

Signs and Wonders in the Early Catholic Church 90-451 and their Implications for the Twenty-First Century

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In John chapter 20 verse 30 the apostle states that Jesus did many other signs, which he wasn't able to include in his gospel. He also records Jesus' promise to his disciples that the works that He did, they would also be able to do, and greater, because he was going to the Father, John 14 v 12. And as we turn the pages of the

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book of Acts and the New Testament letters this is in fact what we find. Acts 5 v 12 records, 'Now many signs and wonders were done among the people by the hands of the Apostles.' In 2 Corinthians chapter 12 verse 12 Paul tells the church, 'The things that mark an Apostle—signs, wonders and miracles—were done among you with great perseverance.' Generally speaking 'signs and wonders' refer to the more supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit, in particular, healings, exorcisms and knowledge and prophetic gifts.

There is of course a large section of the Christian Church which takes the view the these 'signs and wonders' were generated by the Spirit of God simply to reinforce the preaching and teaching of the Apostles. They were the works given to authenticate the words of the apostolic community who had seen the risen Christ, been commissioned by him and given the special enabling of the Holy Spirit to remember all that he had said and done. When however all the Apostles had died these gifts were brought to an end. Some say this happened abruptly; others are of the view that it was a gradual process over a longish period. One writer suggested it was a bit like the gradual withdrawal of horse-drawn vehicles from the roads and their replacement by petrol power; it was a process that took one or two generations to complete. This disappearance of the gifts of the Holy, whether it is held to be sudden or gradual, is referred to as 'Cessationism' or the 'Cessationist' view. Many cessationists justify this opinion from 1 Corinthians 13 v 10, 'When perfection comes, the imperfect disappears.' The 'perfection' which was to come is taken to be 'the Scriptures' and 'the imperfect' which would disappear is the spiritual gifts about which Paul has been speaking in 1 Corinthians chapters 12 and 13.

The cessationist view is endorsed by millions of evangelicals and particularly fundamentalists in North America. For the majority of them B.B. Warfield's statement of this position is definitive. Warfield urged that what the Christian church has witnessed since the New Testament era is not the gifts of the Holy Spirit but rather 'counterfeit miracles'. Warfield found only rationalistic explanations for the occurrence of contemporary physical healings among Roman Catholics, faith-healers and Christian Scientists.

Warfield argued that since the world had received the 'complete revelation of God as given in Christ' through the apostles the added testimony of miracles was no longer needed'.¹

¹ Warfield, B.B., *Counterfeit Miracles* (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1918) p 28.

Warfield, as J. Ruthven has demonstrated, failed to take serious cognisance of those passages of scripture which teach the continuation of the charismata.² Such passages include those sighted in the first paragraph of this article and Romans 11 verse 29 which Ruthven states 'could hardly be more clearly anti-cessationist'.³

If the cessationist view was correct, it would be the case that all the gifts of the Holy Spirit had ceased to function in the early Church, at the very latest by 150 AD. By that time not only had the Apostles long since died but most of those who had been taught by them had also come to the end of their days. The view of many people is that this is in fact very far from being the case and that there is plenty of evidence of the experience of baptism in the Holy Spirit and the use of spiritual gifts in the early Catholic Church right down to the great ecumenical Church Council of 451 and beyond.

This article examines some of the fairly full evidence that both Baptism in the Holy Spirit and 'signs and wonders' were clearly in evidence in the life and worship of the early Christian church during the first five centuries. Inevitably however the present constraints of space have demanded a selective use of an abundance of source material.

EXPERIENCES OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

It is clear that there were numbers of individuals and congregations in this early catholic period who experienced the Holy Spirit in ways which were obviously similar to the occurrences of the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2, or in Samaria in Acts chapter 8, or the house of Cornelius in Acts chapter 10 or among the Ephesian

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Church leaders in Acts chapter 19. Among the earliest of such testimony are the writings of Clement who was bishop of Rome about 100 A.D. He wrote in his letter to the Corinthians, of the church as the body 'preserved in Christ Jesus'. He went on to urge that 'each put himself to the service of his neighbour as his particular gift (charisma) dictates'.⁴ Ignatius who was bishop of Antioch in the second decade of the second century wrote on one occasion to Polycarp: 'Ask for invisible things so that you may lack nothing and abound with all spiritual gifts'.⁵

Justin Martyr (c.110-165) was born of pagan parents but converted to Christ when he was about thirty years of age. He taught students in several important cities in the Roman Empire including Ephesus and Rome itself where he opened a Christian School. In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, he wrote about the gifts of the Spirit in the churches with which he was familiar. He noted that the gifts of the Holy Spirit, including exorcism, were widely in use.

For one receives the spirit of understanding, another a counsel, another of healing, another of strength, another of foreknowledge, another of teaching and another of the fear of God. The prophetic gifts remain with us to the present time. For some [believers] do certainly cast out devils, so that those who have thus been cleansed from evil spirits do frequently

² Ruthven, J., *On the Cessation of the Charismata: The Protestant Polemic on Post-Biblical Miracles* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

³ *Ibid.*, p 204.

⁴ Clement, *First Letter to the Corinthians* 37-38.

