

UNIT 2C TRADITION

55: Early Western Fathers after Nicea

Introduction: Five Theologians of Considerable Stature

This lecture considers five of the early Western Fathers after the Council of Nicea whose lives cover more than 250 years from the middle of the fourth century until the end of the sixth century. The first four—Saints Jerome, Ambrose, Augustine and Leo the Great—were very much late 4th century/early 5th century contemporaries, while the final saint, St Gregory the Great, guided the Church in the late 6th century. The aim of this lecture is not to offer individual obituaries that focus on theological achievements (which were considerable), but rather to consider precisely what their understanding of God and of being human might mean to us today. Perhaps this focus is a somewhat rather self-oriented aim, but then seeking a fuller participation in God’s plan and life is never selfish—and that is what each of these five men did; and what we can now do. We can then discover how these remarkable men do speak to us about how to understand and fulfil God’s plan for our own lives.

St Jerome (c. 347-420)

St Jerome is best known for his translation of the Bible into Latin, known as the Vulgate, arising from his linguistic abilities in Latin, Greek and Hebrew. That text has become, in effect, the “official, received text” of the Western Church, while a similar stature has been given to the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament in the Eastern Church.¹ His Biblical translations and commentaries often contained allegorical or mystical interpretations; and he has been accurately described as “perhaps the most important biblical scholar of the early Western church.”² He was a monk and a scholar, a mentor of his peers and young people,

¹ Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev, *Orthodox Christianity: Doctrine and Teaching of the Orthodox Church, Volume II* (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2012), p. 34.

² John Anthony McGuckin, *The Westminster Guide to Patristic Theology* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 187.

an adviser to Pope Damasus (c.304-384), as well as a polemicist, “a most touchy character ...one of the most argumentative ascetics of the fourth century,” often engaged in controversies, fighting against the Arians, the Pelagians, the followers of Origen and anyone else whom he believed was expressing heretical views.³ His advice was often pithy and relevant to people of different situations and different ages. For example: “Be ever engaged, so that whenever the devil calls [you] he may find you occupied;”⁴ “Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ”⁵ . He told one mother whose daughter had become a nun that there was no cause for anger, because the mother had received “a high privilege,” and “you are now the mother-in-law of God.”⁶ St Jerome was very much a realist who insisted that “somehow or other, those who please the world most please Christ the least. . . . Don’t fish for compliments, lest you defy God while you are being applauded.”⁷

St Jerome’s allegorical approach to the Scriptures and his knowledge of Hebrew are often questioned today. However, his epistles (or letters) contain many interesting examples of pastoral theology from an ascetic perspective:

Whether he is discussing problems of scholarship, or reasoning on cases of conscience, comforting the afflicted, or saying pleasant things to his friends, scourging the vices and corruptions of the time, exhorting to the ascetic life and renunciation of the world, or breaking a lance with his theological opponents, he gives a vivid picture not only of his own mind but of the age.⁸

For the last thirty-four years of his life St Jerome settled in Bethlehem, founded a men’s monastery and “devoted the rest of his life to study.”⁹ Some years ago my wife and I visited the traditional site of the underground cell in Bethlehem where

³ McGuckin, p, 186.

⁴ *Letter 125, to the priest Innocent.*

⁵ Prologue to the *Commentary on Isaiah.*

⁶ *Letter 22 to Eustochium, § 20.*

⁷ Christopher D. Hudson, J. Alan Sharrerr & Lindsay Vanker (Eds). *Day by Day with the Early Church Fathers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), St Jerome, pp.30, 197, quoting *Letter 58* and *Letter 52.*

⁸ At: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerome>.

⁹ F. L. Cross & E. A. Livingstone, *Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), p. 867.

St Jerome lived and studied for so many years. The memory of being in that cold, damp, uncomfortable cell for only a few minutes is still with me.

Throughout his life of more than 70 years St Jerome made many people uncomfortable. He did not mince his words; and often advised: “It is useless to try to teach what you don’t know, and is worse still to be ignorant of your ignorance.”¹⁰ He was unquestionably a scholar of considerable competence and repute. He was often as hard on himself as he was on others, deeply aware of his own contradictions in belief and behaviour. For example, he wrote to Eustochium, the daughter of the wealthy Paula (who helped him build many monasteries) that he had left family and friends “to be a soldier of Christ;” and yet he admitted that “I could not do without the library which I had collected for myself at Rome by great care and effort. And so, poor wretch that I was, I used to fast and then read Cicero.”¹¹ This dual attraction to both Christ and secular writers such as Cicero and Virgil lead him into great difficulty. As Christopher Hall, the associate editor of *Ancient Christian Commentaries on Scripture*, has pointed out in studying St Jerome’s many letters:

