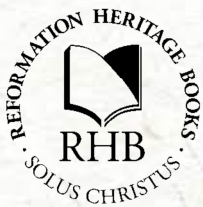


Church History

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Simonetta Carr



Reformation Heritage Books
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Church History

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Note to the Reader

This book may include some words that are unfamiliar to you. The first time they appear, they will be in bold type (**like this**), which will show that you can find their meaning in the glossary at the back of the book.

If you find an unfamiliar word that is not in bold type, you can check the glossary to see if a variation of that word is included. For example, the word *liberalism* is in the glossary, but not the word *liberal*. When you find the definition of *liberalism*, though, you can figure out that a *liberal* is someone who believes in *liberalism*—and you will know what all of that means. Because there may be words in this book unfamiliar to you that aren't in the glossary, it's a good idea to read this book (and any book) with a dictionary close by so that you can understand what you are reading and improve your vocabulary by learning new words.

Also, you will notice that the first time people are mentioned in this book, their names are followed by the dates of their birth and death. If these dates are not there, it could be that the person was mentioned earlier in the book or that the dates of his or her birth or death are unknown.

The abbreviation *ca.* before a date stands for the word *circa*, meaning “about.” It shows that we are not sure about the date of a person's birth or death. The abbreviation *b.* before a date stands for *born*; we give only people's year of birth when they are still alive or when we don't know the year that they died. The abbreviation *d.* stands for *died*. We give only the year of a person's death when we don't know the year he or she was born. Even if we have only approximate years of a person's birth or death or only the year of their birth or death, it helps us to know the era when they lived.

Another important tool at the back of this book (and many other books) is the index. An *index* is an alphabetical list of topics, names of people, and names of places included in this book with the page numbers where they are mentioned. It can help you quickly find where, for example, the city Constantinople is mentioned, a person like C. S. Lewis is discussed, or a topic like the French Revolution is covered. In an index, people are listed by their last names first, so if you want to find out more about Lewis, you would look under *L* for Lewis, C. S. If people have a title (like king, queen, or pope) with no last name, look them up under their given name—for example, look under *H* for Henry VIII, King of England; or *G* for Gregory I, Pope.

Like with anything you read, if you have questions about what you find in these pages, talk with trusted people who can help you understand: your parents, a teacher, or a minister, for example. Asking questions—and discovering good answers to them—is one of the best ways to grow.

Introduction

From eternity past, before the creation of this world, God intended to have a people whom He would love forever, enjoying their company as they enjoyed His. His plan has always been the same: “I will be their God, and they shall be My people” (Ezekiel 37:27).

Adam and Eve’s rebellion in the garden of Eden, when they sided with Satan against God, didn’t catch God by surprise. In His wisdom, He had already decided to bring about the only remedy that would allow Him to show His perfect justice and His perfect love. He would come to earth in the person of His Son, fully God and fully man, to live the perfect life Adam would fail to live and take on Himself all the sins of His people.

In the Old Testament, the people of God lived by faith in this Savior to come. They called Him Messiah (corresponding to the word Christ in the Greek New Testament), or Son of David. Since Jesus’s birth, God’s people have been living by faith in the Savior who has come as promised.

Jesus told His disciples that He would build His church, and nothing could destroy it (Matthew 16:18). He was not talking about a church building. He was talking about His people. In fact, He promised that He would always be with His people in spirit, even after His return to His Father in heaven (Matthew 28:20).

He has kept His promise. For over two thousand years, Christ has continued to preserve His church even when it seemed like it was going to be destroyed.

You can read about the first years of the church in the Bible in the book of Acts. There, we see how it became organized and how it brought the message of salvation through Christ first to Israel, where Jesus and His disciples lived, and then to other nations around the Mediterranean Sea.

This book starts after the resurrection of Jesus and His commission of the twelve **apostles** and ends at the beginning of the twenty-first century. History is much more complicated than a simple overview, but this will give you a general idea of how God preserved His church and His **gospel**, His message of good news, throughout the centuries and what challenges the church had to face. Hopefully, it will make you want to know more about this fascinating story and especially about the God who has planned it and keeps it going toward an even more exciting future.

GAUL

Lyon

Rome

Carthage

EGYPT

A Persecuted Church

During the first three hundred years after Christ ascended to heaven, the number of His followers continued to grow, even though they were often misunderstood, teased, and **persecuted**. They were organized in churches and united by common beliefs that were expressed in short, official statements known as **creeds**. These statements were an early form of the Apostles' Creed, which some churches still recite today. Churches' customs and traditions, however, varied from place to place.



30–312

- ca. 30 The Roman authorities crucify Jesus. His friends bury Him, and after three days He rises again. He then commissions His disciples to preach the gospel and establish churches. These specially commissioned disciples are called apostles.
- ca. 33 A blinding light stops the Jewish religious leader Saul of Tarsus on his way to Damascus, where he was going to arrest Christians. Jesus commissions him to take the gospel to other nations outside Israel. Saul changes his name to Paul.
- 49 The apostles hold a church council in Jerusalem. They discuss how God has fulfilled His promises of creating for Himself a people of all nations, not just Jews.
- 64 Nero blames the Christians for a fire that burned much of Rome. He cruelly persecutes Christians in Rome.
- 177 Pressed by the people of Lyon, in today's France, the Roman government imprisons, tortures, and kills many Christians.
- 249 The first general persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire under Emperor Decius occurs.
- 301 King Tiridates III of Armenia proclaims Christianity as the state religion, making Armenia the first official Christian country.
- 303 The worst persecution against Christians starts during the reign of Diocletian.

WHY PERSECUTION?

