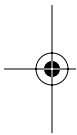


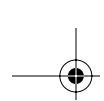
Preface

Learning Theology with the Church Fathers is the second volume of a projected three-volume set: *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (patristic biblical interpretation);¹ *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers* (patristic reflection on key theological topics and issues: Scripture, Christ, the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, sin and salvation, providence, the church and the resurrection); and a book provisionally titled *Praying with the Church Fathers* (patristic reflection and practice in the spectrum of Christian spirituality: prayer, worship, the Eucharist, baptism, Christian witness and service to the poor).

Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers, the first volume of the series, is a basic introduction to the manner and content of patristic biblical interpretation. In it I focus on the eight great doctors of the church—Athanasius, John Chrysostom, Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzus in the East; Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome and Gregory the Great in the West—using these masters of the faith as examples of how the fathers read and interpreted the Bible. I also provide basic biographical and bibliographical background for those who want to explore patristic hermeneutics further.

When I had finished writing *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* I knew there were still vast areas of patristic wisdom and insight that I had yet to touch. What, for example, of the thoughts of the fathers on key theological topics such as the authority of Scripture, tradition, the Trinity, the incarnation of the Son,





the Holy Spirit, sin, grace, redemption, suffering and evil, providence, the church and the resurrection of the dead? These subjects in themselves called for a second book. Hence, the volume you now find in your hands, *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers*.

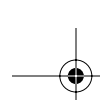
I acknowledge readily and immediately that the fathers never split theology off from spirituality, as though theology was an academic, mental exercise best practiced in one's study, while Christian spirituality was more appropriately focused on the heart and centered in a church sanctuary. Any split between mind and heart, theology and spirituality, study and sanctuary would have met with scant toleration from the fathers.

For the fathers, as for at least one of the three great ecclesiastical communions of the Christian world—Eastern Orthodoxy—theology and spirituality, the Christian mind and heart, worship and reflection are an inseparable whole. The fathers continually remind us that theology is at best broken speech about the transcendent, mysterious God who draws near to us in the incarnation of the Son and the presence of the Spirit. Within the context of worship, whether through the proclamation of the Word from the pages of Scripture or in the celebration of the sacraments, God draws near to us. Here we learn what we can and cannot know and speak within the inherent limitations of human language as we attempt to understand and express faithfully the wonder of who God is and what God is up to in human history. Our thoughts and words about God will always and inevitably fall short in their attempt to capture and explain God's nature and actions.

Anthony Ugolnik chides the West's tendency to "avoid" the "essentially mysterious nature of Christianity . . . rather than [to] adore it." He writes:

We [Christians in the West] confess to doctrines profoundly mysterious by their nature—that a man should be God, that one God should be at the same time three persons, that we of corruptible flesh should also be temples of the living God. So we believe, but so we cannot comfortably *think*. For as "thoughts," these are in essence mystery. Mystery is what many contemporary minds are hungry for; it is what they seek far afield, in the non-Christian realms and such Eastern, Asiatic sources as the Bhagavad Gita and the Tibetan Book of the Dead. We Christians in the West have not shared what we possess. We have mystery in plenty, yet our discourse averts it, avoids it as if in embarrassment. For mystery is what we have been taught through our education to extinguish.²





Ugolnik is not arguing that all speech about God is necessarily impossible and unproductive. Thinking and speaking about God is surely a possible and praiseworthy endeavor, if our reflection and speech are formed and informed within the context of worship. For it is within worship, the fathers insist, that we encounter the mystery of God and God's acts on our behalf and learn to think, speak and reverently respond to divine realities—all the while acknowledging that our words fall far short of the wonder they are feebly attempting to encompass and describe.

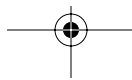
Daniel Clendenin, an evangelical theologian, explains that Eastern Orthodox theology, a theology deeply rooted in the fathers, "is far removed from the theological abstractions common in the West. Adoration, contemplation, and vision, not rational intellection, characterize the Eastern tradition."³ For instance, Clendenin directs us to the christological formulations of the Chalcedonian Creed as an example of how Eastern fathers went about their work.