In the midst of this struggle [of being attracted to both Cicero and Christ] Jerome fell ill and in his feverish state dreamed that he was standing before the judgment seat of Christ. Christ asked him his status. Jerome replied that he was a Christian. [However, Jerome then wrote] “And He who sat upon the throne said: ‘Thou liest. Thou art a Ciceronian, not a Christian. ‘Where thy treasure is, there is thy heart also’ [Matthew 6:21].’ I was struck dead on the spot [wrote Jerome.]’ [Then] Jerome begged for and received mercy, provided that he never read again ‘books of pagan literature.’ Scholars are divided as to whether Jerome was able to fulfill this promise.¹²

The reason for this division among scholars as to the extent of pagan influences on St Jerome’s theology is that “allusions to pagan authors fill his writing, perhaps

¹⁰ Christopher D. Hudson, J. Alan Sharrerr & Lindsay Vanker (Eds). *Day by Day with the Early Church Fathers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), St Jerome, p. 14, quoting *Letter 53*, § 5 & 7.

¹¹ Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998, p. 111, quoting from *The Letters of St Jerome, vol. 1*, trans. Charles Christopher Mierow, ACW 33 (New York: Newman Press, 1963), p 165.

¹² Hall, p. 111, quoting from *The Letters of St Jerome, vol. 1*, p. 166.

creeping uninvited to the surface of a mind soaked in their thought.”¹³ However, before throwing too many stones at St Jerome, perhaps I (with a rather large personal library) and others should reflect on what precisely are our “treasures”—our deepest wishes and goals in life—and how those “treasures” relate to our commitment to Christ and His Church.

It has been argued that St Jerome believed that “sex and spirituality did not mix well.”¹⁴ He was a convinced ascetic; and there is some evidence that he had lost “the older biblical sense of two [persons] becoming one flesh [in marriage] as a joyful sign of the vitality of creation, or of the covenant of God with Israel.”¹⁵ For example, when a monk in Milan, Jovinian (d. c.406), had the nerve to suggest “that ascetics and married had an equal spiritual status in the church,” St Jerome attacked him so strongly that “the poor monk was exiled; and his sensible book burned.”¹⁶ However, Jerome also affirmed marriage and insisted:

If the Lord had commanded virginity, it would have seemed as though He condemned marriage. And that would do away with humanity’s seed plot from which virginity grows. If He had cut off the root, how could He expect fruit? If the foundations weren’t laid first, how could He build the structure and put on the roof to cover everyone? . . . Don’t worry if the angelic life of the celibate isn’t demanded of us, but [instead we are] merely advised as [to how] we face fleshy temptations and evil promptings.¹⁷

This is not the St Jerome with whom we are familiar, but given the vast output of his writings, it is not surprising that confronted with different situations and advising different people, his advice would differ. Rather than focus on sexuality, it is more insightful to focus on the necessity of repentance and St Jerome’s insistence that “sinners who confess their sins and say, ‘my wounds stink and are corrupt because

¹³ Hall, p. 111.

¹⁴ McGuckin, p. 306.

¹⁵ McGuckin, p. 307.

¹⁶ McGuckin, p. 193.

¹⁷ Hudson *et al*, *Day by Day with the Early Church Fathers*, St Jerome, p. 178, quoting *Against Jovinianus* 1.12.

of my foolishness' are cleansed from their infections. But 'he that covereth his sins shall not prosper.'"¹⁸

Intriguingly, St Jerome had deep respect for family life and for children. For example, he was aware of the sacrifice that Paula had made in being separated from her daughter; and saw such separation as “against the law of nature” and only justified by “her greater love for God.”¹⁹ This balanced awareness of the joys and challenges of parenthood was also linked to a profound awareness of the importance of educating children—both boys and girls—an unusually progressive attitude to women in the male-dominated fourth century. St Jerome advised a friend about his daughter’s education to begin the search for literacy by playing with letters and then:

Give her some little present, something acceptable to her tender age, as soon as she has learned to join letters and syllables together. . . Do not scold her if she is slow. Arouse her ambition by praise. Let her desire victory; let her be pained by defeat. Above all, never let her hate her studies, otherwise the bitterness learned in childhood may last until she is of mature years. . . No really learned man would blush to serve a child. . . We should not despise the little ones, for without them great things cannot come to pass.²⁰

Furthermore, St Jerome’s understanding of the importance of educating girls extended to a deep respect for women who sought to study and understand the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments. For example, in a letter written shortly after Paula’s death, St Jerome reflected on the determination of understanding Scripture, present both in Paula and her daughter, Eustochium, that extended to questioning him carefully whenever Paula did not understand a particular passage and how she would insist that he told her “which of many possible meanings seemed

¹⁸ Hudson *et al*, *Day by Day with the Early Church Fathers*, St Jerome, p.237, quoting *Letter 122*.

¹⁹ Hall, p. 44, quoting from St Jerome, *Epistle 108*.

