

Saint of the Month for December 2014

(A monthly series compiled by Tom Quinlan)

Saint John Damascene, Priest and Doctor of the Church **Thursday, December 4**

This month we go back to the 7th and 8th centuries to consider Saint John Damascene (John of Damascus, Syria). He is considered the last of the Eastern Fathers of the Church. Some background information might be helpful.

The Roman Empire had been unified for centuries, with its capital in Rome, but broke up into western and eastern halves. The western half, with its capital in Rome, “fell” in the 5th century. The eastern part lasted much longer. Its capital was Byzantium, later renamed Constantinople; this is modern-day Istanbul, Turkey. The city fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, and became the new capital of the Ottoman Empire. During John’s life the eastern empire had been reduced in size, but portions, including finally only the capital, survived until the 15th century.

The languages of the Roman Empire’s parts were different- Latin in the west, and Greek in the east. Thus, in the first centuries after Christ the language of educated people in the east was Greek, especially if they were writing for a broad audience. Even though Jesus spoke Aramaic (a Semitic language related to Hebrew, both ancient and modern, and Ugaritic (Ugarit was an ancient city on the Mediterranean coast roughly across from Cyprus) and Arabic), the New Testament was written in Greek. (Educated Jews of the time of Jesus used Hebrew, and could read and write that language; less educated people in Palestine could understand the Hebrew Scriptures read in their synagogues, but used Aramaic (and sometimes Greek, depending on whom they were talking to) in everyday speech.) Jews of the Diaspora didn’t know Hebrew, and used the Septuagint, the Hebrew Scriptures translated into Greek, in their synagogues; there were synagogues in many places for these Greek-speaking Jews, including in Jerusalem.

John was born about the year 690, and by this time Damascus was ruled by a Muslim khalif. The relations between Muslims and others then was not perfect, but much better than now: a Jew was usually the physician to the khalif, and Christians were tolerated or better; they had to pay a poll tax, but could and did hold high office. John’s father, also called John, was chief of the revenue department (the post seems to have been hereditary), and eventually Saint John had the same job.

While still a tax official, John wrote three *Discourses on Sacred Images* about the year 730; these works put him in the forefront of the Iconoclastic Controversy. He defended the veneration of these images against Leo III, the Byzantine Emperor, and the Iconoclasts (those who wanted such images destroyed- clasts are fragments or pieces in Greek, so they wanted to break the icons and other sacred images into pieces). His opponents condemned John at the Council of Hiera in 754, but were reversed at the second Council of Nicea in 787, both after his death.

Soon after 730 John decided to become a monk, and moved to Mar Saba (Saint Sabbas), near Jerusalem, and spent the remainder of his life there writing, studying, and preaching.

He was given the title “the Golden Orator.” He was particularly interested in writing and singing hymns, and writing poems and other works, but his joyous spirit irritated the other monks, who thought he was out of line with his vows. A possible legend says that his superior had a vision of Mary, who told him to allow John to write all the hymns and poems he wanted! And so it went- overruled by the Virgin Mary!

Saint John might best be considered an excellent synthesizer of existing ideas, although he of course had some original thoughts. We must remember that all of Christian doctrine didn't appear immediately, but took a lot of time to be developed. During the intervening years the Church Fathers pondered and prayed about many theological and philosophical concepts, and worked on a systematic theology. This work was sometimes sharpened by the divergent views of those now called heretics: the Church Fathers and others worked on defining the mainstream, orthodox views, and refuting these other views. As an example, it took until the Council of Nicea in 325 and the Council of Constantinople in 381 before the doctrine of the Trinity was firmly established: Jesus and the Holy Spirit were two of the three Persons of the Trinity; they made for just One God; the second and third persons were of the same substance as the Father; they were all co-eternal; they all should receive the same worship. This was almost 350 years since the Resurrection!

Saint John wrote about 150 works, but the most significant was *The Source of Knowledge*, “a synthesis of Christian philosophy and doctrine that was influential in directing the course of medieval Latin thought and that became the principal textbook of Greek Orthodox theology. It had three parts: the philosophical, the historical, and the theological; it was revised about 743.

The first drew largely from the late 3rd century Neoplatonist Porphyry's *Isagoge*, an introduction to the logic of Aristotle. This greatly influenced the western Scholastics, including St. Thomas Aquinas.

The second part transcribed portions of the 4th century Epiphanius' work *Panarion* on heresies.

The third part was called “the Exposition (*Ekthesis*) of the Orthodox Faith,” and was the most important. It speculates on the nature and existence of God, and analyzes the nature of free choice and the will. Please note that here Orthodox does not mean the Orthodox churches- the break with the Roman church came in 1054, way after Saint John's death.

This three part work had a huge influence on both the east and the west. In the east, it is held in roughly the same esteem as the *Summa* of St. Thomas Aquinas.

Saint John died in 749; he was proclaimed a Doctor of the Church in 1890.

The commemoration is given the rank of Optional Memorial. (**Daily Roman Missal, Third Edition** (Scepter Publishers); **Magnificat**, December 2014; **Butler's Lives of the Saints, 2nd Edition** (Ave Maria Press); **Encyclopaedia Britannica**, 15th Edition; **Catholic Dictionary, Revised Edition** (Our Sunday Visitor))

Collect from the Mass of Saint John Damascene:

Grant, we pray, O Lord,
that we may be helped by the prayers

of the Priest Saint John Damascene,
so that the true faith,
which he excelled in teaching,
may always be our light and our strength.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. (**Roman Missal, Third Edition**)

I chose Saint John this month because he is not very well known, and contributed much to the development of Christian doctrine. We are not all theologians and philosophers of his level, but we can always try to learn more about the faith, and try to understand the will of God for us and to carry out that will. Saint John of Damascus, pray for us!