

The Early Church Fathers on Catholic Practices

Critics of Catholicism are fond of claiming that the Church has wandered from the simple faith of the Early Christians. One sign of this, they claim, are the various distinctive Catholic practices. It is claimed that these were unnecessary additions that distract people from the simple Gospel message. The obvious flaw with this type of argument is that it has no basis in fact. In an attempt to distance themselves from the Church, the Reformers and those that would follow them, gradually threw out many Christian practices that dated from the early Church. The writings of the Early Church Fathers bear this out. The following are some examples.

Irenaeus

Notwithstanding this, those who did not keep [the feast in this way] were peacefully disposed towards those who came to them from other dioceses in which it was observed (although such observance was [felt] in more decided contrariety [as presented] to those who did not fall in with it; and none were ever cast out [of the Church] for this matter (Fragments 3 [inter A.D. 175-185]).

Cyprian of Carthage

Certainly, the one both understands that he has sinned, and laments and bewails it; the other, puffed up in his heart, and pleasing himself in his very crimes, separates sons from their Mother, entices sheep from their shepherd, disturbs the sacraments of God; and while the lapsed has sinned but once, he sins daily (*Treatise 4* [A.D. 252]).

by the sacrament of baptism, the filth of the old man is washed away by them, that they pardon the former mortal sins, that they make sons of God by heavenly regeneration, and renew to eternal life by the sanctification of the divine layer (Letter 74:17 [A.D. 256]).

Council of Sardica

Ye remember that in former times our fathers decreed that if a layman were staying in a city and should not come to divine worship for three [successive] Sundays [that is], for three [full] weeks, he should be repelled from communion (Canon 11 [A.D. 344]).

Athanasius

Ursacius and Valens to my Lord the most blessed Pope Julius (*History of the Arians* 3:26 [A.D. 357-358]).

Ambrose of Milan

Especially he recommends the Lord's Prayer, and the repetition of Psalms by night, and the recitation of the Creed before daylight (*Concerning Virgins* 3:4 [A.D. 377]).

Sulpitius Severus

He had set down a glass vessel containing oil blessed by Martin in a pretty high window (*Dialogue* 3 [circa A.D. 400]).

Jerome

Some offences are light, [venial] some heavy [mortal]. It is one thing to owe ten thousand talents, another to owe a farthing. We shall have to give account of the idle word no less than of adultery; but it is not the same thing to be put to the blush, and to be put upon the rack, to grow red in the face and to ensure lasting torment. Do you think I am merely expressing my own views? Hear what the Apostle John says: him ask, and he shall give him life, even to him that sinneth not unto death. But he that hath sinned unto death, who shall pray for him? "You observe that if we entreat for smaller offences, we obtain pardon: if for greater ones, it is difficult to obtain our request: and that there is a great difference between sins (*Against Jovinianus* 2:30 [A.D. 393]).

I admire in your work its practical aim, designed as it is to instruct by the authority of scripture ignorant persons in all the churches concerning the reverence with which they must handle holy things and minister at Christ's altar; and to impress upon them that the sacred chalices, veils, and other accessories used in the celebration of the Lord's passion are not mere lifeless and senseless objects devoid of holiness, but that rather, from their association with the body and blood of the Lord, they are to be venerated with the same awe as the body and the blood themselves (Letter 114:2 [A.D. 405]).

She had assumed the bridal-veil of Christ in the basilica of the apostle Peter and had vowed to live henceforth in the monastery, in the spots consecrated by the Lord's Cross (Letter 147:6 [circa A.D. 419]).

Council of Carthage

And that all these sacraments are altogether true and holy and divine is most certain, and in them the whole hope of the soul is placed, although the presumptuous audacity of heretics, taking to itself the name of the truth, dares to administer them. They are but one after all, as the blessed Apostle tells us, saying: "One God, one faith, one baptism," and it is not lawful to reiterate what once only ought to be administered. [Those therefore who have been so baptized] having anathematized their error may be received by the imposition of the hand into the one Church, the pillar as it is called, and the one mother of all Christians, where all these Sacraments are received unto salvation and everlasting life; even the same sacraments which obtain for those persevering in heresy the heavy penalty of damnation (canon 57 [A.D. 419]).

Augustine

Every day must this prayer be said by you, when you are baptized. For the Lord's Prayer is said daily in the Church before the Altar of God, and the faithful hear it (Sermon 12:8 [circa A.D. 391]).

This I remember hearing from more than one: for a certain holy presbyter was an eye-witness of such an apparition, having observed a multitude of such phantoms issuing from the baptistery in bodies full of light, after which he heard their prayers in the midst of the church itself (Letter 158 :8 [inter A.D. 411-430]).

John Cassian

Wherefore let us enjoy a little sleep, and so shake off the drowsiness that steals over our eyes, as the dawn approaches, and then we will go together to church, for the observance of Sunday bids us do this, and after service will come back, and as you wish, discuss with redoubled delight what the Lord may have given to us for our common improvement (*Conference* 7:34 [circa A.D. 430]).

Vincent of Lerins

The foregoing would be enough and very much more than enough, to crush and annihilate every profane novelty. But yet that nothing might be wanting to such completeness of proof, we added, at the close, the twofold authority of the Apostolic See, first, that of holy Pope Sixtus, the venerable prelate who now adorns the Roman Church; and secondly that of his predecessor, Pope Celestine of blessed memory, which same we think it necessary to insert here also (*Commonitory* 84 [A.D. 434]).

Theodoret

Conference between Liberius, Pope of Rome, and the Emperor Constantius (*Ecclesiastical History* 2:8 [A.D. 449-450]).