“If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you,” Jesus told His disciples (John 15:20). His words proved true soon after He returned to heaven at the end of His earthly mission, as we read in the book of Acts. The early Christians were persecuted by Jewish leaders who didn’t recognize Jesus as the Messiah (Savior) their scriptures (what Christians know as the Old Testament) had predicted.

Many Jews thought Jesus was lying about being the Son of God. They also thought the idea of the God who had made the heaven and the earth dying on a Roman cross, the most humiliating and cruel punishment at that time, was outrageous and offensive. That was not the Messiah they had been expecting. They wanted a strong man who could deliver them from the Romans, who had taken over their land.

The Greeks and Romans were used to stories of men like Hercules becoming gods through acts of courage and strength. But the story of the God who became man and died a shameful death like a common criminal seemed so foolish that they made it the subject of cartoons.

Most of the time, however, Greeks and Romans allowed people to practice other religions. They had many different gods and adopted gods from other nations. They even respected the Jews for their ancient religion. Christianity, instead, looked like a new religion, with strange teachings and ceremonies that were easily misunderstood. For example, when in the Last Supper Christians repeated Jesus’s words that the bread is His body and the wine His blood, the Romans called them **cannibals**.

The Romans became particularly concerned when the Christians refused to worship other gods. Often, if a disaster struck, the Romans blamed the Christians for angering the gods. And when the Romans required people to worship the spirit of the emperor’s household as a god, the Christians’ refusal to do so was seen as a rebellion against the government.

The earliest-known wide persecution of Christians in Rome was started in the year 64 by Emperor Nero, who blamed them for a fire that destroyed much of the city. Most of the time, however, it was the common people who complained about Christians to the



The Amphithéâtre des Trois-Gaules in Lyon, France, where many Christians were killed by wild beasts—a common form of punishment in the second half of the second century

GUILHEM VELLUT, FLICKR

authorities. This is what happened in 177 in Lyon, in today's France, where the locals, plagued by wars and disease, blamed the Christians for angering the gods and dragged them to the authorities for punishment. Most Christians were imprisoned. Some were tortured, and about forty-eight were killed.

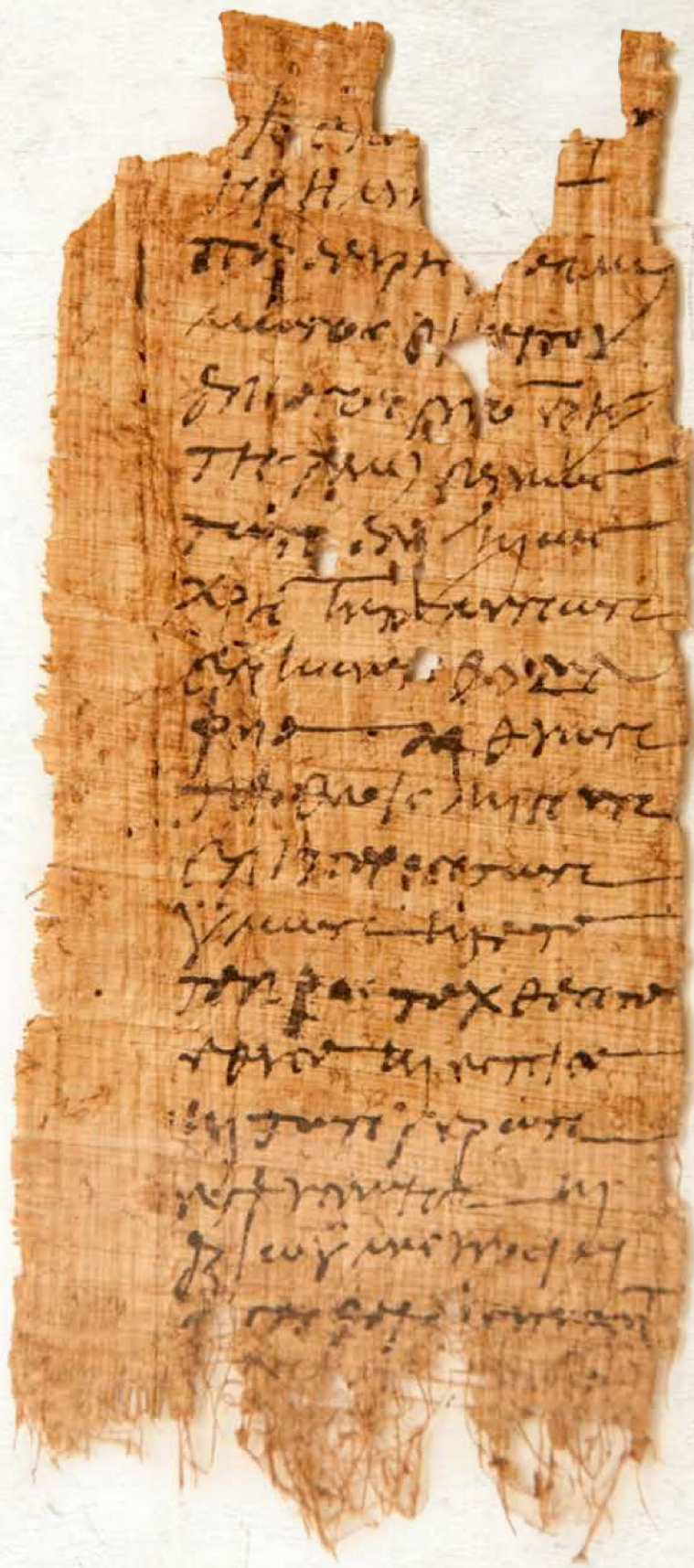
Other times persecution came directly from the emperors. Even the worst persecutions, however, failed to stop the Christians, who believed that dying for their faith was an honor. Those who died because of their faith were called **martyrs**, from a Greek word meaning “**witnesses**.” The Christians’ courage and devotion were a witness of their faith and drew others to the gospel.

