



Thomas F. Torrance and the Church Fathers

*A Reformed, Evangelical and Ecumenical
Reconstruction of the Patristic Tradition*

Jason Robert Radcliff



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and the Church Fathers

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This book is dedicated to the monks of St. Gregory Palamas Greek Orthodox Monastery in Hayesville, Ohio. Thank you for graciously welcoming a Presbyterian into your midst and introducing me to the lives and teachings of The Fathers.

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Foreword

T. F. Torrance's lectures were exhilarating. In the early seventies, he, as Professor of Christian Dogmatics, and his colleague, John McIntyre, the Professor of Divinity, lectured to the General Theology class, the first-year class for B.D. students at New College, Edinburgh. McIntyre's lectures on theological epistemology were incisive and witty: Torrance's were expansive and exhilarating. That was true, at least for those of us who were already graduates, but B.D. studies had been opened to students without a first degree, and they must have found it daunting! Athanasius and Einstein, the Cappadocians and Polanyi, patristics and nuclear physics all featured in a series of breathtaking lectures on the Apostles' Creed.

At this point, Torrance's main publication was *Theological Science*, a truly stretching examination of theological method, arguing for its scientific status. The case was argued from a deep knowledge of philosophy of science, and although the first-year lectures were on the Creed, method and content were not divorced. Torrance would enter in his teaching gown (as most still did in the seventies) and appeared to lecture extemporaneously, transfixing us with his penetrating gaze over his half-moon spectacles. Questions and discussion were soon provoked, and since the class included graduates from the Faculties of both Arts and Sciences, the conversation was rich and thought-provoking. Discussion bridged the division between what C. P. Snow had called "the two cultures."

Forty years later, the theological world at large is only beginning to appreciate the abiding strength of Torrance's thinking. He was not the kind of fashionable theologian of the day who leapt on the latest bandwagons and sold pop-theology, much of which is now outmoded. His comprehensive grasp of historical theology enabled him to put the current fashions and moods in perspective and to dismiss what he called mere "paper theology." The historical perspective made him aware of the deeper cultural movements. While the now-fashionable word "postmodernity" was not then in

common use, Torrance's grasp of the cultural and epistemological implications of Einstein's thought in physics, made him aware that the Newtonian era of the Enlightenment was over. In alliance with the Hungarian chemist and philosopher of science Michael Polanyi, he dismissed the myth that the physical sciences were totally "objective" while theology was merely "subjective."

But it was only after his so-called "retirement" that most of Torrance's major theological works were written, and it is only in the last twenty years that a fuller appreciation of his theology has begun to emerge. Several writers, including Elmer Colyer, Alister McGrath, and Paul Molnar, have written introductions to his thought as a whole, and a series of monographs has appeared on different aspects of his thinking—his links with Polanyi, his doctrine of Christ, his Trinitarian soteriology, his view of *theosis*, and so on. It was also only after his retirement that he wrote most extensively on the Trinitarian theology of The Fathers. In this book, Dr. Jason Radcliff focuses on his patristics, his account of the *Consensus Patrum*. This is most obvious in his major book, *The Trinitarian Faith*, marking the 1600th anniversary of the Council of Constantinople of AD 381.

It was always evident to his students that Torrance's greatest loyalty was to Athanasius. He did in fact have differences with his other two main mentors, Calvin and Barth (although, out of immense respect perhaps, these were not made evident), but it is doubtful whether he had any disagreement at all with Athanasius! The *homoousion* of the Nicene Creed, which Athanasius defended *contra mundum*, was the "lynchpin" of the Christian faith without which the gospel collapsed into incoherence. Irenaeus and Hilary were also to be studied, and (with some reservations) the Cappadocians, but at the heart of the *Consensus Patrum* was the "axis" from Athanasius to Cyril of Alexandria.