⁵ Ignatius, *Letter to Polycarp*, C2.2.

both believe and join the church. Others have knowledge of things to come; they see visions and utter prophetic expressions.⁶

Justin's comment that the exorcism of unbelievers was a frequent occurrence and in some cases led to conversion is significant. It contrasts sharply with contemporary Pentecostal and Charismatic churches where much of the focus has been on the exorcism of members of the believing community. Tertullian (c.160-225) was a church leader in the North African city of Carthage. Before he joined the Montanist sect about the year 202 he wrote a book, probably in about 190, entitled *On Baptism*. In it he outlines how the churches in North Africa had long carried out their baptism services. He mentions that those who are baptised have hands laid on them and that this is done 'to invite and welcome the Holy Spirit'. At one point in the narrative Tertullian specifically addresses those who are about to be baptised and this is what he says:

Therefore, you blessed ones, for whom the grace of God is waiting, when you come up from the most sacred bath of the new birth, when you spread out your hands for the first time in your Mother's house [i.e. the church] with your brethren, ask your Father, ask your Lord, for the special gift of his inheritance, the distribution of gifts, which form an additional, underlying feature [of baptism]. Ask and you shall receive.⁷

It is clear that Tertullian expected new Christians to be baptised in water and in the Holy Spirit at the same point in time. There's no suggestion that confirmation or the coming of the Holy Spirit wouldn't happen until a friendly bishop clad in purple arrived on the scene some years later. This procedure of episcopal confirmations, according to Jerome, didn't take place until after Constantine's conversion when, for political reasons, the emperors wanted to give bishops more secular and spiritual power.

Eusebius, the personal friend of the Roman Emperor, Constantine, and bishop of Caesarea, wrote his *History of the Christian Church* in A.D. 327 beginning at the book of Acts and working through to his own day. Although he sometimes quotes his sources from memory, his work is generally acknowledged to be substantially reliable. In book 5 he commented on the revivalistic Montanist movement in Asia Minor. In doing so, he also mentioned that the gifts of the Holy Spirit were in evidence in a number of other Churches of which he had knowledge. This is what he wrote:

Just then the Montanus... party in Phrygia was spreading its idea of prophecy among many for the first time... [but] there were still many other marvellous works of the gifts of God being done in different churches up to that time which gave

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rise to the belief among many that these men also were prophets.⁸

While Eusebius in this passage is more preoccupied with the gifts and works of the Holy Spirit, Hilary (c.315-367), who was a 4th century bishop of Poitiers in Gaul, describes the experience itself. He writes: 'We who have been reborn through the sacrament of baptism experience intense joy (maximum gaudium) when we feel within us the first stirring of the Holy Spirit.'⁹

⁶ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* c 82.

⁷ Tertullian, *On Baptism* 8; SC 35.76.

⁸ Eusebius, *A History of the Christian Church*, B 5, C 3, para 4.

⁹ Hilary, *Tract on Psalm 64*:14.

This emphasis on experience is something that Hilary felt to be particularly important. In another piece of writing he declared, 'among us there is no one who, from time to time does not feel the gift of the grace of the spirit.'¹⁰ Elsewhere, Hilary mentions the gifts of the Holy Spirit that this experience opens up. 'We begin', he says, 'to have insight into the mysteries of faith, we are able to prophesy and to speak with wisdom. We become steadfast in hope and receive the gifts of healing...'¹¹

Hilary wrote these tracts near the end of his life about 360 AD and it's clear his baptism and early experience of the filling of the Holy Spirit still moved him. In the same piece from which we have just quoted, he goes on to underline the importance of fully using the gifts, which the Lord gives us. 'These gifts', he wrote, 'enter us as gentle rain. Little by little they bear fruit.'¹² Clearly Hilary anticipated that healing, evangelism and other gifts grew in Christian people as they developed the faith and courage to reach out and use them. His advice, given in his *Tract on the Trinity* was, 'Let us make use of such generous gifts'.¹³

Cyril (c.315-387) who was bishop of Jerusalem in the later years of the fourth century, was an important leader in the Holy city and wrote a great deal, including some significant pieces on the Holy Communion. He thought of the Christian Church in Jerusalem, as indeed all others, as standing in a charismatic succession, a history of the Spirit which ran right back to Moses. Cyril gave a series of twenty-three lectures to those who were preparing for baptism. In one of them he stated that the Spirit is 'a new kind of water' and that what the Spirit touches the Spirit changes.¹⁴ 'Great, omnipotent and admirable', he continued, 'is the Holy Spirit in the gifts'. Although he wrote at a time just after Constantine the Great had been converted to Christianity and the church was beginning to become clericised, he did not restrict the gifts to those who had been ordained. He was adamant that 'Hermits, virgins and all the laity have these gifts of the Spirit'. Following the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians chapter 14 verse 3, Cyril urged the Christians in his pastoral care 'to receive the gift of prophecy'.¹⁵ Cyril's last instruction to his baptismal candidates was 'to prepare your souls for the reception of the heavenly gifts'.¹⁶

Both Basil of Caesarea (c.330-379) and Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389) who were prominent bishops in Asia Minor, also expected that charismatic gifts would be kick-started at the time when new Christians were baptised in water and hands were laid on them with prayer for the reception of the Holy Spirit. Gregory of Nyssa (c.331-395), Basil's younger brother, wrote a biography of Gregory the Wonder Worker, a third century North African Christian. In chapter 77 he commented that one of Gregory's great marvels was that he accomplished his many healing miracles 'without any special fuss'. In other words, to quote a more recent writer, he did the supernatural, naturally. Again, he wrote, 'but for the deliverance from demons and the cure of bodily ills the breath from his mouth was sufficient.'¹⁷ In the following chapter, Gregory of Nyssa further commented, 'To go through in order all the marvels worked by him would require a long book.'¹⁸

¹⁰ Hilary, *Tract on Psalm* 118:12.