The first general persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire happened in 249 under Emperor Decius, who demanded everyone’s participation in sacrifices to the gods, even if it was just by eating the meat of sacrificial animals. Those who obeyed received a certificate called a *libellus*. Those who were found without a *libellus* were imprisoned, tortured, and sometimes killed.

An even worse persecution was launched in 303 during the reign of Diocletian. Churches were burned, Bibles were destroyed, and thousands of Christians were killed. By this time, however, Christians had become so numerous and well liked in their communities that many Romans defended them.

Did You Know?

Death by crucifixion (being nailed to a cross) was such a horrible form of punishment that it was usually done outside the city. The sight of people hanging on crosses served as a warning for people coming into a city. Crucifixions were really a form of torture because it could take hours or even days of terrible suffering for a person to die. The Romans, who had probably learned this method from the Persians or Carthaginians, didn’t use it to punish Roman citizens. Because the apostle Paul was a Roman citizen, he was probably beheaded.



In order to avoid persecution, Christians had to show a certificate (*libellus*) declaring that they had performed a sacrifice to the Roman gods. This *libellus* was required during the persecution under Emperor Decius. The signature line reads, “We, the Aurelii Serenus and Hermas, saw you sacrificing.”

LUTHER COLLEGE ARCHIVES, DECORAH, IOWA



THE SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY

Before leaving this earth, Jesus told His disciples,

All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:18–20)

His disciples took this commandment seriously and spread the good news of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection both in Israel and in other nations. It was really good news because it told people that because of Jesus's obedience, sacrifice, and victory over death, there was a bright future in store for all those who trusted in Him.

He was really the Christ (a Greek word for Messiah) the Jews had been expecting, but He was not just their Savior. He had come to save people from all nationalities. And He had not come to give the Jews political

freedom from the Romans, who were there just for a time. He had come to free them from the bondage of sin—something no human being could do.

Accustomed to the idea that there were many gods who kept fighting each other and had to be kept pacified with constant sacrifices, people found the Christian message of a God of never-ending love to be wonderful news. This good news is known as the gospel. Those who received the gospel spread it to others, sometimes traveling long distances to do so.

This sounded strange to ancient people, who usually believed in the gods of their region and didn't care what people living in other places believed. In fact, they were glad if the foreigners' gods were weak. But Christians believed that Christ died to save the whole world and that everyone should hear this good news.

We don't have a record of all the early missionary travels. According to some sources, the apostles



The monastery of Khor Virap in Artasat, Armenia, was built in the seventh century on the site where Gregory the Illuminator was imprisoned for thirteen years. The prison cell is still under the monastery, which was remodeled several times. The mountain in the background is Mount Ararat.

DIEGO DELSO, DELSO.PHOTO

Thaddeus and Bartholomew brought the gospel to Armenia, while the early **evangelization** of India is attributed by some to the apostle Thomas and by others to Bartholomew. In any case, according to the historian Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 260–339), in the late second century there was already a community of Christians in India who had a copy of the Gospel of Matthew.

Most of the time, the gospel was spread by Christians who spoke to their neighbors or to people they met while traveling for work or pleasure or because of persecution. As new Christian communities grew, they often asked a larger community to send a **bishop** to assist them.

Some ancient historians were surprised that a religion whose followers were so persecuted and despised continued to spread—first slowly, then faster and faster. At the end of the first century, of the sixty million people in the Roman Empire, less than ten thousand were Christians. By the year 300, at the time of the Diocletian persecution, at least six million people called themselves Christians in spite of the dangers and hatred against them.

THE FIRST CHRISTIAN NATION

According to the ancient historian Agathangelos, Armenia was the first nation to adopt Christianity as its official religion. This happened in 301, during the reign of King Tiridates III (ca. 250–330).

As the story goes, Tiridates, charmed by the beauty of a Christian **nun**, Hripsime, called her to his palace, where he asked her to marry him. When she refused, he tried to take her by force, but she fought him off and won. Disappointed and embarrassed, he tried to convince the **abbess** of the **convent** to order Hripsime to obey him. When she also refused, he killed the thirty-three nuns in the convent.

After this, he was struck by a condition similar to that of King Nebuchadnezzar in the Bible (see Daniel 4). It was then that Tiridates's sister Khosrovidukht urged him to call a Christian man out of his prison to pray for him. The man's name was Gregory (ca. 240–332), later known as “the Illuminator,” which means “giver of light.” Gregory had been in prison for thirteen years for refusing to worship one of Armenia's **pagan** gods.

Healed through Gregory's prayer, Tiridates professed faith in Christ. Wanting his people to do the same, he officially declared Armenia a Christian nation.

Some Men and Women of the Early Church

MARTYRS—GIVING THEIR LIVES FOR CHRIST

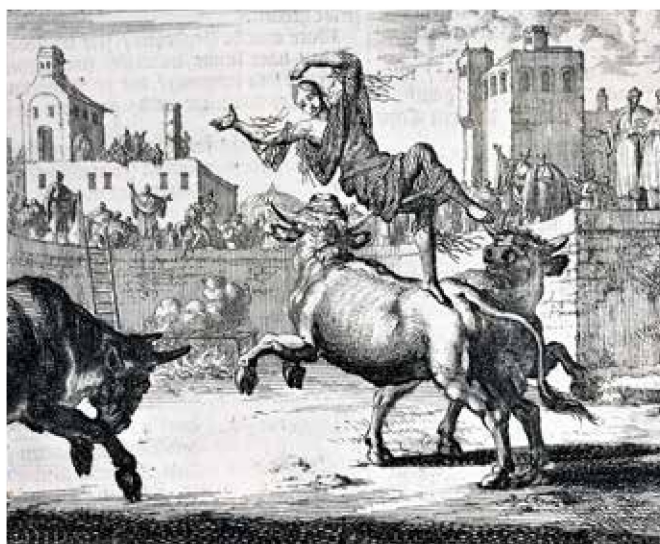
IGNATIUS (ca. 35–ca. 107) was bishop of Antioch, in today's Turkey. He was arrested because of his faith and sent to Rome under guard. The news spread quickly even without TV and internet, and Christians rushed to meet him at every stop he made along the way. They were encouraged by his brave and cheerful attitude. He was killed in Rome, probably in the Circus Maximus.