Dr. Radcliff places Torrance's enthusiasm for The Fathers in the context of other attempts to recover patristic theology—from Newman and Harnack through Eastern Orthodox scholars to the evangelical theologies of retrieval in the late twentieth century. What distinguishes Torrance, however, from some who abandoned their own evangelical traditions for Orthodoxy or Catholicism, is that he presented a "Reformed, evangelical, and ecumenical reconstruction of the church fathers." The word, "reconstruction," is significant, for Torrance is not merely a historian or patrologist. Some have criticized him for reading his own theology into The Fathers, but Radcliff argues that we have to understand what he is doing. He is not an antiquarian. Rather he takes The Fathers as authoritative thought-partners for today.

That has its dangers of course, and Radcliff accepts that in Torrance's hands Athanasius can begin to sound rather like Barth! But overall,

Torrance's presentation of the *Consensus Patrum* is an enriching one for today's church. For the sake of mission today (and Torrance, as the son of evangelical missionaries, was always concerned with mission), the riches of patristic theology must be mined. In today's multi-cultural world, the foundational work of The Fathers in their multi-cultural world on Christology and Trinity are needed to give an essential foundation to the focus on salvation in the evangelical traditions stemming from the Reformation. The way forward is "towards an evangelical patristic theology" and this book, adding a new and essential dimension to the ongoing study of Torrance's thought, helps us to deepen our understanding of what that should look like.

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The prayers and encouragement of many have sustained me throughout the process of writing this book. I am thankful for the prayers of my grandparents, Bob and Barbara Radcliff and Nancy and Clifford St Clair, as well as my wider family and friends in America, Scotland, and England, particularly my father, Robert, who read through the whole of this book and offered helpful feedback, my mother, Donna, and my siblings, Corey, Doug, and Megan.

Most of all, I am thankful beyond expression for my wife, Alexandra; her grace, love, support, encouragement, and care has sustained me throughout the process of completing this book in infinite ways. I am particularly grateful for such a beautiful editor and conversation partner on the topic of Torrance, The Fathers, and theology.

Abbreviations

PG Migne, J. P. *Patrologia Cursus Completus Series Graeca*. 165 volumes.
(Paris: 1857–1886).

PL Migne, J. P. *Patrologia Cursus Completus Series Latina*. 217 volumes.
(Paris: 1844–1864).

Introduction

THOMAS F. TORRANCE
AND THE *CONSENSUS PATRUM*

[T. F. Torrance is] a theologian who is at the same time Orthodox, Catholic and Reformed because he seeks to build up his theology on the one, historical common ground of all three traditions and because he is prepared at the same time to confess in full modesty and sincerity their historical particularities and fortify himself only with their positive forces. Is this not what ought to be commended today across the boundaries of the Christian traditions when Patriarch and Pope and Reformed theologian have been united in reminding the world about the Gift of God's boundless Love, Grace and Truth in and through Christ and His Church?

George Dion. Dragas, "The Significance for the Church of Professor Torrance's Election As Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland," 226.

INTRODUCTION

The twentieth century has seen a movement *ad fontes* of the church fathers¹ unprecedented other than, perhaps, the time of the Reformation itself. Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic theologians have always used The Fathers, the Reformers used The Fathers, however there was a large gap during a time of the diverging traditions of liberalism and fundamentalism

1. Throughout this book the term "Fathers" is used to denote patristic figures in general, "Greek Fathers" is used to denote patristic figures writing in Greek and "Latin Fathers" is used to denote patristic figures writing in Latin.

when Protestants did not allow the consensual patristic tradition, or the *Consensus Patrum* (“Consensus of The Fathers”),² to inform their theology.³

The Reformation included a “return to the sources” in regards to both the Bible and the church fathers as the Reformers sought to prove that they were in line not only with New Testament Christianity but also the theology of the early church, albeit with an emphasis on the Western Augustinian tradition. The early twentieth century found evangelical⁴ Protestants largely

2. See Torrance, *The Christian Frame of Mind*, 5. “Consensus Patrum” is a Latin phrase used by Catholic and Orthodox theologians to denote the consensual patristic tradition. It is not a phrase that Torrance himself uses very often, more regularly using phrases such as “the classical tradition” and “consensus.” See Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 2ff. Torrance also refers to “the Athanasius-Cyril axis of classical theology.” See Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, 14. The concept of the “Consensus Patrum” is usually traced back to Vincent of Lérins’ famous call to hold to “that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all.” See Vincent of Lérins, *Commonitorium*, 2.6. In this book phrases such as “patristic tradition,” “patristic consensus,” “consensus of The Fathers,” and the Latin phrase “Consensus Patrum” will all be used to denote the concept of a consensual patristic tradition.

