the Son, and in the Holy Spirit. That I may worship you, our Father, and with you, your Son; that I may deserve your Holy Spirit, who proceeds from you through your Only Begotten Son ... Amen.” (St. Hilary of Poitiers — page 123)

Briefly pause.

Lord’s Prayer

Leader: *St. Hilary of Poitiers ...*

Group: *Pray for us.*

All make the *Sign of the Cross*.

NOTES

SESSION 5

Jerome, Aphraates, Ephrem,
Chromatius, Paulinus of Nola

Chapters Twenty-One to Twenty-Five

OPENING PRAYER AND READING

Begin the session with the *Sign of the Cross* and the *Prayer to the Holy Spirit* (see page 16).

Excerpt from *The Fathers*:

This dialogue with Scripture must always have two dimensions: on the one hand, it must be a truly personal dialogue, because God speaks with each one of us through Sacred Scripture and it has a message for each one. We must not read Sacred Scripture as a word of the past but as the Word of God that is also addressed to us, and we must try to understand what it is that the Lord wants to tell us.

However, to avoid falling into individualism, we must bear in mind that the Word of God has been given to us precisely in order to build communion and to join forces in the truth on our journey toward God. Thus, although it is always a personal Word, it is also a Word that builds community, that builds the Church. We must therefore read it in communion with the living Church. (page 144)

Quiet Reflection

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

Questions for Discussion

1. How did Jerome's early life reflect solitude, community, and service? Were they in conflict?
2. What is Jerome's most well-known accomplishment? What were his other achievements?
3. Where did Jerome's life begin? Where did it end?
4. What does Pope Benedict suggest Jerome's work teaches us about how to read Scripture? What must we always keep in balance?
5. What is the role of the Church in our reading of Scripture?
6. Aphraates lived in the Near East. How was this context different from the African or Northern Mediterranean context of the other Fathers whom we have discussed?

NOTES

7. What characterized Aphraates' community's theological environment?
8. What was the role of humility in Aphraates' thought?
9. Ephrem also emerged from the context of Syriac Christianity. What does Pope Benedict say he hopes we can learn from studying these figures?
10. How does the use of poetic language support Ephrem's theological expression? What about poetry helps him say what he wants to say?
11. What paradoxes did Ephrem see in the Christian faith?
12. What were the pressures and problems in the area in which Chromatius had ministered and suffered?
13. What was Chromatius's theological emphasis?
14. What was the role of Mary in Chromatius's theology?
15. What prompted Paulinus's interest in Christianity?
16. What inspired him to enter religious life?
17. What role did the poor play in Paulinus's life and ministry?

Questions for Reflection

1. Jerome's life and spirituality were rooted in Scripture. What role does Scripture play in your spiritual life? What resources do you find helpful in reading or praying with Scripture?

2. Jerome emphasized reading the Scriptures with the Church. What do you think this means? Why is it an organic approach and not an external imposition? How does this differ from other approaches to Scripture?
3. Jerome was assisted in his ministry by many others. What are the challenges of working with others in ministry? What do you value most about working in community with other Christians?
4. Aphraates and Ephrem both represent the Christianity of the Near East. These churches still exist, and some of them are in communion with the Catholic Church. What unifies diverse communities in Catholicism?

NOTES

5. Ephrem's work emphasizes the paradoxes in the Christian faith. What paradoxes of the Gospel and the Christian life have been meaningful to you?
6. The community which Chromatius served had been strengthened as it suffered persecution. Why would that happen? Has something like that ever happened in your life of faith?
7. Paulinus's journey of faith was marked by unexpected incidents: his encounters with Christians at a shrine, the death of his son. What twists and turns has your spiritual life taken? What unexpected events have opened your heart to God?
8. The poor were not at a distance to Paulinus — he invited them to live in his community. Have you ever taken a step to more radically live the Gospel? What does it take to take a step like that?

NOTES

CLOSING PRAYER

Quote from *The Fathers*:

*“Give relief to those in distress, visit the ailing,
help the poor: this is prayer.
Prayer is good, and its works are beautiful.
Prayer is accepted when it gives relief to one’s neighbor.
Prayer is heard when it includes forgiveness of affronts.
Prayer is strong
when it is full of God’s strength.”
(St. Aphraates — on page 156)*

Briefly pause.

Lord’s Prayer

Leader: *St. Aphraates ...*

Group: *Pray for us.*

All make the *Sign of the Cross*.

NOTES

SESSION 6

Ambrose, Augustine

Chapters Nineteen and Twenty-Six

OPENING PRAYER AND READING

Begin the session with the *Sign of the Cross* and the *Prayer to the Holy Spirit* (see page 16).

