

# Doctor of the Church



*St. Isidore of Seville, a 7th-century Doctor of the Church, depicted by Murillo (c. 1628) with a book, common iconographical attribute for a doctor.*

**Doctor of the Church** (Latin *doctor* “teacher”) is a title given by the Catholic Church to saints whom they recognize as having been of particular importance, particularly regarding their contribution to theology or doctrine.

Some other churches have similar categories with various names.

## 1 Before the 16th century

In the Western church four eminent “Fathers of the Church” attained this honour in the early Middle Ages: Saint Gregory the Great, Saint Ambrose, Saint Augustine, and Saint Jerome. The “four Doctors” became a commonplace among the Scholastics, and a decree of Boniface VIII (1298) ordering their feasts to be kept as doubles in the whole Church is contained in his sixth book of Decretals (cap. “Gloriosus”, de relict. et vener. sanctorum, in Sexto, III, 22).<sup>[1]</sup>

In the Eastern Church three Doctors were pre-eminent: Saint John Chrysostom, Saint Basil the Great, and Saint Gregory Nazianzen. The feasts of these three saints were made obligatory throughout the Eastern Empire by Leo VI the Wise. A common feast was later instituted in their honour on 30 January, called “the feast of the three Hi-

erarchs”. In the Menaea for that day it is related that the three Doctors appeared in a dream to John Mauropous, Bishop of Euchaitae, and commanded him to institute a festival in their honour, in order to put a stop to the rivalries of their votaries and panegyrists. This was under Alexius Comnenus (1081–1118; see “Acta SS.”, 14 June, under St. Basil, c. xxxviii). But sermons for the feast are attributed in manuscripts to Cosmas Vestitor, who flourished in the tenth century. The three are as common in Eastern art as the four are in Western. Durandus (i, 3) remarks that Doctors should be represented with books in their hands. In the West analogy led to the veneration of four Eastern Doctors, Saint Athanasius being added to the three hierarchs.<sup>[1]</sup>

## 2 Catholic Church



*The Four Great Doctors of the Western Church were often depicted in art, here by Pier Francesco Sacchi, c. 1516. From the left: Saint Augustine, Pope Gregory I, Saint Jerome, and Saint Ambrose, with their attributes.*

The details of the title, *doctor of the church*, vary from one autonomous ritual church to another.

## 2.1 Latin church

In the Latin church, the four Latin Doctors “had already long been recognized” in the liturgy when the four Great Doctors of the Eastern Church, John Chrysostom, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Athanasius of Alexandria were recognized in 1568 by Pope St. Pius V.

To these names others have subsequently been added to the liturgy. The requisite conditions are enumerated as three: *eminens doctrina, insignis vitae sanctitas, Ecclesiae declaratio* (i.e. eminent learning, a high degree of sanctity, and proclamation by the Church). Benedict XIV explains the third as a declaration by the supreme pontiff or by a general council. But though general councils have acclaimed the writings of certain Doctors, no council has actually conferred the title of Doctor of the Church. The procedure involves extending to the universal church the use of the Divine Office and Mass of the saint in which the title of doctor is applied to him. The decree is issued by the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints and approved by the pope, after a careful examination, if necessary, of the saint’s writings. It is not in any way an *ex cathedra* decision, nor does it even amount to a declaration that no error is to be found in the teaching of the Doctor. It is, indeed, well known that the very greatest of them are not wholly immune from error. No martyr is in the list, since the Office and the Mass are for Confessors. Hence, as Benedict XIV points out, Saint Ignatius of Antioch, Saint Irenaeus, and Saint Cyprian are not called Doctors of the Church.

The Doctors’ works vary greatly in subject and form. Some, such as Pope Gregory I and Ambrose were prominent writers of letters and short treatises. Catherine of Siena and John of the Cross wrote mystical theology. Augustine and Bellarmine defended the Church against heresy. Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* provides the best information on England in the early Middle Ages. Systematic theologians include the Scholastic philosophers Anselm, Albertus Magnus, and Thomas Aquinas.

Until 1970, no woman had been named a doctor in the church, but since then four additions to the list have been women: Saints Teresa of Ávila (St. Teresa of Jesus) and Catherine of Siena by Pope Paul VI; Thérèse de Lisieux<sup>[2]</sup> (St. Therese of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face), “the Little Flower” by Pope John Paul II; and Hildegard of Bingen by Benedict XVI. Saints Teresa and Therese were both Discalced Carmelites, St. Catherine was a lay Dominican, and Hildegard was a Benedictine.