3. See the following chapter of this book for elaboration upon this claim.

4. The term “evangelical” is used in in a two ways in this book to mean: (1) evangelical in the wide sense of “committed to the Gospel of grace” and (2) conservative evangelical, sometimes in the fundamentalist/legalist sense. In doing so, the usage of the term in this book follows Torrance’s own use of it. See e.g. Torrance, “Karl Barth and the Latin Heresy,” for both uses in one article. See p. 464, 478 for use #1 and p. 472, 477, 479, 480, 481, 482 for use #2. Torrance’s employment of the term in the former sense appears to derive from the traditional use of the term within Protestant circles as denoting the churches arising out of the Protestant Reformation in general (and also, more specifically, delineating them from the liberal churches) but Torrance constructively applies this sense of the term much wider in seeing a greater evangelical tradition extending back through to the patristic era and forward into the contemporary era through Barth (see further chapter 4 of this book). Torrance employs the term positively in this sense. The latter sense of the term is typically coupled with words such as “fundamentalist” or “legalist” and, as such, Torrance appears to be thinking of conservative evangelicals. Typically, Torrance’s employment of the term in this sense refers particularly to conservative evangelicals in the Westminster tradition of Calvinism following in the tradition of Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly whom Torrance had mind in his own time, but generally, this negative use of the term denotes those who use Protestant confessions in a literal and static sense (“fundamentally” and “legalistically”) filtering the Gospel through the confessions whereas the positive use of the term refers to those who remain committed to the Gospel of God’s gracious self-giving in Christ and read everything else (the Bible, creeds, confessions, etc.) in light of Christ. Torrance never puts it as such, but it is probably fair to say the positive use of the term refers to conservative evangelicals appreciative of Karl Barth and the negative use of the term refers to those in the evangelical tradition of Torrance’s time who were suspicious of Barthian theology during its entrance into the English-speaking world. Cf. Noble, *Tyndale House and Fellowship*, 71–78 and Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 254f. See also Noble’s excellent summary of Torrance’s relationship to these two traditions within British evangelicalism in Noble, “T. F. Torrance on the Centenary of

ignorant of their patristic heritage on account of, on the one hand, The Fathers being given equal importance to Scripture in medieval Catholicism and, on the other hand, the bypassing of The Fathers in liberal Protestantism. The resulting paucity of knowledge in this regard has meant that many Protestants who later “discover” The Fathers conclude that there is a necessity to convert to Roman Catholicism⁵ or Eastern Orthodoxy.⁶ Moreover, many of those who have returned to The Fathers but remained Protestant have failed to offer any clearly defined Reformed and evangelical hermeneutic to guide patristic interpretation that allows for a truly evangelical reading that is also historically faithful to The Fathers.⁷

Fr. George Dragas, Professor of Patrology at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, has been known to tell his students the story of his first interaction with his beloved professor, Thomas F. Torrance.⁸ When young Fr. George first sat down with “Professor Tom” in his office at New College, Edinburgh, the budding student’s eyes were drawn to two items in the scholar’s study: An icon of St. Athanasius and a painting of John Calvin. Upon Fr. George’s inquiry about the items, Professor Torrance told Fr. George, “Always follow the example of St. Athanasius.”⁹ When Fr. George asked about the other figure, Torrance responded, “Well, you should read him.” This colorful anecdote illustrates Torrance’s unique approach to Reformed and patristic theology and, in many ways, encapsulates the essence of this book.