²⁰ Hall, p. 44, quoting from St Jerome, *Epistle 107*.

to [him] most likely.”²¹ He also wrote to a friend of how impressed he had been of Paula’s determination to learn Hebrew.²²

Building on his great linguistic abilities, St Jerome’s view of sexuality in relation to The Holy Trinity is remarkably balanced. He insisted that: “It is inconceivable that sex exists among God’s agencies,” pointing out that the Holy Spirit is “expressed in Hebrew in the feminine gender, *ruach*, in Greek in the neuter, *to pneuma*, [and] in Latin in the masculine, *spiritus*.”²³ Therefore, with reference to the attributes of God, “it is not so much an indication of sex as an expression of the idiom of the language . . . because sex does not apply to Him.”²⁴

Father McGuckin concludes his comments on St Jerome with the reflection that:

In later life [St Jerome] wrote several treatises in praise of ascetical virginity in which he disparaged sexuality and marriage in a pessimistic and extremist fashion (*Against Helvidius* and *Against Jovinian*), thus setting a precedent that cast a gloom over subsequent centuries of Christian (clerical) attitudes. His numerous surviving letters show him to be a brilliant witty (and extremely prickly) correspondent.²⁵

However, Father McGuckin’s evaluation is rather harsh, although many scholars would agree. It may well be true that St Jerome had a conflicted attitude toward sexuality, especially in his later years when supervising the monastic life of many others. Perhaps this was in part because he saw the expression of sexuality as a great challenge to monasticism, somewhat as St John Chrysostom rightly saw both the Jewish people and Judaisers—those who insisted that anyone who wished to be Christians must first become Jewish—as threats to the growth of Christianity.

²¹ Hall, p. 44, quoting from St Jerome, *Epistle 108*.

²² Hall, p. 44, quoting from St Jerome, *Epistle 108*.

²³ Hall, p. 112, quoting from *The Letters of St Jerome*, vol. 1, p. 97.

²⁴ Hall, p. 112, quoting from *The Letters of St Jerome*, vol. 1, p. 97.

²⁵ McGuckin, p. 188.

However, such attitudes do not indicate that St Jerome was a misogynist or that St John Chrysostom was an anti-Semite. On the contrary, it behoves us to respect the challenges that both saints faced in their struggles to advance the Christian faith.

St Ambrose (c. 339-397)

Along with St Jerome, St Augustine, St Gregory the Great and St Leo the Great, St Ambrose is one of the great Doctors of the Latin Church. Aurelius Ambrosius (better known as St Ambrose) was a consummate administrator, theologian and politician, a strong leader and preacher who modelled practical care for his Christian followers, as well as social and religious justice in the Roman Empire. St Ambrose was “the first Latin church father born into a Christian family;”²⁶ yet he did not rush to embrace a leadership role in the Early Church. At the age of 35, he was simply a catechumen as well as a local lawyer and provincial consularis (governor) when he went to a church in Milan (then the second capital in Italy) where there was a hot dispute between the Catholics and the Arians about who should succeed the (Arian) bishop Auxentius who had died. The citizens were so impressed with the speech of St Ambrose that they began to chant “Ambrosius, bishop.” Although Ambrose fled to a friend’s house, the emperor intervened; Ambrose relented; and in 374, in a single week, St Ambrose, who had no training in theology at that time, was hurriedly baptised and consecrated Bishop of Milan—a position he held with considerable distinction until his death 23 years later.²⁷ . He studied a great deal (in Greek as well as in Latin) and became a very discerning theologian.

The power of the preaching of St Ambrose is evident in this forthright condemnation of the Arians:

[Our] faith . . . is contained in the following principles, which can’t be overthrown. If the Son didn’t have an origin, He isn’t the Son. If He is a creature, He isn’t the Creator. If He was made, He didn’t make everything. If He needs to learn, He doesn’t have foreknowledge. If He is a receiver, He is

²⁶ Hudson *et al*, *Day by Day with the Early Church Fathers*, p. 369.

²⁷ McGuckin, p. 9; Cross & Livingstone, p. 49

not perfect. If He progresses, He isn't God. If He is unlike the Father, He isn't the Father's image. If He is the Son by grace, He isn't one by nature. If He doesn't have a part in the Godhead, He has the capability to sin. 'There is none good but God.' [Matthew 19:17; Mark 10:18]."²⁸

The concise language is a model of how to communicate challenging theology with great clarity.

The slow pace with which the vocation of St Ambrose grew was a probable cause of his considerable patience with others. For example, he insisted:

There is but one true teacher [Jesus Christ], the only one who never learned what he taught everyone. But men have first to learn what they are to teach and receive from Him what they are to give to others. Now what ought we to learn before everything else, but to be silent that we may be able to speak. .