¹¹ Hilary, *Tract on Psalm* 64:15.

¹² *Ibid.*, 64:15.

¹³ Hilary, *On the Trinity* 2:35.

¹⁴ Cyril, *Catechetical Lecture* 16:11.

¹⁵ Cyril, *Catechetical Lecture* 17:9.

¹⁶ Cyril, *Catechetical Lecture* 18:32.

¹⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *Gregory the Wonder Worker* C 77.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, C 78.

Before these kinds of testimony to the continuance of the gifts of the Holy Spirit within the early Catholic Church becomes too drawn out, it is perhaps apposite to conclude with reference to one of our own countrymen. Patrick (385-451) was an Englishman who was captured in a raid and taken to Ireland as a slave for six years. He then escaped to Gaul where he trained as a monk. He eventually came back to England from where he was sent out to take the gospel to Ireland. Towards the end of

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his life Patrick wrote his *Confession*. In it he says:

He who wants to can laugh and jeer, but I shall not keep silent nor keep hidden the signs and wonders which have been shown to me by the Lord before they took place, as He knows all things before the world began.¹⁹

In the seventh century Muirchu wrote a biography of Patrick. According to him, the evangelist of the Irish raised a man by the name of Macula from the dead²⁰ and within hours he was in good shape. On another occasion, Patrick brought a man called Dare and his horse back to life by sprinkling holy water on them. As a result of this miracle Dare gave Patrick an area of land on which the city of Armagh was later founded.²¹ In a further incident, Patrick also cursed a field belonging to an evil man by the name of Mudebrod. According to Muirchu, it was still sandy and infertile a hundred years later.

These general introductory comments make it sufficiently clear that the 'signs and wonders', that is the more miraculous spiritual gifts, didn't simply die away with the passing of the apostolic age. Rather, they continued on through the early centuries and were still clearly in evidence at the time when the great Council of Chalcedon met in 451 AD to affirm that Jesus was both fully God and fully human in his one person. Having established this fact we are now in a better position to examine in a little more detail three specific aspects of the Holy Spirit's work in this period: namely, healing and wholeness, conflict with the demonic and prophetic and knowledge gifts.

HEALING AND WHOLENESS

One of the earliest pieces of writing after the New Testament documents were completed was *The Shepherd*. Written by Hermas, a church leader in the city of Rome about 130 AD, it makes an interesting reference to those who did not undertake to relieve illness and distress 'in the Christian Way'.²² 'The Christian Way' very likely referred to prayer and the laying on of hands. The practice in the imperial city was certainly affirmed by Quadratus, one of the earliest Christian apologists. He wrote in 125 AD that in Rome the works of the Saviour continued to his time and that the presence of people in the church who had been healed left no question as to the reality of physical healing.²³ Tertullian, the North African church leader, explicitly identified people he personally knew of in the late third century who had been healed. He testified to their great number and the wide range of physical and mental illnesses

¹⁹ Patrick, *Confession* 45.

²⁰ Muirchu, *Life of Patrick* Section 23.

²¹ *Ibid.*, Section 25.

²² Hermas, *The Shepherd* 3.10.4

²³ Quadratus, *Apology*.

he had seen cured.²⁴ Elsewhere he stated that 'the Lord could, and sometimes did, recall men's souls to their bodies' meaning that some individuals were raised from the dead.²⁵

Perhaps the most interesting discussion of healing among the ante-Nicene Fathers is found in the writings of Irenaeus (120-202) who was a prominent church leader at Lyons in central Gaul. He wrote a book entitled *Against Heresies* at some point between 182 and 188 AD. One of his most telling contentions against the heretics was that they were not able to accomplish the miracles of healing which the Christians were able to perform. They did not have access to the power of God and so could not heal. Irenaeus gave examples of almost the same range of healings that are found in the Gospels and Acts taking place in the Churches that he knew. All kinds of bodily infirmity and many different diseases had been cured. He had seen the damage done from external accidents repaired and even described the raising of the dead.²⁶

It seems clear that Irenaeus' pagan readers were well aware of these miracles of healing since numbers of them had been converted as a result. Interestingly, Irenaeus mentions that Christians didn't charge any fee for healing, as was the custom in the celebrated pagan temples of healing in Epidaurus and Pergamum.

A little later in the following century, Origen (185-254) became the head of a Christian School which had been set up in the city of Alexandria. Origen was a gifted Bible scholar and the first man to write commentaries on books of the Bible.

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In the year 248, shortly before he died, Origen wrote a different kind of book entitled *Against Celsus*. Like Irenaeus's book, this was a defence of Christianity written to impress barbarians and other unbelievers. He pointed out that Greeks and barbarians who came to believe in Jesus Christ were able to perform 'amazing cures' by invoking the name of Jesus. 'By this means', he wrote, 'we have seen many persons freed from grievous calamities, and from distractions of mind, and madness, and countless other ills, which could be cured neither by men nor devils.'²⁷ In one place he added that demons were sometimes driven even out of the bodies of animals, which could also suffer injury inflicted on them by evil spirits'.