My only wish is to attain Jesus Christ.

—IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH

POLYCARP (ca. 69–155) was bishop of Smyrna, in today's Turkey. To the Roman authorities who encouraged him to save his life by cursing Christ he replied, "Eighty-six years I have served Christ, and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" He was burned at the stake.

BLANDINA (ca. 162–177) was a young slave. She was arrested during the persecution at Lyon, in today's France, and tortured day and night. Throughout this time she encouraged other young people to stay strong. She was killed by a raging bull in a Roman **arena**.



Blandina was killed by a raging bull in a Roman arena.

FROM THE MARTYR'S MIRROR, 1660,
BETHEL COLLEGE LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES

CYPRIAN (ca. 200–258) was bishop of Carthage. When Emperor Decius began to persecute Christians, Cyprian went into hiding so he could keep the church encouraged and united. He encouraged the church to forgive those who out of fear gave up their faith—as long as they repented. Years later, he boldly faced a new wave of persecution and was killed.



PERPETUA AND FELICITAS

(both d. 203) were a noblewoman and a slave from Carthage, in today's Tunisia. They were both young mothers. (Felicitas gave birth to a baby a couple days before she was killed.) They were killed for refusing to deny their faith. Perpetua is remembered for the diary she kept during her imprisonment, helping us to understand how Christians were persecuted.

A mosaic depicting
Perpetua and Felicitas,
as a fifth-century artist
imagined them

PHOTO BY NICK THOMPSON,
PUBLISHED WITH KIND PERMISSION OF
OPERA DI RELIGIONE DELLA
DIOCESI DI RAVENNA

I cannot be called anything other than what I am, a Christian.

—PERPETUA OF CARTHAGE

APOLOGISTS—INTRODUCING CHRIST TO THE WORLD

Initially, Christians wrote to instruct, reassure, and comfort other Christians. For example, local bishops would write letters to their churches. By the middle of the second century, some began to address their writings to outsiders in order to explain the Christian faith. We call these writers **apologists**.

JUSTIN (ca. 100–165), called Martyr, was a **philosopher** from the region of Samaria, near Israel, who discovered that Christianity was the only “safe and reasonable” **philosophy**. His writings were addressed to both the Jews (to help them understand that Christianity is the fulfillment of their scriptures) and to the pagans. He also wrote letters to emperors to explain that Christians were of great value to Rome. Despite this, he was arrested and killed, together with some of his students.



A Roman mosaic in Ostia Antica, Italy, showing a philosopher talking. The clothes this man is wearing are probably similar to what Justin Martyr wore as a sign of his profession. Beards were also common among philosophers.

FR. LAWRENCE LEW, O.P.

It was a challenging task because few people at that time had ever heard of Jesus, and few, apart from the Jews, knew much about the Old Testament and the Messiah it announces. The apologists had to start from scratch. Often, they had to defend Christians against the accusations of those who had heard only strange and negative things about Christianity.

CLEMENT (ca. 150–ca. 215) became the head of a school for new believers in Alexandria, Egypt. He wrote many important works, including *Exhortation to the Greeks*, in which he encouraged educated Greeks and Romans to hear the gospel of Jesus. While fragments of hymns from the early church exist, his “Hymn of the Savior” is the earliest known complete hymn of the church.

ORIGEN (ca. 185–ca. 253) was a teacher and writer from Alexandria, Egypt. He wrote a convincing reply to Celsus, a Roman who believed that Christianity was a new and dangerous religion. Celsus thought Christians were absurd because they followed a dead carpenter. He also thought that God would never come down to earth—it’s man who needs to raise his mind to God. Origen replied that it’s precisely the opposite. God reached down to man because man is not able to reach up to God. His clear and logical replies confirmed that Christians were not as absurd and unintelligent as Celsus accused them of being.

Origen was also the first person who tried to write an organized explanation of Christian beliefs. Ultimately, not all of his thinking was considered biblical by the church, but his writings raised important questions Christians needed to face.

We understand that God, the Creator of all things, is superior to the things that are to be changed. If, therefore, on some points we teach the same things as the poets and philosophers whom you honor, and on other points are fuller and more divine in our teaching, and if we alone afford proof of what we assert, why are we unjustly hated more than all others?

—JUSTIN MARTYR

Great Questions of the Church

DO WE NEED HIGHER KNOWLEDGE?

Since Jesus's message was still new, some people interpreted it in different ways. Soon the church realized the danger of straying from the teachings of the apostles, who had been with Jesus and knew what He taught. In fact, the apostles had to deal with some false teachings in their churches and had described them in their letters and in the book of Revelation.

There were different reasons why some people strayed from the apostles' message. Some thought that it was too simple and there was a higher knowledge still to be discovered. Today, these people are called **Gnostics**, from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning "knowledge."

The Gnostics were not one united group. The word is used for different groups who had similar beliefs. Some Gnostics claimed to have received special revelations directly from Jesus that were superior to the message of the apostles. Most of them believed that everything we can see and touch is inferior to what is spiritual. Some explained the evil in the world by saying that there are two gods—one good and one bad, or one inferior to the other.

