

April 26

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Tertullian (2nd-3rd cent.) witness

There are Christians who announce the Gospel with their lives, and who are perhaps unable to find words to describe their experience of communion with God. Others are gifted with a spirit of prophecy and offer profound and original interpretations of God's mystery, but their lives seem to be marked by contradiction. This may be the case of Tertullian. One of the most influential theologians and spiritual writers of the second and third centuries, he isolated himself progressively from others during the course of his lifetime. After falling out of communion with the great Church and even with the Montanist prophets he had vigorously supported, he died surrounded by very few followers.

Tertullian was born around the year 160 into a wealthy pagan family of Carthage, and received a solid education in the classics. His passion for speculation, together with a gift for linguistic precision similar to that found in Roman juridical environments, led him to create the language that came to prevail in later Latin theology. His writings on baptism, prayer, and martyrdom were amply quoted by later authors.

Yet Tertullian's intellectual rigor, together with his fiercely polemical character and his discovery of the prophetic, ascetic movements associated with the Montanist groups of his time, led him to become increasingly intollerant. He left the Great Church in 213, but there is very little historical information to tell us what later happened to him.

He may not have fully understood God's infinite mercy and compassion upon human weakness during his lifetime, but Tertullian nonetheless left a corpus of valuable teachings.

Origen (ca. 185 - ca. 254) priest and martyr

Origen, a priest of the universal Church, died as a martyr in 254 after being severely beaten during the persecution of Decius.

He was a native of Alexandria, Egypt. The martyrdom of his father Leonid, which took place when Origen was only eight years old, made a profound impression on him. Anxious to give witness to his own faithfulness to Christ, he left his profession as a scribe as soon as he could and began to teach catechism. He lived a sort of pre-monastic life, in solitude and in assiduous, prayerful reading of Scripture. The Bible was his primary source of spiritual nourishment, and he was probably the most profound and original Biblical commentator in the early Christian world. Almost all of the Greek and Latin Church fathers looked to his works for inspiration.

Origen was a skillful catechist, and although he was a lay person, several bishops invited him to preach sermons. This caused him trouble with the bishop of Alexandria, who forbade him to appear in public and refused to recognize as valid the ordination to the priesthood Origen had received in Palestine. Determined to obey the Church as well as the Gospel, Origen accepted the bishop's decision and withdrew until his ordination was recognized. He was then allowed to resume teaching and preaching.

His ministry as an itinerant teacher of the faith ended when persecution broke out under Decius. Arrested and tortured, Origen was spared martyrdom in the strict sense by the emperor's sudden death, but because of his old age and the severity of the physical abuse he suffered, he did not survive long. Several of his affirmations, which show traces of the neoplatonic philosophy that dominated in Alexandrian circles during his lifetime, were condemned in the centuries following his death. Yet there is more that is objectionable in later interpretations of Origen's teachings than in the actual content of his statements, which for Origen himself were simply working hypotheses.

A READING

I want to be a son of the Church. I do not want to be known as the initiator of a heresy; I want to bear the name of Christ. I wish to bear this name that remains like a blessing on earth. I desire that my spirit and my works grant me the right to be called a Christian.

If I, who in the eyes of others am your right hand, I who bear the name of priest and have the mission to announce the Word - if I should commit an error against the Church's teaching or against the rule of the Gospel and thus become a cause of scandal for the Church, let the entire Church, with a unanimous decision, cut me off, me, the Church's right hand, and throw me away.

From a prayer of Origen

THE CHURCHES REMEMBER...

WESTERN CATHOLICS:

Timotheus, disciple of the apostle Paul (Spanish-Mozarabic calendar)

COPTS AND ETHIOPIANS (18 barmudah/miyazya):

Arsenius (3rd-4th cent.), martyr (Coptic Church)

LUTHERANS:

Tertullian, doctor of the church in North Africa

MARONITES:

Cletus (d. ca. 90), pope; *Basil of Amasea* (d. ca. 322), martyr

ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS AND GREEK CATHOLICS:

Basil of Amasea, hieromartyr, and *Glaphyra* his companion, martyr