One of those who came to study under Origen when he moved from Alexandria to Caesarea was Gregory Thaumaturgos (c.210-c275). Gregory was a student in Caesarea from 233-238. After completing his studies, he returned home to Pontus, in Asia Minor, and there he engaged in full-time Christian work for bishop Phaidmus. Later he was made bishop of New Caesarea. Gregory of Nyssa tells us that when Thaumaturgos first entered that city 'the common people, women and children, swarmed around him and some whose bodies were plagued by affliction and he was in their midst, sharing by the power of the Spirit in accord with need of each in the crowd, proclaiming, discerning, directing, teaching, healing'.²⁸ The Wonder Worker's power to heal, said his biographer, was known throughout the region.

²⁴ Tertullian, *Scapula* 4.

²⁵ Tertullian, *The Soul's Testimony* 3.

²⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies Book* 2.6.2; 10.4; 31.2 and 32.4.

²⁷ Origen, *Against Celsus Book* 3.24.

²⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *Thaumaturgos the Wonderworker* section 46.

Hippolytus (d. 236), an early theologian in the church at Rome, gave some details in his writings of church services in the city about the year 215. He mentioned that oil was kept to hand so that the sick who came to the Lord's Supper could be anointed and prayed for. The oil was consecrated in 'the same general manner as the bread and wine.' The minister presiding prayed that 'sanctifying this oil, O God, whereby you did anoint Kings, priests and prophets, you would grant health to them who use it, so that it may bestow comfort on all who taste it and health on all who use it.'²⁹

Hippolytus also tells us that it was the custom of the Church in Rome to officially recognise and commission those who had the gift of healing. In his, *The Apostolic Tradition*, he wrote: 'If anyone says, "I have received the gift of healing", hands shall be laid upon him; the deed shall make manifest if he speaks the truth.'³⁰ Interestingly, Hippolytus stressed the importance which the Church in Rome attached to the bishop or church leader visiting those who are unwell. Visits by the bishop, he wrote, are 'a great thing for the sick man.... He recovers from his disease when a bishop comes to him, particularly if he prays over him.'³¹

Gregory of Nazianzus and Basil of Cappadocia both make mention of healing in their writings. Gregory, for example, described the healing of his sister, Georgina. He reported her illness as a burning fever alternating with periods of death-like coma. It continued despite many prayers and many visits to physicians. Then in desperation in the middle of a night she went into the church building and took some of the reserved sacrament in her hand, knelt down and clung to the altar. She cried out that she would hold on to the altar until she was healed. At the same time she rubbed some of the precious sacrament on her body. At last she was healed.³² Later on, when Gregory was promoted to be bishop of Constantinople, Sozomen, the Church historian, reported that in his Cathedral Church 'the power of God was manifested, and was helpful... for the relief of many diseases and for those afflicted by some transmutation in their affairs.'³³ Gregory's brother, Basil, wrote that the Lord 'sometimes cures secretly and without visible means when he judges this mode of treatment beneficial for our souls; and again He wills that we use material remedies for our material ills.'³⁴

John Chrysostom (c.347-407), nicknamed 'golden mouth' because of his gifted preaching, was made bishop of Constantinople in 398. His collect for grace can be found at the end of Morning and Evening Prayer in the Church of England *Book of Common Prayer*. Chrysostom wrote of daily miracles of healing which took place in the reign of

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the pagan Roman Emperor, Julian. Augustine (354-43), bishop of Hippo Regius in North Africa, and the undisputed theologian of the West, also testified to his experience of healings. Augustine was born of pagan parents and educated in philosophy. He was eventually converted to Christianity through the witness of Ambrose, bishop of Milan in 386 who baptised him the following year. He became a priest in 391 and bishop of Hippo Regius in 395. He wrote *The Confessions* (397-401) and *The City of God* (413-427). In his early days Augustine was of the

²⁹ Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* 1:5

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.15.

³¹ Hippolytus, *Canons*, 199.

³² Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 7.

³³ Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.5.

³⁴ Basil, Long Rules Q 55 in *Asetical Works*, p 322.

view that the gifts of the Holy Spirit had been given to validate the apostolic message but subsequently they were no longer needed. However, Augustine's earlier scepticism gave way to belief in Jesus' continuing healing power. This change came about when he read Athanasius' *Life of Antony*. Later when he wrote his greatest work, *The City of God*, in 424, he reported how he had started the practice of recording the miracles, which were taking place in his own diocese of Hippo Regius.

He did this, '...once I realised how many miracles were occurring in our own day and which were so like the miracles of old and how wrong it would be to allow the memory of these miracles of divine power to perish among the people'. He continued: 'It is only two years ago that the keeping of records was begun here in Hippo, and already, at this writing, we have more than seventy attested miracles.'³⁵ In another book entitled, *Retractions*, which he finished in 426, Augustine wrote in slightly more reflective mood.