One person who held this second view was Marcion (d. ca. 160). He is not included with the Gnostics because he didn't believe that knowledge is the key to salvation. He still believed we are saved by faith in Christ, but he thought that Christ was the son of the good god of the New Testament, who was different from the harsh god of the Old Testament. The New Testament frequently quotes the Old Testament, so Marcion removed the Old Testament references. Both the Gnostics and Marcion had many followers, although the Christian community was united in rejecting their teachings.

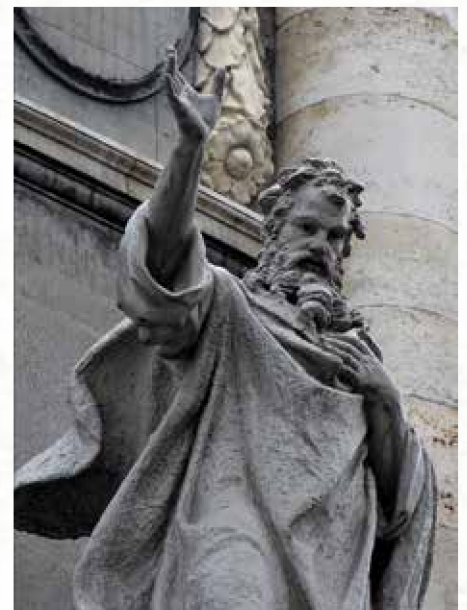
Irenaeus (ca. 130–ca. 202), a pastor from Asia Minor who served in Lyon, France, studied the gnostic teachings and wrote a book to explain why they were different from what Jesus had taught, even though they used similar words, and how they were illogical and based on suppositions. He also explained that both the Old and the New Testaments talk about one God who created everything good, for a good purpose, and who is bringing this purpose to a glorious end in Christ.

We call his book *Against Heresies*. Originally, the Greek word for *heresy* meant "a choice." By Irenaeus's day it meant a "wrong choice." His purpose was to encourage Christians to keep to the scriptural teachings of the apostles. He included a prayer for the Gnostics, saying that he loved them "better than they seem to love themselves."

Another important apologist who wrote against the Gnostics was the North African Tertullian (ca. 155–ca. 240), who was also the first apologist to produce a great number of Christian works in Latin, the language of the Western Roman Empire; before this, most Christian works had been written in Greek, which was the language of the East. Some of his works were also addressed to the Jews and to pagan philosophers.

Think about It

- What's wrong with wanting to discover more about God than what the Bible has revealed?
- Was it safer for Christians to trust the teachings of the apostles or the teachings of the Gnostics? Why?
- Did the Gnostics' interpretations help them to understand the Bible, or did they take them further away from it? Why?
- Explain how the Bible is one unified story, with just one God from beginning to end. What's the theme of the story?



We don't have any images of Irenaeus from the time when he was alive. This is how nineteenth-century sculptor Carl Rohl Smith imagined him to be.

ORF3US, WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Daily Life of Early Christians

Sometime in the second century, a Christian wrote a letter to a man named Diognetus, who was curious to know how Christians worshiped and what they believed.

He explained that Christians didn't look any different from the people around them. They lived in the same communities as the others, dressed like them, ate the same types of food, and spoke the same languages. A Christian in Greece looked like any other Greek, and a Christian in Africa looked like any other African.

But they were different in other ways. They lived in their own countries as though they were only passing through. They performed their duties as citizens of their countries, but they remembered they were first of all citizens of heaven. They loved everyone, even those who persecuted them. When people insulted them, they answered with a blessing.

Their faith affected their attitudes and decisions. For example, Christian parents didn't abandon their babies like Greek or Roman parents often did, and husbands and wives valued their faithfulness to each other.

The objects left from that time show some of the Christians' preferences. For example, they chose carefully the symbols and pictures used in jewelry designs. They avoided not only pictures of gods or **idols** but also images of swords or bows (Christians tried to live at peace) or wine cups (Christians drank wine or beer in moderation). They liked images of doves, fish, anchors, and ships. The fish became a Christian symbol because the letters of the Greek word (*ixthus*) were the first letters of the words in the Greek phrase "Jesus Christ Son of God Savior."



Sometimes, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, *alpha* (Α) and *omega* (Ω), were placed next to the *chi-rho* symbol as a reminder of what Jesus said in Revelation 1:8; 21:6; and 22:13: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End."

MONIEK SPAANS, ISTOCK



In the center of this terracotta oil lamp from the fourth century, you can see a Christian symbol: the Greek letters *chi* (X) and *rho* (P), placed one over the other. These were the first two letters in the Greek word *Kristos* (Christ). People used oil lamps to light their homes. These letters reminded Christians that Christ is the light of the world.

THE WALTERS ART MUSEUM, BALTIMORE

THE BISHOPS— OVERSEEING THE CHURCHES

Initially, the word *bishop* (*episkopos* in Greek) simply described an overseer of a church and probably had the same meaning as **elder**. After a while, each church started to have one bishop in charge.

By the fourth century, larger cities such as Antioch, in today's Turkey; Alexandria, in Egypt; Rome, in today's Italy; and Carthage, in today's Tunisia, had one bishop over all the churches in the city. But the authority of bishops varied from city to city.

The clothes worn by most bishops and **archbishops**, today known as **vestments**, were not a Christian invention. They were similar to the clothes worn by noblemen or government authorities.

A SAMPLE OF WORSHIP IN THE EARLY CHURCH



This picture of a Christian family was painted on a wall of the **catacombs** of Saint Gennaro, Naples, Italy. The family's hands are raised in prayer because that's how most people prayed in those days instead of bowing their heads and closing their eyes, as most Christians do now.

GIANNI CIUNFRINI
(WITH PERMISSION FROM
CATACOMBE DI NAPOLI)



Did You Know?