. It is seldom that anyone is silent, even when speaking does him no good.²⁹

Also, the fact that St Ambrose was only five feet four inches tall, may well have encouraged a certain humility which drew others to him.

St Ambrose came from a remarkable family. (As parents we seek to give our children both roots and wings—both a sense of personal security and the ability to leave home—and in that context Ambrose's parents, from Trier [now in Germany] were spectacularly successful.) His father was a prefect in Gaul, his mother a person of considerable intellect and piety; and both his brother Satyrus and his sister, Marcellina, became saints. Three saints—one family! He appears to have inherited and implemented a quite forthright attitude to life—if there is a problem, tackle it with intelligence and sensitivity to others. For example, he encouraged a revised Liturgy whose roots went back to St Barnabas (374); he significantly improved church music (384); he befriended, baptised (387) and mentored St Augustine; he excommunicated the Roman Emperor Valentinian (390), because of the emperor's assault on the city of Thessalonica; and after the emperor had done public penance, paganism was outlawed throughout the Roman Empire, and the principle was

²⁸ Hudson *et al*, *Day by Day with the Early Church Fathers*, St Ambrose, p. 122, quoting *Exposition of the Christian Faith* 2.5.14.

²⁹ Hall, p. 36, quoting from St Ambrose PL 16, col. 28.2.5-29.7.

established for the first time that “the emperor indeed is within the Church, not above the Church.”³⁰

In his theological writings, Ambrose placed considerable emphasis upon the interaction of human sin and divine grace within each person. Initially, Augustine had a low opinion of Christian preachers; however, after listening to Ambrose, Augustine’s perspective changed, although at that time he viewed Ambrose’s celibacy as “a painful burden.”³¹ The manner in which Ambrose drew Augustine to baptism and a deeper appreciation of Christianity was one of St Ambrose’s more important pastoral achievements. Augustine was quite impressed by Ambrose’s style of learning and reading:

When [Ambrose] read, his eyes scanned the page and his heart sought out the meaning, but his voice was silent and his tongue was still. Anyone could approach him freely and guests were not commonly announced, so that often, when we came to visit him, we found him reading like this in silence, for he never read aloud.³²

Yet in the relationship between these two highly intellectual people, it was simply kindness that drew St Augustine to St Ambrose. “My heart warmed to him,” St Augustine later wrote to a Christian friend, “not at first as a teacher of truth, which I had quite despaired of finding in your Church, but simply as a man who showed me kindness.”³³ Furthermore, St Augustine had previously “been repelled by the Bible’s narrative, largely because portions of Scripture, especially in the Old Testament, seemed to him to present an unworthy picture of God;” and St Ambrose taught him to read any Biblical text on three levels—literal, moral and mystical—which enabled St Augustine to respect the Bible.³⁴

³⁰(McGuckin, p. 9; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ambrose> and http://orthodoxwiki.org/Ambrose_of_Milan).

³¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ambrose>.

³² *Confessions*, Book 6, Chapter 3.

³³ Hall, p. 104, quoting *Confessions*, Book 5, Chapter 13.

³⁴ Hall, pp. 104-105. Cf. *Confessions*, Book 5, Chapter 14 and Book 6, Chapter 4.

In summary, St Ambrose models for us the possibility of sainthood—in his decisions, in his relationships, in his preaching, in his writings, in his hymns and in his impact upon future generations of Christians. A phrase that impressed St Augustine which St Ambrose often repeated in his sermons still has meaning for each of us: “The written law inflicts death, whereas the spiritual law brings life.” [2 Corinthians 3:6-7].³⁵

St Augustine of Hippo (354-430)

The centre of St Augustine’s theology is caught by the theme of the opening paragraph of his most famous work, *The Confessions* (written c. 398-400): “You [that is, God] have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” The title, “the confessions,” has a double meaning—confessing in the Biblical sense of praising God, as well as confessing personal sins.³⁶ St Augustine never hid his nine years of commitment to the Gnostic doctrine of Manicheism in which there is “a supposed primeval conflict between light and darkness” during which light had been stolen by Satan but then recovered by Jesus, Buddha, the OT prophets and the Persian prophet Mani (c. 216-276).³⁷ One of St Augustine’s prime purposes in *The Confessions* was to make clear that as the recently appointed Bishop of Hippo he had fully renounced his Manichean past, as well as his unnamed partner of the fifteen years from 371 to 386 (when he was aged 17 to 32) with whom he had a son, Adeodatus (who died in 389). St Augustine lived life to the full—theologically, philosophically and sexually. St Augustine’s view as a Christian became that “the sexual instinct is never without some flaw of egotism, even if procreative marriage makes good use of it.”³⁸

³⁵ Hall, p. 105, quoting *Confessions*, Book 6, Chapter 4. See also: “Law in the Early Church” at the website: <http://faculty.cua.edu/pennington/Canon%20Law/LawEarly%20Church.htm> .