It is indeed true: that the sick are not always healed... But what I said should not be taken as understanding that no miracles are believed to happen today in the name of Christ. For at the very time I wrote ... a blind man in [the] city [of Milan] was given back his sight; and so many other things of this kind have happened, even in this present time, that it is not possible to know all of them or to count up all those we do have knowledge of.³⁶

As we reflect on these testimonies to the continuing power of Jesus to heal in these early centuries of the undivided early Catholic Church, a number of implications for contemporary Christianity emerge. Clearly there is widespread historical precedent for praying for and visiting the sick. Hippolytus' stress on church leaders going to those who are unwell suggests that a person's physical presence often brings encouragement, which raises a sufferer's faith level. It is plain that theologians such as Augustine grappled with philosophical issues which are similar to those which confront twenty-first century Charismatics, such as why some are healed and others not. Taken as a whole, the Early Church Fathers did not subscribe to the inclination of some contemporary Charismatics to attribute sickness in all its forms to the demonic. Rather they saw it as stemming from a variety of sources. The practice of anointing the sick with oil and praying for their healing in the context of the sacrament of communion seems to have an early precedent and to have been common. A reading of these documents of the early Church Fathers leaves us with the feeling that health, wholeness and praying for the sick were all an integral and a natural part of the Church's life and worship.

CONFLICT WITH THE DEMONIC

A second aspect of this topic is the way in which the Church in this early Catholic period understood and grappled with the demonic. This is an area of particular relevance to the contemporary Charismatic movement, which has asserted the presence of the Kingdom of God, is evidenced in the overcoming of demonic forces. As in the matter of healing, the confines of a journal have necessitated a restriction to a small selection of the early church fathers some of whom have already been mentioned.

Justin Martyr (100-165) wrote of 'the evil demon that dwelt in Damascus'.³⁷ He blames this territorial ruler for holding the Magi in bondage and inspiring them to commit all kinds of evil.

³⁵ Augustine, *City of God*, 22.8

³⁶ Augustine, *Retractions*, 1.13. 7.

³⁷ Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 78.

Justin believed that the coming of Christ somehow broke the hold of this spirit over the region, freeing the three kings to come and worship the infant Christ. In the following chap-

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ter, Justin spoke of evil angels³⁸ who dwelt in the city of Tanis (or Zoan) in Egypt. His conviction is that 'the princes in Tanis are evil angels'. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, wrote about A.D. 160 of Christ's followers in his own day who 'having received grace from him, use it in his name for the benefit of the rest of men'. He continued that some of their number 'drives out demons with certainty and truth, so that often those who have themselves been cleansed from evil spirits believe and are in the church'.³⁹

Gregory the Wonderworker, believed that the region of new Caesarea of which he had just been made a bishop was 'held fast by the deception of demons'. Part of the reason for this conviction was that the city itself had never had within it the temple of the true God'. On his first visit to this metropolis after his consecration the rain fell so heavily that Gregory was forced to shelter in a pagan temple. His biographer wrote:

Entering the temple with his companions, he immediately brought terror on the demons by the invocation of the name of Christ, and when with the sign of the cross he had purified the air which was filthy with the stench of sacrifices, he passed the whole night according to his custom, keeping vigil in prayers and hymnody, so that [the] house was transformed into a house of prayer.⁴⁰

Gregory the Wonderworker seemed particularly aware of demonic influence on the land. In a later section of his biography, Gregory of Nyssa related how his subject transformed a marshy infertile area near to the city into a fruitful land by praying over it. Another incident concerned the river, which flowed near the city and often overflowed its banks destroying cattle and crops. Gregory planted his staff near the bank and 'entreated Christ with a loud voice' with the result that the area was never again flooded.⁴¹ During Gregory's time as bishop, the pagan Roman Emperor, Decius, stirred up a fierce persecution against the Christians. The persecutors decided the way to crush the Christians was to capture Gregory and take him away.

Gregory and his deacon prayed for protection and the Lord's surrounding presence apparently made him invisible to all their searches.

Antony the Hermit (251-356) was one of the great founders of monasteries. At the age of just 18 years of age Jesus' words to 'go and sell all that you have' rang in his ears and so he went in response and founded a community in the village of Comas in middle Egypt. He lived in a cave and later in a disused castle near the Red Sea. Antony was a Christian who experienced the rigours of the spiritual battle. His perception was that demonic forces filled the atmosphere. He wrote: 'The number of evil spirits in the air around us is great, and they are not far from us.' He urged his hearers to 'keep our heart with watchfulness, for we have terrible crafty enemies, the wicked demons, and we wrestle against them, as the Apostle said'. Notwithstanding his convictions, he doesn't seem to have been paranoid about the demonic. 'We must', he declared,

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

³⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2:49:2.

⁴⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *Thaumaturgos the Wonderworker*, Section 34

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, section 52.

'fear God alone, having no fear of them at all... for the great weapon against them is a virtuous life and confidence in God.' Among the things which demons fear, Antony lists fasting, praying, indifference to money, love for the poor but above all devotion to Christ.⁴² Monastic life and the spiritual battle seem to have done Anthony no harm and he died at the ripe age of one hundred and five.