- Today, the Roman Catholic Church still mixes the Eucharist's wine with water.
- In the early church, when the Bible was read and explained, the preacher would sit and the **congregation** would stand. Over time, each bishop began to sit on a special chair called in both Latin and Greek the *cathedra*. Later, the word *cathedral* was the name of a church where a bishop regularly preached.

In a letter to Emperor Antoninus Pius (86–161), Justin Martyr explained how Christians worshiped in Rome. The worship service included reading the Bible, instructions (preaching), prayers, and the **sacrament** of the **Eucharist** (now also called the Lord's Supper). This followed the example given by the apostles in Acts 2:42: "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' **doctrine** and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers."

Justin explained that on Sunday, Christians traveled from different places to get together for worship. Then they would read some writings from the Bible, either Old or New Testament, and the person leading worship would explain them to the others.

After that, they had prayer and the Lord's Supper, with bread and wine that was diluted with water, as the ancient Romans and Greeks did. If people were not able to leave their homes, the **deacons** would bring the Lord's Supper to them.

At the end of the service, people gave an offering for the poor.

Justin explained that Christians worshiped on Sunday instead of the Jewish Saturday because Sunday represents the first day of creation and especially because "Jesus Christ our Savior on the same day rose from the dead."

The Lord's Supper is also described in the *Didache*, an important document from the early church that gives one example of how Christians celebrated it every Sunday.

DID THE EARLY CHRISTIANS READ THE BIBLE?

Until the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century, the main way to duplicate a document or book was to copy it by hand—on scrolls or on sheets of parchment made from animal skins. Books were expensive, and only a few people owned them. Most people heard the Bible read in church on Sundays.

The first Christians used the same books the Jews considered inspired by God. Today we call them the Old Testament. Since there was no New Testament yet, the first Christians just called them “the books.” At the same time, the churches started to pass around some letters written by the apostles. In the course of time, they recognized that some of these letters were as inspired by God as the Old Testament books. These, together with the Gospels, the book of Acts, and the book of Revelation, made up the New Testament, a title given in the beginning of the third century.

A UNITED CHURCH

Irenaeus pointed out that while the Gnostics had many different theories, the Christian churches, no matter where they were, were united through the Bible. This unity was very important to Christians. This is why Cyprian refused to recognize baptisms performed by heretics or by people who had separated from the church. He is remembered for saying, “Outside of the church there is no salvation,” and “He cannot have God for his Father who does not have the church as his mother.” He meant that people couldn’t call themselves Christians if they didn’t belong to what was recognized as the church—a community of believers

Paul died around AD 65, so all his letters were written before then. Three of the Gospels—Mark, Luke, and Matthew—were also written by AD 70. The Gospel of John was written in the 80s AD.

Irenaeus, who wrote around the end of the second century, included many New Testament references in his works, showing that these books were well known and their authority was recognized. In 367 Bishop Athanasius (ca. 296–373) of Alexandria produced the first existing list of the New Testament books, which were almost the same as those we have today. Then, in 397 the **Council** of Carthage officially recognized as the inspired Word of God the books of the Old and New Testaments, which the church has been using ever since.

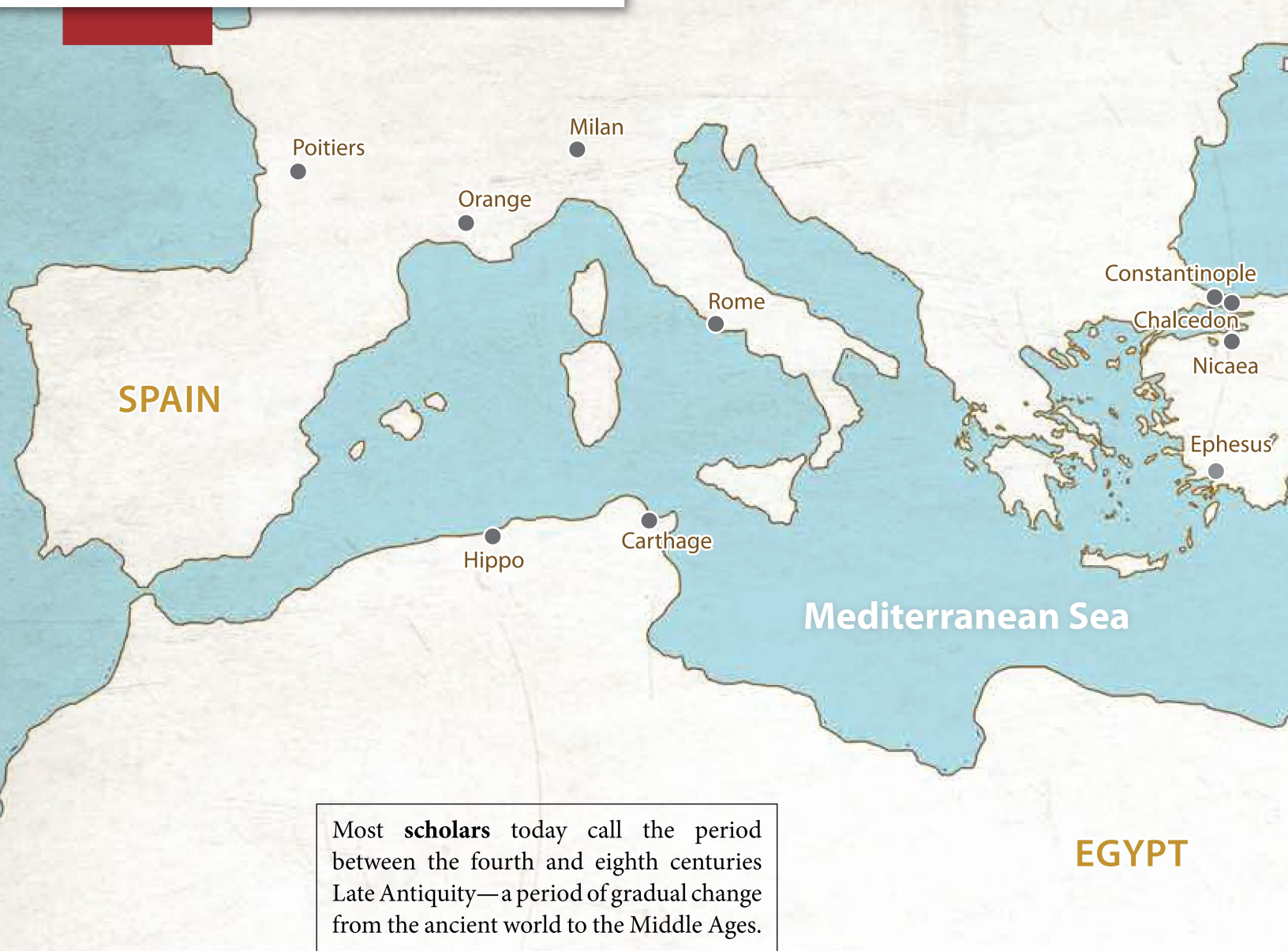
present in many nations and united in their faithfulness to the recorded teachings of the apostles. Those who didn’t consider themselves part of this community and taught things that were not in the Bible were inventing a different religion.