³⁶ Cross & Livingstone, p. 395.

³⁷ Cross & Livingstone, p. 1027.

³⁸ Cross & Livingstone, p. 128.

To survey the theology of St Augustine is a daunting challenge, but five major themes can be drawn from Father John McGuckin's *Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology*:³⁹ To this we can add a sixth on prayer.

(1) In *The Confessions*, St Augustine showed how self-scrutiny helps us achieve salvation because we gain a deeper understanding of “the story of God’s providence in creation and in a human life.” True faith leads to “a deep desire of the heart for God.” Theme 1: Face yourself, and God will find you. If you know yourself, you can rest in God and be open to His will. In essence, knowing yourself draws you closer to God because we are all creatures made by God. If you truly wish to love your neighbour as yourself, it is essential to first love yourself, because you are a person made in the image of God. St Augustine urged that: “We must be persuaded how much God loved us so that we don’t shrink from Him in despair. And we need to be shown also what kind of people we are whom He loved so that we also don’t withdraw from Him out of pride. But He dealt with us so that we could profit from His strength, and in the weakness of humility, our holiness could be perfected.”⁴⁰ ... Live in love, and love will live in you. Dwell [in love], and you will be dwelt in.”⁴¹ For St Augustine, loving your neighbour as yourself empowers you “to turn the whole current of [your] love for others into the channel of the love of God.”⁴²

(2) “[Many of St Augustine’s writings] greatly developed the Latin Church’s understanding of itself as both a heavenly and earthly body (like Christ himself—whose body it was—a complete and perfect synthesis of flesh and divine spirit).” Theme 2: The Church has both an earthly and a heavenly presence, because it is the Body of the God-Man, Christ who shares both realms. In interpreting the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), St Augustine viewed the Church as “the

³⁹ (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), pp. 39-41.

⁴⁰ Hudson *et al*, *Day by Day with the Early Church Fathers*, St Augustine, p. 45, quoting *On the Trinity*, 4.1.

⁴¹ Hudson *et al*, *Day by Day with the Early Church Fathers*, St Augustine, p.146, quoting *Homily 7 on 1 John*, § 10.

⁴² Hudson *et al*, *Day by Day with the Early Church Fathers*, St Augustine, p. 336, quoting *On Christian Doctrine*, 1.22.

traveller's inn where the wounded are healed. But [coming down from] above [in] the Church is the life and liberty we inherit."⁴³

(3) In *The City of God*, St Augustine presented a carefully “considered ethical and political view of what Christianity conceived of as a civilized order.” While human society was clearly differentiated from the eschatological realization of God's kingdom, human society could still be “informed and guided by heavenly ideals.” Theme 3: Understanding God's kingdom helps to develop an earthly society with Christian ideals. St Augustine firmly differentiated between “the cities of godly people and of ungodly people” [for] one [is] guided and formed by the love of self, the other by love of God.”⁴⁴

(4) In *The Trinity*, St Augustine confronted the Arian heresy and used the Nicene understanding of Christology and pneumatology (i.e. the branch of theology that deals with the doctrine of the Holy Spirit) to demonstrate “the reasonableness of the Trinitarian doctrine of three divine persons subsisting in one single divine nature.” At the same time, “he emphasised once again his deeply sensed connection between self-scrutiny and theological method”—that seeking to understand yourself and seeking to understand God are intimately linked together, that relationships within The Trinity model for us how we can relate to each other, (Theme 4).

(5) “All of St Augustine's later life” was marked by his controversy with the British preacher and Biblical commentator Pelagius (c. 350-425), who taught in Rome that “the difficulties in observing moral laws have to be met and answered by significant ascetical training” which enabled anyone to implement God's will.⁴⁵ In response, St Augustine developed a doctrine of grace in which humanity had “nothing on which it could base its salvation: all was a gift of God.” Although St Augustine's approach “became determinative for Western Catholicism,” his pessimistic tone about how easily humanity could “slip into the slavery of sin and corruption” led to “a tendency in Latin theology to focus on the notions of original

⁴³ Hudson *et al*, *Day by Day with the Early Church Fathers*, St Augustine, p. 328, quoting *Tractate 41 on John*, § 13.

⁴⁴ Hudson *et al*, *Day by Day with the Early Church Fathers*, St Augustine, p. 215, quoting *City of God*, 14.13.