In the following century we have a rich resource in the writings of Evagrius of Pontus (345-399). He was ordained a reader and then a deacon but never priested. After a period in Jerusalem he spent the last sixteen years of his life as a monk in Egypt. He was something of a speculative writer and perceived the air, much in the same way as Antony, as being controlled by demonic spirits who tempt us and cause us to have fantasies.⁴³ Demons also disturb us when we sleep. One of the most dangerous demons in his view is the demon of unchastity. 'Be on your guard,' he wrote, 'against the demon of unchastity. For he is very wily and jealous'.⁴⁴ How are we to combat the demons? Evagrius urged his readers to pray: 'If you are disheartened,

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pray as the Apostle says (James 5 v 13). Pray with fear and trembling, effort and with inner watchfulness and vigilance.⁴⁵

Ambrose (339-397) followed in his father's footsteps and became a provincial governor in Italy. In the year 374 there was strife over who should be the new bishop of Milan. Even though he was only preparing for baptism at the time Ambrose was chosen. Ambrose rose to become a great preacher and leader in the Church. His secretary and friend, Paulinus, wrote his biography in about 375 and tells us of 'Ambrose's great power over unclean spirits'.⁴⁶ He also related that in the great church where Ambrose ministered, unclean spirits left those who had been healed.⁴⁷

Martin of Tours (316-397) is best known for the time when he cut his cloak in half to share it with a freezing beggar. In the night following Jesus appeared to him wearing the half of his cloak he had given away. Sulpitius Severus in his *Life of Martin* tells how Martin once met with a demon-possessed man who tried to bite anyone who came near. Martin put his fingers into the man's mouth and the man drew back as if his teeth and gums had been burned and he was healed.⁴⁸

In concluding this section mention should be made of Patrick who in evangelising the Irish had many a conflict with the forces of darkness. When the Saint came to the pagan city of Tara he discovered there was an idolatrous feast which was kept at the same time as Easter. By tradition no one could light a fire before one was kindled in the King's house. St. Patrick began his Easter celebration with an enormous fire. The result of this was that the King went with a number of his counsellors and wizards to remonstrate with Patrick. One of the wizards called Lochra spoke against the Catholic faith in 'the most arrogant terms'. In response, Patrick shouted out aloud, 'O Lord, who can do all things... may this impious man who

⁴² Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, section 30.

⁴³ Evagrius, 'On Discrimination', *Philokalia* sections 68 and 69.

⁴⁴ Evagrius, *On Prayer* section 90.

⁴⁵ Evagrius, 'On Asceticism and Stillness', *Philokalia* 37.

⁴⁶ Paulinus, *Life of Ambrose* 5.14.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.14.

⁴⁸ Salpitius Severus, *Life of Ambrose* chapters 16-17

blasphemes your name, be now carried out of here and die without delay.' Almost instantly the man fell headfirst and crashed his head against a stone and died.⁴⁹

From all of this, it is very clear that for the Church of the first five centuries evil was both real and personal. The Early Church Fathers were, like the apostles who preceded them, convinced that demonic beings lay behind the structural, societal and personal evil which they experienced. There is no suggestion that the Church in this period had begun to demythologise or rationalise the demonic away as happened at the time of the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation. If anything it is a case of the reverse. The particular Church Fathers considered in this context appear to subscribe to what might be termed 'a demon-infested universe'. Their views were not unlike those of some contemporary Charismatics such as Bill Subritzky, Peter Horrobin or even those of the New Testament Scholar, Clinton Arnold.⁵⁰ Yet these early Christian leaders do not appear to be quite so captivated and mesmerised by the demonic. Antony for example, urged his contemporaries not to fear demons and not to overly concern themselves with them. Evagrius seems to have been very aware of demonic spirits surrounding him yet even he doesn't appear paranoid and recommends resolute prayer as the remedy for dealing with them. Like the extreme American fundamentalists, Ida and Frank Hammond, Evagrius and some of his fellow church elders do however reveal an inclination to personalise their strongest temptations into demons. Such is a common tendency, indeed perhaps a necessary coping mechanism, among those who are seriously resisting what they know to be evil. This said, it always has to be kept in mind that Christians grapple with the 'world' and 'the flesh' as well as with the devil and all his works. It is not of course difficult to understand why a monk, such as Evagrius, perceived unchastity to be a particularly evil and subtle, demon. Unchastity was after all the one great temptation with which all monks struggled. To fall victim to it meant the breaking of vows and probable expulsion from the monastic community.

Contemporary Charismatics perhaps need to learn from their early Catholic predecessors in the way in which they grappled with the demonic. Clearly these

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Early Fathers of the Church exorcised and spoke with authority against evil spirits but their emphasis was firmly on living a life, which is moral, upright and rooted in Jesus. Leaders and teachers such as Antony stressed the importance disciplined prayer, fasting and indifference to material things. They recognised that when a person's daily living is solid and wholesome there would be no seedbed for demons to cling to. This conviction coheres with the Pauline emphasis in Ephesians 6 on 'truth' and 'righteousness' as major components in the believer's armoury for spiritual warfare.

THE PROPHETIC AND KNOWLEDGE GIFTS

The third section of this article is a brief assessment of the prophetic and knowledge gifts. Here also there is plenty of evidence that they were a continuing feature of life and worship in the early Catholic period. Indeed it is known that down to the end of the second century it was not unusual for congregations to be led by men and women who were designated as 'prophets'.

⁴⁹ Muirchu, *Life of Patrick* para 17.

⁵⁰ Arnold, C., *Spiritual Warfare* (Marshall Pickering, 1977) pp 161-232.