At the same time, Irenaeus explained that churches can have some minor differences. For example, at a time when Christians were questioning the best time to celebrate Easter, he thought it was acceptable for the churches in Rome to celebrate it at one time while the churches in the East chose a different date.



MS 193. The Crosby-Schøyen Codex, Egypt, third century. These two pages show the end of the first letter of Peter and the beginning of the book of Jonah. This is the earliest existing manuscript of the book of 1 Peter in any language and the earliest complete manuscript of the book of Jonah in any language, as well as the oldest book in private ownership.

SCHØYEN COLLECTION,
OSLO AND LONDON



Most **scholars** today call the period between the fourth and eighth centuries Late Antiquity—a period of gradual change from the ancient world to the Middle Ages.

A Recognized Church

Things changed drastically for Christians in 313, when Emperor Constantine I (ca. 272–337), who had declared himself a Christian, proclaimed that Christianity was a legal religion. For the first time, Christians found favor with the Roman government and were able to worship freely. In fact, Constantine commissioned the building of large churches. This declaration was a turning point in church history. It became known as the Edict of Milan because it was issued in Milan, Italy, which was the capital of the Western Roman Empire from 286 to 402.



312–622

- 312 Following a military victory, the Roman emperor Constantine I declares himself a Christian.
- 313 Constantine puts a legal end to the persecution of Christians.
- 325 Constantine calls the first Council of Nicaea to discuss, among other things, whether Jesus is fully God. This is the first ecumenical council, with representatives from the whole church.
- 337 King Mirian III makes Christianity the official religion of Georgia, a region of Eastern Europe.
- 361–363 The Roman emperor Julian tries to return the empire to its original religion.
- 367 The Christian bishop Athanasius makes a first complete list of the books of the New Testament.
- 380 Emperor Theodosius I makes Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire.
- 381 The first Council of Constantinople (second ecumenical council) agrees that the Holy Spirit is fully God and refines the Nicene Creed.
- 382 The Council of Rome officially recognizes as the inspired Word of God the books of the Old and New Testaments, which the church has been using for some centuries.
- 405 Jerome finishes the official translation of the Bible into Latin.
- 410 The Visigoths' raid on Rome signals the collapse of the Western Roman Empire.
- 412 Augustine of Hippo begins to oppose the teachings of Pelagius.
- 418 The Council of Carthage officially condemns Pelagius's teachings.
- 451 The Council of Chalcedon (third ecumenical council) affirms that Jesus is fully human and fully divine, one person with two natures.
- 476 The Germanic general Odoacer ends the Western Roman Empire by deposing its last emperor.



One of the ancient gates of Iznik, where Nicaea was located

CAROLE RADDATO, WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Great Questions of the Church

IS JESUS REALLY GOD?

The Bible teaches that there is only one God. It also teaches that Jesus is both God *and* the Son of God. How can this be? This question puzzled the early Christians. Arius (ca. 260–336), an elder in Alexandria, Egypt, tried to solve this puzzle by saying that Jesus is not God in the same way the Creator is. He said, for example, that God the Father is eternal, while Jesus had a beginning, which means He was created. Arius even invented a jingle to explain his idea—“There was when He was not”—meaning that there was a time when Jesus didn’t exist. (The jingle was catchier in the original Greek.) Today, the **Jehovah’s Witnesses** believe the same thing. Also, the **Mormons** believe that Jesus was the first created spirit, not the Son of God.

Throughout the Roman Empire, bishops, elders, and common people began to take sides for and against this elder so much that there were arguments in the markets and fights in the streets. In 325, Emperor Constantine tried to bring peace by calling a meeting of bishops in the city of Nicaea (today’s Iznik, Turkey). It was the first church meeting ever called and presided over by an emperor. It was also the first **ecumenical** council, a meeting of representatives of the whole church, from both the East and the West.

About two hundred bishops came. They discussed the main teachings people had been circulating about Jesus. The vast majority believed that the Father and the Son were one God but distinguished one from the

other. That explained why Jesus could say, “I and My Father are one” (John 10:30) *and* could also pray to the Father.

In the end, the bishops wrote a statement declaring that Jesus was of one substance with the Father, and Constantine approved this wording. Constantine gave Arius the choice of signing the statement or going into exile. Arius chose exile.

The Council of Nicaea didn’t put an end to the arguments. A few cities ended up having two bishops, one in favor of Nicaea and one in favor of Arius.