⁴⁵ McGuckin, p. 256.

sin, and the corruption of the material world.”⁴⁶ In later life, as a consequence of his emphasis on the providence of divine grace, he supported the teaching of double predestination to both salvation and damnation. Apart from some Protestant Reformers in the 16th Century, the Latin west significantly modified this position and the Orthodox never accepted it. Theme 5: Trust God alone. Yet St Augustine also sought to encourage us, bluntly, but lovingly, advising: “You may hide your heart from people, but try to hide it from God! How can you hide from Him?” St Augustine continued, “Will you listen to this advice? If you are going to run from Him, run [instead] to Him. Run to Him by confessing, not from Him, by hiding.... So say to Him, ‘Thou art my place to flee unto,’ and be nourished by His love that leads to life.”⁴⁷

(6) The depth of St. Augustine’s theology as well as its practical application is shown by his analysis of both the causes of sin and the nature of prayer. He wrote:

There are two causes leading to sin: either we don’t know our duty, or we don’t perform the duty we know. The former is the sin of ignorance, the latter of weakness. Now, it is our duty to struggle against these things. But certainly we will be beaten in the fight unless God helps us to see our duty and to make our love for righteousness stronger than our love for earthly things. . . . As the psalmist says, “The Lord is my light and my salvation” [Psalm 26(27):1]. God is my light because He removes my ignorance. He is my salvation because He takes away my weakness.⁴⁸

In most cases, prayer consists more of groaning than of speaking, of ears rather than words. He sees our tears. Our groaning isn’t hidden from Him. For He made everything by a word [The Logos] and doesn’t need human words.⁴⁹ ... It isn’t a question of prayers alone, as if we don’t need to include our wilful

⁴⁶ See John S. Romanides, *The Ancestral Sin*, (RidgeWood, NJ: Zephyr Publishing, 1958/trans. 2002).

⁴⁷ Hudson *et al*, *Day by Day with the Early Church Fathers*, St Augustine, p. 150, quoting *Homily 6 on 1 John*, § 3.

⁴⁸ Hudson *et al*, *Day by Day with the Early Church Fathers*, St Augustine, p. 121, quoting *Enchiridion*, 81.

⁴⁹ Hudson *et al*, *Day by Day with the Early Church Fathers*, St Augustine, p. 93, quoting *Letter 130*, § 18.

efforts. For although God is “our Helper,” [Psalms 18(19):2, 27(28):9, 40(41):17, 54(55):4, 70(71):5; Isaiah 50:7, 9] we cannot be helped if we don’t make some effort of our own. God doesn’t work out our salvation in us as if we are dull stones or creatures without reason or will.⁵⁰ ... You know what you want [in your prayers and life], but He knows what is good for you.”⁵¹ ... You need the Lord’s help. You shouldn’t rely on yourself to live well. Don’t pray for the riches and honours of this world, or for any worthless possession. But pray that you won’t enter into temptation.”⁵² ... We should pray not only not to be led into evil, but also to be delivered from the evil we have already been led into. When this happens, we won’t need to fear temptation or anything else. But as long as we live in our fleshy state, which the serpent led us into, we can’t hope for such deliverance. We should hope, however, that it will take place in the future.⁵³

Those reflections on sin and prayer are worthy of careful consideration and determined personal application.

In summary, although St Augustine’s theology has some negative views of humanity with which many modern Orthodox theologians would disagree, St Augustine is certainly not a heretic; and it may well be that a careful study of his theology is a helpful tool in drawing Western and Eastern Christians closer to each other. In fact, his profound insight that the better we understand ourselves, the better we understand God (and vice-versa) remains a guide for our lives today as much as for his contemporaries.

St Leo the Great (c. 400-461)

St Leo the Great was a pope *extraordinaire*, a person of prayer and courage who changed the lives of innumerable people. “His papacy is remarkable chiefly

⁵⁰ Hudson *et al*, *Day by Day with the Early Church Fathers*, St Augustine, p. 111, quoting *On Forgiveness of Sins and Baptism*, 2.6.

⁵¹ Hudson *et al*, *Day by Day with the Early Church Fathers*, St Augustine, p.264, quoting *Sermon 30*, § 2.

⁵² Hudson *et al*, *Day by Day with the Early Church Fathers*, St Augustine, p. 297, quoting *Letter 218*, § 3.

⁵³ Hudson *et al*, *Day by Day with the Early Church Fathers*, St Augustine, p. 321, quoting *Sermon on the Mount*, 2.36.

through the enormous extent to which he consolidated the influence of the Roman see,” gaining recognition from the emperor Valentinian III that jurisdiction over all the Western provinces of the Empire rested with the Roman see.⁵⁴ The modern theological consensus is that doctrinally he “was clear and forcible, but not profound;” however, his *Tome* presented at the Council of Chalcedon “was accepted as a standard of Christological orthodoxy,” as will be shown next week in considering the ecumenical councils of the 5th century.⁵⁵ Furthermore, there was a practical wisdom about his preaching:

It is great and very precious in the Lord’s sight, beloved, when all of Christ’s people work together at the same duties and every rank and degree of both sexes cooperates with the same intent. How wonderful it is when one purpose motivates everyone to stay away from evil and do good. How excellent it is when God is glorified in his followers’ works. . . .⁵⁶

Those words continue to reverberate from the 5th century to the 21st.