One of the earliest sub-apostolic documents is *The Didaché* or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*. Some date it as early as 110 AD., others place it at about 120 A.D. On occasion, the writer appears to indicate the existence of an order of prophets. 'Allow the prophets', he says, 'to give thanks as much as they wish'.⁵¹ In another place he wrote of bishops and deacons as men to be honoured 'along with prophets and teachers'.⁵² The *Didaché* warns that 'not everyone who is speaking in the Spirit is a prophet'⁵³ and gives instructions as to how to recognise a genuine prophet from a false one. It states that prophets must be fully supported by those to whom they minister but that genuine prophets won't stay more than two days and they won't ask for money!

Hermas, writing in about 130 AD, made reference to the practice of prophecy in the Churches at Rome. In his little tract, entitled, *The Shepherd*, he wrote:

When a man who has the divine Spirit comes into a synagogue of righteous men, who have faith in the divine Spirit, and intercession is made to God... the prophetic Spirit, who is in contact with him, fills the man, and the man filled with the Holy Spirit, speaks to the congregation as the Lord pleases.⁵⁴

Hermas also warned of the dangers posed by false prophets in a similar way to the writer of the *Didaché*. 'The true prophet who has the divine Spirit proceeding from above is meek, and peaceable, and humble and refrains from iniquity and the vain desire of this world.'⁵⁵

Among the noble army of early Christian martyrs was bishop Polycarp who lived from 70-156 AD. He was the leader of the Church at Smyrna, one of the seven mentioned by the Apostle John who had in fact instructed Polycarp in the Christian faith. Three days before Polycarp was arrested by his Roman persecutors he had a vision in which he saw his pillow ablaze with fire. He turned and said to those who were with him, 'I must be burned alive'. So it proved. He was burned to death in the arena at Smyrna on 22nd February 156 AD.⁵⁶

Like Polycarp, Justin Martyr foresaw his own death. 'I expect', he said, 'to be waylaid by someone of those whom I have named, and to be put on the rack, even by Crescens, that unphilosophical and vainglorious opponent.' His expectation was fulfilled with Crescens instigating cruel proceedings that led to Justin's arrest and beheading in AD 165.

About the same time as Polycarp and Justin were active leaders of the Church, Montanus initiated what became a widespread early charismatic style movement in Asia Minor. Montanus had been a priest in the cult of Cybele but was converted in 157 AD. He soon attracted a large following including two prophetesses, Priscilla and Maximilla who became his coleaders. They engaged in extreme asceticism including 'dry fasts' (no water) and a strong emphasis on celibacy. Montanism was known as 'The New Prophecy'. This might suggest that prophecy had declined somewhat in Asia Minor in the preceding years. It may also have been for the rea-

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⁵¹ *Didaché* 10.7.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 15:1-2

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 11.8.

⁵⁴ Hermas, *The Shepherd* commandment xii.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 43:1-2.

⁵⁶ *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 5:2, 12:3 and 16:2.

son that the Montanists developed a very distinct order of prophets which included women or possibly because some held their utterances were held to be on the same level as the apostolic writings. The Montanists predicted that Jesus would return in AD 177 at Pepuza and many people migrated there in expectation of entering the millennial Kingdom. When the predicted advent failed to materialise it was reinterpreted in a spiritualised form as marking the beginning of a new age of the Holy Spirit. There has been a tendency to blacken the Montanists by Churchmen past and present, probably because of their emphasis on gifts of the Holy Spirit and the leadership of women. Epiphanius who didn't have much time for the Montanists asserted that by the fourth century the ordination of women in Montanism was common.

Those who seek to put down Montanism need to reckon with the fact that Tertullian, the first great Latin theologian, joined the movement towards the end of the second century. According to Tertullian, the bishop of Rome 'acknowledged the prophetic gifts of Montanus, Priscilla and Maximilla and... bestowed his peace on the Churches of Asia and Phrygia'.⁵⁷

When the Montanist prediction of the Second Coming in AD 177 failed many were ready to condemn the whole movement but Irenaeus journeyed from Lyons to Rome to persuade bishop Eleutherus not to discredit the gifts of the Spirit altogether. Irenaeus himself wrote:

Unhappy are those who deny that the church has the grace of prophecy. They act similarly to those who abstain from communion with the brotherhood on account of hypocrites in it. We have many brethren in the Church exercising prophetic powers and speaking in all kinds of languages through the Spirit, and revealing the secrets of men for our advantage and explaining the mysteries of God.⁵⁸

For Irenaeus prophecy is primarily 'the foretelling of things future', or as he puts it in another place, 'the foreshadowing of what shall be hereafter'. 'The prophets', he writes, 'foreshewed how that God should be seen of men, as also saith the Lord, 'Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.'⁵⁹

Tertullian who joined the Montanists around A.D. 207 (the date is disputed) tended to stress the predictive element in prophecy. In his criticism of the Gnostic teacher, Marcion, for example, he wrote, 'Let Marcion then exhibit, as gifts of his god, some prophets, such as have predicted things to come, and have manufactured the secrets of the heart'.⁶⁰ Prophetic utterances, particularly those which are predictive in nature, are often difficult to manage in the context of public worship. Significantly, Tertullian mentions a prophetess in the congregation of which he is a part, who 'after the people are dismissed at the conclusion of the sacred services', reports whatever she has seen in visions'. He goes on to say that 'all her communications are examined with scrupulous care, in order that their truth may be probed'.⁶¹ Perhaps there is wisdom here for contemporary charismatic worship. It may well be wise to test predictive prophecies before allowing them to be spoken to the congregation as a whole.