Traditionally, in the Liturgy, the Office of Doctors was distinguished from that of Confessors by two changes: the Gospel reading *Vos estis sal terrae* (“You are the salt of the earth”), Matthew 5:13–19, and the eighth Respond at Matins, from Ecclesiasticus 15:5, *In medio Ecclesiae aperuit os ejus, \* Et implevit eum Deus spiritu sapientiae et intellectus. \* Jucunditatem et exultationem thesaurizavit*

*super eum.* (“In the midst of the Church he opened his mouth, \* And God filled him with the spirit of wisdom and understanding. \* He heaped upon him a treasure of joy and gladness.”) The Nicene Creed was also recited at Mass, which is normally not said except on Sundays and the highest-ranking feast days. The 1962 revisions to the Missal dropped the Creed from feasts of Doctors.

As of 2015, the Catholic Church has named 36 Doctors of the Church. Of these, the 17 who died before the Great Schism of 1054 (marked \* in the list below) are also venerated by the Eastern Orthodox Church (Gregory of Narek was from the Armenian Apostolic Church which was not in communion with Chalcedonian Church). Among these 36 are 27 from the West and 9 from the East; 4 women; 18 bishops, 12 priests, 1 deacon, 3 nuns, 1 consecrated virgin; 26 from Europe, 3 from Africa, 7 from Asia. More Doctors (12) lived during the 4th century than any other; eminent Christian writers of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd centuries are usually referred to as the Apostolic Fathers or Ante-Nicene Fathers, while the 9th, and 20th centuries have so far produced no Doctors at all. The shortest period between death and nomination was that of Alphonsus Liguori, who died in 1787 and was named a Doctor of the Church in 1871 – a period of 84 years; the longest was that of Ephrem the Syrian, which took fifteen and a half centuries.

On 20 August 2011, Pope Benedict XVI announced that he would soon declare St. John of Ávila a Doctor of the Church.<sup>[3]</sup> Although no official announcement was given, it was reported in December 2011 that Pope Benedict intended to declare Hildegard of Bingen as a Doctor of the Church despite her not yet having been officially canonised.<sup>[4]</sup> The liturgical cult of St. Hildegard of Bingen was officially extended to the universal Church by Pope Benedict XVI on 10 May 2012, clearing the way for her to be named a Doctor of the Church.<sup>[5]</sup> Pope Benedict formally declared SS John of Ávila and Hildegard of Bingen to be Doctors of the Church on 7 October 2012.<sup>[6]</sup>

Pope Francis declared Saint Gregory of Narek to be Doctor of the Church on 21 February 2015.<sup>[7]</sup>

### 2.1.1 List of Doctors

(For earlier authorities on Christian doctrine, see *Church Fathers and Ante-Nicene Fathers*)

### 2.1.2 Other recognised Doctors

In addition, parts of the Catholic Church have recognised other individuals with this title. In Spain, Fulgentius of Cartagena, Ildephonsus of Toledo and Leander of Seville have been recognized with this title. In 2007 Pope Benedict XVI, in his encyclical *Spe Salvi*, called Saint Maximus the Confessor ‘the great Greek Doctor of the Church’,<sup>[12]</sup> though the Congregation for the Causes of Saints considers this declaration an informal one.<sup>[13]</sup>



St. Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582) by Peter Paul Rubens (Kunsthistorisches Museum)

### 2.1.3 Scholastic epithets

Main article: Scholastic accolades

Though not named Doctors of the Church or even canonized, many of the more celebrated doctors of theology and law of the Middle Ages were given an epithet which expressed the nature of their expertise. Among these are Bl. John Duns Scotus, *Doctor subtilis* (Subtle Doctor); Bl. Ramon Llull, *Doctor illuminatus* (Illuminated Doctor); Bl. John of Ruysbroeck, *Doctor divinus ecstaticus* (Ecstatic Doctor); Alexander of Hales, *Doctor irrefragabilis* (Unanswerable Doctor); Roger Bacon, “Doctor Mirabilis” (Wondrous Doctor); Gregory of Rimini, *Doctor authenticus* (Authentic Doctor); John Gerson, *Doctor christianissimus* (Most Christian Doctor); Nicholas of Cusa, *Doctor christianus* (Christian Doctor); and the priest and professor Francisco Suárez, *Doctor eximius* (Exceptional Doctor).

## 2.2 Syro-Malabar Catholic Church

The Syro-Malabar Catholic Church recognises Ambrose, Jerome, Gregory, Augustine, Athanasius, Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus and John Chrysostom, as well as Ephrem the Syrian, Isaac the Elder, Pope Leo I, John of Damascus, Cyril of Alexandria, Cyril of Jerusalem, Epiphanius of Salamis and Gregory of Nyssa.