Father McGuckin comments that St Leo the Great “saw the pre-eminence of his see as being based in the Scriptures and so set ... the primacy of Peter’s Vicar on its way to being a determinative idea of Western Catholicism.”⁵⁷ This theological vision (whatever we may think of its validity) was also linked to great political clout, as Pope Leo persuaded the invading Huns to withdraw beyond the Danube (452) and secured concessions from the Vandals who captured Rome in 455.⁵⁸

The story of how St Leo the Great persuaded Attila the Hun not to attack Rome is striking. The Pope travelled north over dangerous mountains with only a few servants and boldly entered the camp of the Huns and confronted Attila with “the power which was his from Peter.” Attila quickly agreed not to invade Rome. When Attila’s servants asked why he had agreed so readily not to invade Rome, Attila replied that while the Pope was speaking Attila had seen “in the air above the

⁵⁴ Cross & Livingstone, pp. 966-967.

⁵⁵ Cross & Livingstone, p. 967.

⁵⁶ Hudson *et al*, *Day by Day with the Early Church Fathers*, St Leo the Great, quoting *Sermon 88*.

⁵⁷ McGuckin, p. 203.

⁵⁸ Cross & Livingstone, p. 967; McGuckin, p. 203.

Pope's head the figure [of Peter] in the dress of a priest, holding in his hand a drawn sword which he made as if to kill him unless he consented to do as Leo asked." The scene is shown in a painting in St Peter's in Rome above the casket of St Leo.⁵⁹ . In summary, it would perhaps be appropriate to see St Leo the Great as a fine pastor and administrator, as well as THE guide to future Roman Catholic ecclesiology.

St Gregory the Great (c. 540-604)

Here in England we remember Gregory I (Pope from 590 to 604) because of "one of the greatest successes of his pontificate"—the evangelistic mission to England for which the Pope selected its leader, St Augustine (later of Canterbury) as well as 40 members of the monastery that Gregory himself had founded many years earlier.⁶⁰ St Bede reports that the origins of that mission may have begun when Gregory saw some English children in a Roman slave market and is reputed to have said: "Non Angli, sed angeli," meaning "Not Angles [the Germanic people who migrated to England in the 5th century, who together with the Jutes and Saxons formed the Anglo-Saxon peoples], but angels."⁶¹ Whether the story is true or not, it is clear that Pope Gregory I was the first of the popes to come from a monastic background, that he sought to draw people to Christ, and that he was the most prolific writer among all the popes of the first six centuries.

In *The Book of Pastoral Rule* (590), St Gregory set out the requirements to be met by those who were chosen to exercise pastoral leadership in the Post-Constantinian world in which "thousands of new converts flooded into the Church, but many of them were perceived by their contemporaries to be lacking the depth of faith" shown by those before Constantine had converted to Christianity.⁶² St Gregory deeply "believed that the Church's survival depended upon quality leadership. It was for this reason that he actively used the text [of *The Book of*

⁵⁹ See: www.doctorsofthecatholicchurch.com/L.html .

⁶⁰ Cross and Livingstone, p. 706.

⁶¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pope_Gregory_I.

⁶² George E. Demacopoulos, "An Introduction for the Reader," St Gregory the Great, *The Book of Pastoral Rule* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2007), p. 11f.

Pastoral Rule] to recruit monastics to fill the pastoral void.”⁶³ He strongly criticised those monks who were called to pastoral authority as bishops and priests and preachers but preferred “contemplative study ... the mystery of stillness ... and the solitude of [spiritual] investigations.”⁶⁴ Citing the experience of the prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah, St Gregory insisted that:

No one who has not been cleansed should dare to approach the sacred ministries, just as no one whom supernatural grace has selected should proudly oppose it under the guise of humility. Therefore, because it is very difficult for anyone to know if he has been cleansed, it is best for him to decline the office of preaching (although, as we have said, it should not be declined stubbornly when it is known that the supreme Will wants it to be accepted).⁶⁵

Appropriately, St Gregory set out in Part I, Section 11, “what sort of qualities should be present for one to assume spiritual leadership,” as well as “what sort of person should not come to a position of spiritual leadership” (I.12). Throughout *The Book of Pastoral Rule*—which contains much wisdom for those confronted with the possibility of spiritual leadership today—St Gregory “describes the inherent tension between action and contemplation as a healthy pastoral balance, and he rejects those who are unable to balance these diverse conditions.”⁶⁶ Whereas neither St Ambrose nor St. Augustine had “encouraged ascetic struggle, apart from celibacy, in their priests,” St Gregory sought to transform “the parish priest or bishop into a formidable spiritual father resembling the ascetic elder, or *abba* [which means ‘father’ in most Semitic languages].”⁶⁷

Like St Jerome, St Gregory viewed the monastic life as “the ‘perfect’ way of contemplation, excelling the lay married state;” and in *The Dialogues* St Gregory recounted the lives of Italian ascetic saints, praised St Benedict and gave “an

⁶³ Demacopoulos, p. 15.