⁵⁷ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, chapter 1.

⁵⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.11.9 and 5.6.1.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 4:20:5.

⁶⁰ Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 5:8.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 5:8.

It is not difficult to find other glimpses of the prophetic in the writings of the early centuries. For example, Antony the Hermit had remarkable gifts of knowledge. On one occasion he saw in a vision two men on a desert road one of whom had already died of thirst. The other was barely alive. He told one of his monks to run down the road with a pitcher of water. The brother found the man and the water restored him.⁶² Athanasius also related⁶³ that Antony often knew days before the people who were coming to visit him and for what reasons. Patrick tells us that when he was in Britain he had a vision that called him back to Ireland. In the vision he saw the words, 'The voice of the Irish' and he heard a voice, which said, 'We beg you holy boy, to come back and walk among us.'⁶⁴ Patrick was obedient to the vision and was consecrated a bishop to carry the gospel to Ireland where he planted many churches and established Christianity on a solid base.

There is no doubting that the early churches took the prophetic with serious-

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ness. Knowledge and prophecy certainly helped to envision evangelistic enterprise and church planting. It is also instructive to learn, particularly from wise theologians such as Irenaeus and Tertullian, not to discount the prophetic simply for the reason that a prophecy failed or that men and women of the Spirit, on occasion, got into extremes of behaviour or shaking like the Montanists. The failure of the advent to materialise at Pepuza in 177 AD is perhaps a warning to those in the contemporary churches to guard against talking up the next revival or coming judgement on the nations.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

In summary, several points can be made. First, the practice of Spiritual gifts clearly did not end with the passing of the Apostles or even within a generation as some Fundamentalists and Protestant evangelicals have asserted. Clearly, cessationists do not have the evidence of history on their side.

Nevertheless, second, the practice of spiritual gifts appears to have declined somewhat once the Christian Church became the established faith of the Roman Empire following Constantine's conversion in 312 AD. The churches then began in large numbers to move from locations in domestic homes to established buildings, which were permitted by the Edict of Toleration. It was a great deal easier to practise the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the more intimate and informal surroundings of a private home and local domestic environment than in the formalised setting in a larger official stone church building with a substantial altar and structured liturgy.

It seems also clear that the development of a church hierarchy and the associated growth in power of the bishops gradually damped down the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Constantine was a shrewd politician who quickly saw that he could use the Church instead of the Roman legions to hold the Empire together. He therefore raised the status of the bishops in the larger cities and allowed them to wear his colour, purple. Jerome, who admittedly was somewhat resentful of these newly emerging prelates, relates that as part of this process, confirmation or the laying on of hands for the reception of the Holy Spirit, was separated from baptism in water and made an exclusive

⁶² Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, section 59.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, section 62.

⁶⁴ Patrick, *Confession*, 23.

episcopal preserve. This was done, he says, 'by way of honouring the episcopate'.⁶⁵ Gradually with the passing of time and this growing formalisation, expectation of the Spirit's coming and the imparting of Spiritual gifts was ritualised and eventually lost. What the church needed was a return to the bishops of the second and third centuries who had smaller charges, sometimes just one or two churches and were therefore less controlling. They were men of the Word and the Spirit and contrast sharply than their later post-Constantinian counterparts who tended increasingly to be men of Tradition and the Sacrament. One lesson of history repeated here and in subsequent generations is that vibrant moves of the Holy Spirit and the practice of Spiritual gifts do not in general flourish in structured establishment religious communities. Another is that where signs and wonders are in evidence there is a greater likelihood that the church will be expanding and redeeming the culture as was the case in the first four hundred years of Christianity.

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<http://www.earlychurch.org.uk/>

⁶⁵ Jerome, *The Dialogue Against the Luciferians* 9.

Pope John Paul II: The Church Looks to the Twenty-First Century A. First non-Italian pope in centuries" vigorous, dramatic, faced down Communism. 8. Conformity. Required changes. Yes/No/Partial Recommendations and Suggestions. B. Evangelizer to the world: 104 papal trips overseas, his Dialogue of Salvation. 93. C. Teacher: numerous encyclicals, post-synodal documents, writings. 1. Cardinal Gibbons and implementation of the Church teaching on workers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. 9. Conformity. Required changes. Yes/No/Partial Recommendations and Suggestions. 2. Church support of labor unions" fight for rights of workers. 108. 3. The Depression and its effects. St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican City. Overview. Pope: Francis. Hierarchy. History (timeline). Theology. Liturgy. Sacraments. Mary. Catholic Church portal. v. t. e. The Catholic Church, often referred to as the Roman Catholic Church, is the largest Christian church, with approximately 1.3 billion baptised Catholics worldwide as of 2018. As the world's oldest and largest continuously functioning international institution, it has played a prominent role in the history and development of Western... Was the early church actually called or considered Catholic (or Orthodox) or was it something entirely different? 42 comments. share. I wonder if there are good resources to educate myself about the early Roman church, it seems like a very interesting history. permalink. embed. After the fall and Europe was starting to get their shit together again in the form of Charlemagne, did you start seeing the Western half start trying to exert any authority over the eastern half in the form of religious doctrine. It was more of a politic ploy for various Kings to try to lay claim to the authority/power of the Roman Empire.