## 2.3 Chaldean Catholic Church

The Chaldean Catholic Church honours as doctor Polycarp, Eustathius of Antioch, Meletius, Alexander of Jerusalem, Athanasius, Basil, Cyril of Alexandria, Gregory Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom,

Fravitta of Constantinople, Ephrem the Syrian, Jacob of Nisibis, Jacob of Serugh, Isaac of Armenia, Isaac of Nineveh, and Maruthas.

## 3 Eastern Orthodox Church

The Eastern Orthodox Church honors many of the pre-schism saints as well, but the application of the term Doctor of the Church is not used. One consistent use of the category is the trio of Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus and John Chrysostom, recognized as universal teachers and known as the Three Holy Hierarchs.<sup>[14]</sup> The Church also recognizes three saints with the title *Theologos* (Theologian): St. John the Evangelist, St. Gregory of Nazianzus and St. Symeon the New Theologian.<sup>[15]</sup>

## 4 Armenian Church

The Armenian Apostolic Church recognizes the Twelve Holy Teachers (*Vardapets*) of the Church: Hierotheus the Thesmothete, Dionysius the Areopagite, Pope Sylvester I, Athanasius of Alexandria, Cyril of Alexandria, Ephrem the Syrian, Basil the Great, Gregory Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Epiphanius of Salamis, John Chrysostom, and Cyril of Jerusalem.<sup>[16]</sup> They also recognize their own saints Mesrob, Eliseus the historiographer, Moses of Chorene, David the philosopher, Gregory of Narek, Nerses III the Builder, and Nerses of Lambron.

## 5 Assyrian Church of the East

The Assyrian Church of the East recognizes Eliseus, Diodore of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Nestorius as Doctors of the Church.

## 6 Anglicanism

The churches of the Anglican Communion tend not to use the term “Doctor of the Church” in their calendars of saints, preferring expressions such as *Teacher of the Faith*. Those thus recognized include figures from before and after the Reformation, most of whom are also recognized as Doctors of the Church in the Latin rite of the Catholic Church. Those designated as Teachers of the Faith in the Church of England's calendar of saints are as follows:

- Basil the Great
- Gregory of Nazianzus
- Hilary of Poitiers
- Francis de Sales

- Thomas Aquinas
- Cyril of Jerusalem
- Frederick Denison Maurice
- William of Ockham
- Anselm
- Catherine of Siena
- Athanasius
- Ephrem of Syria
- Sundar Singh of India
- Cyril of Alexandria
- Irenæus
- Bonaventure
- Gregory of Nyssa and his sister Macrina
- Brooke Foss Westcott
- Jeremy Taylor
- Bernard of Clairvaux
- Augustine of Hippo
- Gregory the Great
- John Chrysostom
- Sergei of Radonezh
- Jerome
- Teresa of Ávila
- Richard Hooker
- William Temple
- Leo the Great
- John of Damascus
- Ambrose
- John of the Cross

Since all of the above appear in the calendar at the level of Lesser Festival or Commemoration, their celebration is optional. Similarly, because “In the Calendar of the Saints, diocesan and other local provision may be made to supplement the national Calendar”,<sup>[17]</sup> those Doctors of the Church recognized by the Catholic Church may also be celebrated in the Church of England.

## 7 Lutheranism

The Lutheran calendar of saints does not use the term “Doctor of the Church.” The calendar of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod refers to Martin Luther by the title of “Doctor” in recognition of his academic degree, Doctor of Theology from the University of Wittenberg in 1512.

## 8 See also

- Fathers of the Church

## 9 References

- [1] Catholic Encyclopedia article, *Doctor of the Church*
- [2] “St. Therese, Doctor of the Universal Church – Saint Therese of Lisieux”. *thereseoflisieux.org*.
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- [12] Benedict XVI (2007). “Spe Salvi”. *The Holy See*.
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- [14] “Feast of the Three Holy Fathers, Great Hierarchs and Ecumenical Teachers, Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, and John Chrysostom”. *Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America*. Retrieved 20 May 2016.
- [15] Casiday, Augustine (2012). *The Orthodox Christian world* (PDF). New York: Routledge. p. 6. ISBN 978-0-203-11938-9. Retrieved 20 May 2016.

[16] “Saints and Feasts”. *Armenian Church Catholicosate of Cilicia Antelias - Lebanon*. Retrieved 12 November 2015.

[17] *Common Worship* (Main Volume), p. 530

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## 10 External links

- [Doctors of the Catholic Church](#)
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