⁶⁴ St Gregory, *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, I.5.

⁶⁵ St Gregory, *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, I.7.

⁶⁶ Demacopoulos, “Introduction,” *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, p. 16.

⁶⁷ Demacopoulos, “Introduction,” *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, p. 17.

enormous impetus to the spread of Benedictinism as a paradigm of Western monasticism.”⁶⁸ In Rome itself, St Gregory’s most important work was administering the Church with considerable competence, especially during the plague in 590—the same year in which he was elected pope against his own wishes. At that time, he “rallied the city with extensive penitential processions to ask for God’s mercy;” and there was a later “vision of an angel putting away his sword [of death] over Hadrian’s Mausoleum [Castel San Angelo].”⁶⁹ So two great saints—Leo and Gregory—had visions of swords linked to Rome, one about to plunge into Attila the Hun, while the other was put away from harming the city.

One further contribution of St Gregory the Great to Christian life in the Church ought to be mentioned for it has a direct and timely bearing on ecclesiological distortions appearing subsequently in both the east and the west. In 586 Emperor Maurice conferred the title: “Ecumenical Patriarch” on the then Archbishop of Constantinople, St John the Faster (who had no role in seeking this title for himself!) St Gregory heard of this in Rome and strenuously objected that no bishop, no matter how senior and not excluding himself could accept such a title without committing blasphemy and usurping the honour due to all bishops and priests! By expressing the mind of the Church on this matter St Gregory undermines all subsequent developments toward a monarchical papacy anywhere in the Church.⁷⁰

St Gregory, therefore, was quite an extraordinary Christian pastor in the Orthodox patrimony of the west. Like St Ambrose, he was surrounded by holiness—his mother and two of his aunts have been canonized—so that his education has been characterized as “that of a saint among saints.”⁷¹ One extended family, four saints! Reigning some 150 years after St Leo the Great, St Gregory the Great—the

⁶⁸ McGuckin, pp. 153-155.

⁶⁹ McGuckin, p. 154.

⁷⁰ An admirable summary of the events and texts in connection with this intervention by Pope Gregory may be found at <http://www.johnsanidopoulos.com/2013/09/ecumenical-patriarch-or-universal-bishop.html>

⁷¹ www.newadvent.org/cathen/06780a.htm .

only other pope known as “Great”—certainly strengthened the influence of the papacy, as well as the Augustinian doctrine of grace, linked to his own reflections on “purgatorial purification, a view that eventually grew into [the] distinctive Roman doctrine [of] purgatory.”⁷² In summary, St Gregory the Great’s most lasting legacy to the universal Church was perhaps the writings and personal support he gave to monasticism both as a way of life and a preparation for spiritual leadership.

Conclusion

So what do the lives and theology of these five saints teach us? The words of St Leo the Great and St Augustine offer a fitting conclusion and a practical challenge. St Leo preached:

The Lord says, ‘You shalt love the Lord your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind; and you shall love your neighbour as yourself’ [Deu 6:5 and Lev 19:18; cf. Luke 10:27, Mat 22:37-40 and Mark 12:30-31]. Therefore, faithful souls should put on the unfading love of their Author and Ruler. . . . The extent of Christian grace gives us even a greater reason to love our neighbour. This grace, which reaches every part of the whole world, doesn’t look down on anyone. It teaches us not to neglect anyone. So He rightly commands us to love our enemies and to pray to Him for our persecutors. By grafting shoots of wild olive trees from every nation daily onto the holy branches of His own olive tree, Christ makes people reconciled instead of enemies, adopted children instead of strangers, righteous instead of ungodly.⁷³

In *On Grace and Free Will*, St Augustine wrote:

Those who want to obey God, but can’t, already possess a good will, although it is small and weak. But they are able to obey when they obtain a strong and robust will... However, God works in us so that we have the will to obey [Him].

⁷² McGuckin, p. 154.

⁷³ Hudson *et al*, *Day by Day with the Early Church Fathers*, St Leo the Great, quoting *Sermon 12*.

Once we have this will, God works with us to perfect us. The apostle Paul says, “I am confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will continue to perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus’ [Phil 1:6]. Therefore, God operates without us so that we can will to obey, but when we act on our will, He cooperates with us.⁷⁴

Amen—So be it!

⁷⁴ Hudson *et al*, *Day by Day with the Early Church Fathers*, p. 75, St Augustine, quoting *On Grace and Free Will* 33.