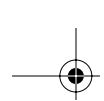
The fathers describe "the union of the divine and human natures of Christ" by employing "a series of four negative words: the two natures of Christ exist 'without confusion, change, division, or separation.'" That is, as Clendenin explains, "the creed states the fact of the union of Christ's two natures in one person and does so in such a way that we avoid theological error, but it resists any temptation to provide a rational explanation of how this can be."⁴ This reticence to speak beyond the boundaries revealed in Scripture, the church's reflection upon Scripture and the church's lived experience in worship illustrates well the patristic and Eastern refusal to separate "reason and experience, theology and spirituality, cognition and mystery."⁵

In this vein, John Climacus (A.D. 579-649) writes that the word spoken by the theologian remains hollow if not grounded in personal experience in worship:

Do you imagine plain words can precisely or truly or appropriately describe the love of the Lord . . . and assurance of the heart? Do you imagine that *talk* of such matters will mean anything to someone who has never *experienced* them? If you think so, then you will be like a man who with words and examples tries to convey the sweetness of honey to people who have never tasted it. He talks uselessly. Indeed I would say he is simply prattling.⁶

And so to title a book *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers* entails the danger





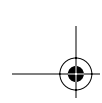
of perpetuating a tendency in Western theology to divide theology from spirituality, theological reflection from devotion. Having acknowledged this danger, however, I find that both the depth and the quantity of patristic thinking and writing on essential topics such as the Trinity and the incarnation demands that they be covered in a volume devoted to them alone. To try to combine them with the fathers' thoughts on matters such as prayer, the sacraments, worship, temptation, confession and other key areas of the spiritual life would lay too heavy a burden on both reader and author.

In the third volume of the series, we will focus on patristic spirituality.⁷ There, for example, we will explore key sacraments such as the Eucharist and investigate its relationship to worship, prayer and the nature of the church itself. Readers expecting links such as these to be discussed thoroughly in the present volume will be disappointed. Best to be forewarned.

This volume, like its predecessor, is simply designed to be a primer for beginners. Perhaps you are a pastor longing to root yourself more deeply in the early church's understanding of the heart of the faith. Maybe you are a seminary student interested in hearing the fathers speak on various theological topics, but in an accessible, lively fashion. You have your doubts, though; earlier efforts to sample patristic offerings turned out to be fairly dusty and dry affairs, more like drinking sand than sampling fine wine. And then, of course, some of you are part of the vast Christian audience who have no plans or interest in becoming pastors (or theologians!) but desire to whet your appetite with the thoughts of the fathers. The fear lurks, though, that one might gag in the attempt or, to mix metaphors, find the terrain too rough to merit the journey.

These misgivings and fears are fair and, by observing the dust covering some patristic textbooks on library shelves, more than warranted. I am convinced, though, that the fathers themselves are rarely boring—strange perhaps, sometimes difficult to understand at a first reading, often opinionated and occasionally quirky—but almost always worthwhile companions for an evening's study, meditation and prayer. Thus, in *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers* I have tried to allow the fathers to speak for themselves, with as little extraneous comment from me as possible. Occasionally I develop a contemporary application. For instance, in chapter one I discuss the difficulty some modern readers have in addressing God as "Father" and how a church father such as Athanasius might





coach those struggling in such a way. For the most part, though, I leave contemporary links and applications up to the reader. It goes without saying that you know your story better than I do and will be much more adept at recognizing particular connections to your life's narrative.

My advice for the pages to come? Read slowly, listen carefully and surround the entire process with prayer. If you find yourself drawn to meditation or worship as you read, accept this gift willingly and thankfully. Do not become discouraged, frustrated or disillusioned if the immediate relevance of a father's reflections, insights and arguments fails to appear. Patristic theology is occasionally complex, understandably so, because the God who reveals himself to us in the Scripture, worship, prayer and the sacraments is complex. Complexity, however, is different from confusion, and the reader who slowly chews on Athanasius's understanding of the incarnation or Augustine's thoughts on the Christian's hope for the future will discover flavors, textures and nourishment that may well last a lifetime. Welcome to the feast!