Excerpt from *The Fathers*:

When I read St. Augustine's writings, I do not get the impression that he is a man who died more or less 1,600 years ago; I feel he is like a man of today: a friend, a contemporary who speaks to me, who speaks to us with his fresh and timely faith. In St. Augustine who talks to us, talks to me in his writings, we see the everlasting timeliness of his faith; of the faith that comes from Christ, the Eternal Incarnate Word, Son of God and Son of Man. And we can see that this faith is not of the past although it was preached yesterday; it is still timely today, for Christ is truly yesterday, today, and forever. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Thus, St. Augustine encourages us to entrust ourselves to this ever-living Christ and in this way find the path of life. (page 185)

Quiet Reflection**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION****Questions for Study**

1. What, according to Pope Benedict, was Ambrose's "last catechesis"?

2. What was unusual about the way in which Ambrose became a bishop?
3. What role did *lectio divina* play in Ambrose's life and writing?
4. What did Augustine observe about the Church in Milan? How did this affect him?
5. What was Augustine's family situation?
6. What was Augustine's early career trajectory? Where did it seem he was headed?
7. How did reading Cicero shift his thinking?
8. Why did Augustine join the Manicheans?
9. What was Augustine's objection to the Scriptures? How did he overcome these objections?
10. Why did the philosophies he was studying leave Augustine unsatisfied? What was missing?

NOTES

11. How do faith and reason work together, according to Augustine?
12. Why is Augustine's *Confessions* unique and important in Western culture? Why is it called the *Confessions*?
13. What was the context of *City of God*? Why did Augustine write it? What was his central point?
14. Pope Benedict outlines three "conversions" in Augustine's life. What were they conversions *from* and *to*?

Questions for Reflection

1. Ambrose came to church ministry in an unexpected, surprising way. How has God worked in your life in an unexpected way for which you didn't think you were prepared? How did you deal with this?
2. Augustine was initially put off by Scripture because it did not have the elevated language or pure logic of philosophy. What are we missing when we view Scripture through a lens like that with those expectations? What are we missing about the way God works in the world?
3. Augustine emphasizes the intimacy of God and human beings. How does the reality of God's presence within you impact your self-understanding?
4. Augustine says that when we are distant from God, we are distant from ourselves as well. Have you ever experienced this? How do we mend that breach?

5. The world holds two possibilities for us, according to Augustine. Because it comes from God, it can help us see God, but we can also fall into the trap of making idols of the things of this world and forgetting the Creator. How have you seen this happen in your life?
6. Augustine went through many stages in his faith journey. Reflect on the stages and “conversions” in your own life. How has God worked through these changes? How does the reality of change and conversion impact your sense of the future?
7. At the end of his life, Augustine wrote a work correcting some of his previous writings, an act of great humility. If you were to write such a book, what would you write?

NOTES

CLOSING PRAYER

Quote from *The Fathers*:

“Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you. And see, you were within and I was in the external world and sought you there, and in my unlovely state I plunged into those lovely created things which you made. You were with me, and I was not with you. The lovely things kept me far from you, though if they did not have their existence in you, they had no existence at all.

“You called and cried aloud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.”
(*St. Augustine — on pages 189-190*)

Briefly pause.

Lord’s Prayer

Leader: *Sts. Ambrose and Augustine ...*

Group: *Pray for us.*

All make the *Sign of the Cross*.

FOR FURTHER READING

Books

Aquilina, Mike. *The Fathers of the Church, Expanded*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2006.

_____. *Living the Mysteries*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2003.

_____. *The Mass of the Early Christians*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2007.

_____. *The Way of the Fathers: Praying With the Early Christians*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1999.

Bennett, Rod. *Four Witnesses: The Early Church in Her Own Words*. Fort Collins, CO: Ignatius Press, 2002.

Chadwick, Owen. *The Early Church: The Penguin History of the Church*. New York: Penguin, 1993.

Gambero, Luigi, and Thomas Buffer. *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*. Fort Collins, CO: Ignatius Press, 1999.

Hahn, Scott, and Mike Aquilina. *Living the Mysteries: A Guide for Unfinished Christians*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2003.

Jurgens, William A. *Faith of the Early Fathers* (Three-Volume Set). Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 1980.

Internet

Many writings of the Fathers are available online. Two excellent sites for exploring these writings are:

New Advent

(www.newadvent.org/fathers/index.html)

The Christian Classics Ethereal Library

(www.ccel.org/fathers.html)

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