

The words of the Early Church bear a significant influence on the claims and positions of the Church, as we know it today. Among others, the writings of Clement regarding the nature of the material world, Polycarp and Justin's warnings of the spiritual evils that ensue from the love of money and Augustine's clarification of the "good will" are important elements of the ministry and witness of the Church. Indeed, the many writings preserved from the Early Church demonstrate the fact that ancient people struggled with issues very similar in essence to those facing the Church today, and the thoughtful witness of these people sheds light on the strengths and shortcomings of various theological and ethical claims.

In the days of Clement, there were those, Marcion and Basilides, among others, who claimed that the material world was inherently negative and that, superior to the god who fashioned the material world, there existed another god who authored a purely spiritual salvation through Jesus Christ. Clement and Justin responded vehemently to this claim, insisting that there is only one God—the God of Creation and Salvation. These early Christian thinkers realized, if the spirit of a person is all that can be redeemed, then there is no hope for physical pleasure or satisfaction, one need not be concerned with the helping those in need, and the man Jesus, who appeared on earth, was in fact not a man at all, but something more like an apparition.

The debate as to the nature of the world is present today. Environmental stewardship and understanding natural disasters are just two ways in which the legacy of early Christian thought is of aid to the present Church. As we ask how and why we are to be stewards of the earth and its resources, it is helpful to remember Clement's words, "All these things the great Creator and Master of the universe ordained to exist in peace and harmony."ⁱⁱ Further, as we try to understand and explain why it is that this good creation sometimes overwhelms us, we can remember Clement's decree, "Let us consider how free [God] is from anger toward [God's] whole creation."ⁱⁱⁱ We should remember that this is the beautiful world that, for so long, has supported and enriched human life.

Ignatius, Polycarp and Justin give explicit direction to care for the poor and widows and to avoid materialism. Ignatius says, "Widows must not be neglected."ⁱⁱⁱ Polycarp urges, "I warn you, therefore, to refrain from the love of money and be pure and truthful."^{iv} Speaking of those who live rightly before God, Justin says, "we who once took most pleasure in the means of increasing our wealth and property now bring what we have into common fund and share with everyone in need."^v Of the one who distributes the common fund, Justin says, "he takes care of orphans and widows, and those who are in want on account of sickness or any other cause, and those who are in bonds, and the strangers who are sojourners among [us], and, briefly, he is the protector of all those in need."^{vi}

Indeed, the Church of today can learn great lessons from these early Christian thinkers regarding the demands of caring for the poor, the sick and the marginalized in our world. With the demands of AIDS, cross-continental famine and Domestic War Refugees, one must ask what the Church can do to better care for those in need and to be better stewards of the "uncommon" fund that exists because of the disproportionate distribution of wealth.

Augustine explains that the sin of humanity is a matter of the *skewed will*. Humans often become disoriented and try to find satisfaction in a "good thing" other than God. Augustine says, "the happiness of [humans] cannot come from [humans] but only from God, and that to live according to oneself is to sin,"^{vii} and to sin is to lose God.

Indeed, this is an important premise of most of the Church's theology. Humans continuously try to find satisfaction in money, power, sexual exploits, fame and others. However, the central witness of the Church is that God is the author and guardian of the good in all things, and without God, no satisfaction can be found in anything.

There are those who might read the words of these early Christian thinkers and find such fault that they must disregard the lot. For example, Ignatius says, "Do not treat slaves and slave girls contemptuously. Neither must they grow insolent."^{viii} Polycarp says, "Whoever perverts the sayings of the Lord... and says there is neither resurrection nor judgment—such a one is the first-born of Satan."^{ix} Finally, Justin says, "in every nation a crowd of females and hermaphrodites... are exposed as public prostitutes... whom you ought to exterminate from your civilized world."^x For some, the presence of such offensive language and teaching is enough to discredit the entire witness of the authors because these must be signs of a deeply flawed theology.

Indeed, many of the words of the early Christians are troublesome for those of us preparing for ministry in the 21st century Church. However, so many of the early Christian writings remain relevant and viable for us today. We must remember the context and finitude of these early thinkers and, with the scope and perspective of history, be willing to learn lessons from their shortcomings and to fully employ their insight.

- ⁱ Clement's First Letter, 20.
- ⁱⁱ Ibid., 20.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ignatius, *Letter to Polycarp*, 4.
- ^{iv} Polycarp, *Letter to the Philippians*, 11.
- ^v Justin, *First Apology*, 14.
- ^{vi} Ibid., 67.
- ^{vii} Augustine, *City of God*, XIV.4.
- ^{viii} Ignatius, *Letter to Polycarp*, 4.
- ^{ix} Polycarp, *Letter to the Philippians*, 7.
- ^x Justin, *First Apology*, 27.