There were also people who believed the Father and the Son were two different gods altogether and others who thought the Father and the Son were just one god appearing in two different forms—sometimes as father and sometimes as son. The confusion continued throughout the century.

Politics also had a lot to do with this matter because some emperors defended Arius’s views while others opposed them. Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, one of the greatest defenders of the decisions made at Nicaea, was exiled five times by different emperors for his firm belief that Jesus Christ is fully God.



This golden medallion, showing the head of Emperor Constantine I, was created to celebrate the thirtieth year of his rule, which lasted from 306 to 337.

THE WALTERS ART MUSEUM, BALTIMORE

Think about It

- Some people say Jesus never declared specifically that He was God’s only Son. Even though He didn’t, He certainly approved of those who did say it. For example, when Peter said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 16:16–17). He told Peter that his answer was exactly right. Find more verses showing that Jesus agreed with those who said He was God.
- Created or uncreated, same substance or similar substance... does it really matter? Can’t we just love Jesus without understanding who He really is? Why not?
- If Jesus had not been God, was His death on the cross enough to save us? Can a man die for someone else’s sins? Explain your answer.
- If Jesus was not really God and could not save us, then how should we view Him? We would be forced to see Him as just a good example to follow, which is how many people want to see Him today. But would you want to follow someone who says he is something he is not?
- Read John 1:1, 3, 14; 17:5; and 20:8. How do they prove that Jesus is God?

THE THREE CAPPADOCIANS

Three men were particularly instrumental in helping the church to understand the Trinity, along with the importance of seeing each person (God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit) as equally **divine**.

Two of these men—Basil (ca. 330–379) and Gregory (ca. 335–395)—were brothers. The third was a close friend also named Gregory (ca. 329–ca. 390). We distinguish the two Gregories by the place where they were born or lived: Basil's brother was called Gregory of Nyssa, and their friend, Gregory of Nazianzus. They are often known as the Cappadocian Fathers because they served in the area of Asia Minor known as Cappadocia.



HOW CAN GOD BE ONE IN THREE PERSONS?

The churches had been obeying Jesus's last commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). People wondered who exactly the Holy Spirit was.

Those who believed that the Father and the Son were two different forms of the same god taught that the Holy Spirit was a third form. In other words, they thought that God manifested Himself sometimes as the Father, sometimes as the Son, and sometimes as the Holy Spirit. This doesn't agree with the Bible, in which Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are often manifested at the same time in their different roles. For example, at Jesus's baptism in Mark 1:9–11, Jesus is in the water, the Holy Spirit descends like a dove, and the Father speaks from heaven.

Ultimately, the church realized that any attempt to explain the **Trinity** with human illustrations is flawed. It's best just to say that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one God in three persons. This a mystery that only God can understand. That doesn't mean we should not try to learn more about it. As long as we stay faithful to the Bible, learning about the Trinity can help us to know God better and to be filled with wonder at His greatness.

In 380 Emperor Theodosius I (ca. 347–395) defended the teaching of the Trinity when he made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. He said, "According to the apostolic teaching and the doctrine of the gospel, we believe the one **deity** of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, in equal majesty and in a holy Trinity."

I cannot think of the One without being quickly surrounded by the splendor of the Three; nor can I think of the Three without being immediately carried back to the One.

—GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS

Think about It

- Why are some truths about God impossible to explain with human words?
- How can human explanations end up creating a different God from the one who has revealed Himself in the Bible?
- Read Matthew 3:16–17 and John 14:26. What do they tell you about the Trinity?



The Cappadocian Mountains provided a place of quiet for Christians who wanted to spend time in meditation and were a refuge for those who were persecuted. Some Christians carved their homes inside the mountains. Later, whole monasteries and churches were carved in these rocks, and images were painted on the inside walls.

#1923#, FLICKR

Daily Life of Early Monks

Before the **conversion** of Constantine, the church regularly expected persecution. Martyrs and confessors (those who stayed faithful to their beliefs under threats) were held in great honor as spiritual heroes.

Constantine's decision to legalize Christianity brought much relief but also laziness and insincerity. Since Constantine and nearly all of his **successors** professed to be Christians, many people converted to Christianity out of convenience. They went to church but spent most of their time living for money and entertainment like the pagans did.

A few believers—especially young people—wanted to get away from all that. They left their money and possessions and moved to isolated places where they could spend their time in meditation and prayer. They became known by the Greek word *monachoi*, which means “solitary.” In English, we call them **monks**. Some monks lived together in communities, and some lived completely by themselves.

In one of his writings, John Chrysostom (ca. 354–407), a bishop of Constantinople who spent some years as a monk, explained that the monks who lived together usually slept on straw mats in separate rooms and followed a common rule. They wore simple tunics under rough clothes made of camel's or goat's hair. Their diet

Incomprehensible! How could the son of respectable middle-class parents with a good education and excellent prospects for a steady comfortable life leave his home to go off and join a company of dirty vagrants [wanderers]!

—THE REACTION OF AN UPSTANDING
CITIZEN OF ANTIOCH TO THE MONKS'
LIFESTYLE AS RECORDED BY CHRYSOSTOM

was simple: bread and water, unless they were sick and needed a little more nourishment.

Every day, they rose before dawn and gathered to sing psalms and hymns and to pray. Then they performed their daily tasks. Chrysostom thought it was important for monks to spend time working, especially to help the poor.

JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

John was later called Chrysostom, a Greek word meaning “golden mouth,” because he was an excellent preacher. His prestigious position provoked the jealousy of other bishops and the anger of Empress Eudoxia (d. 404), who resented his sermons against her extravagant lifestyle. In the end, Eudoxia had Chrysostom exiled. He died in 407 when, already weak, he was forced to walk many miles in bad weather.