Torrance constructs (or to use his own recurring term, “reconstructs”)¹⁰ his patristic consensus around catholic (or ecumenical) themes and figures.¹¹ Torrance is unique for his time in that as a Protestant, evangelical, and Reformed theologian he uses the church fathers as an authoritative voice speaking within the theological tradition into his own theological system. However, Torrance’s uniqueness goes even deeper inasmuch as, being a western Protestant theologian, his patristic reconstruction consists primarily of the Greek Fathers of the Christian East. He provides a fresh

His Birth” 11–17. In this book, as in Torrance, the term is used in both ways and context clarifies which sense is in use.

5. Howard, *Evangelical Is Not Enough*.

6. Gillquist, *Becoming Orthodox*.

7. Perhaps the two most famous: Oden, *The Rebirth of Orthodoxy*; Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*.

8. See Dragas, “Interview Regarding T. F. Torrance,” 32 for written account of this story.

9. According to Dragas, Torrance called Athanasius “*the theologian*.” See *ibid*.

10. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*.

11. See Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* for the full flowering of Torrance’s reconstruction. However, it exists throughout all of his published and unpublished material.

voice into the theological conversation of his time by means of his approach to dogmatic and historical theology as a Reformed theologian with strong catholic leanings, intentionally situating himself and his reading within the universal church. Torrance's reading of *The Fathers* is unique amongst other interpreters because as both evangelical and Reformed, he combines them with theological themes and figures from his own tradition. Torrance has a unique conception of the consensual patristic tradition, which is centered upon Christology and informed by grace, consisting of primarily Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria, along with figures such as Irenaeus of Lyons, Didymus the Blind, Epiphanius of Salamis, John Calvin, Karl Barth, and H. R. Mackintosh. For Torrance this *Consensus Patrum* is contained within the core message of *The Fathers*, namely, the Nicene *ὁμοούσιον* ("one essence") with the Father and the epistemological and soteriological implications therein, which he understands to be best encapsulated by Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria.

Torrance's patristic consensus is a creative attempt to produce a Reformed and evangelical version of the *Consensus Patrum* which involves significant changes to both the standard interpretations of *The Fathers* and Torrance's own Reformed and evangelical tradition. The Torrancian *Consensus Patrum* has many constructive achievements that have been overlooked by his contemporaries and later commentators on account of his being evaluated simply as an historian of Christian thought or a Reformed dogmatic theologian. When Torrance is viewed rather as a Reformed and evangelical theologian constructing a uniquely Reformed and evangelical version of the *Consensus Patrum*, as he is in this book, Torrance's many contributions emerge more clearly.

SCOPE OF THE BOOK

This book explores Torrance's version of the *Consensus Patrum*. It traces the patristic scholarship of Torrance and his appropriation of it into his own evangelical and Reformed tradition by means of his construction of the Torrancian patristic consensus. Moreover, this book offers an exploration of where Torrance's project fits within the map of theological and patristic scholarship. The questions this book seeks to answer are: (1) What is the nature of Torrance's patristic scholarship, (2) is his project a successful constructive-theological endeavor, and (3) in what ways should contemporary theological scholarship carry Torrance's project forward?

This book argues that Torrance constructs his *Consensus Patrum* around key theological themes and figures. The primary theme is the Nicene doctrine

of *ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρὶ* (“of one essence with the Father”) and the primary figure is Athanasius of Alexandria. Additionally, other patristic themes and figures, inasmuch as they are situated in relation to Athanasius’ basic theological *ὁμοούσιον*-centered commitments, fit within the patristic consensus.

Torrance’s reconstruction of the patristic tradition contains much from which theologians, particular evangelical, can learn. A full study and assessment of it, in addition to a proposed “next step,” therefore, has much to offer the church and the academy. From an historical viewpoint the results will show how a systematic theologian used patristic sources. From an ecclesiastical viewpoint it will supply the Reformed evangelical community with, at the very least, an example of a theologian who effectively appropriates The Fathers in such a way that preserves faithfulness to The Fathers and commitment to the Reformed evangelical tradition. It will also contribute to the growing discussion amongst Protestants, especially evangelical, who are returning to The Fathers and hopefully provide further impetus for ecumenical discussion on the basis of a shared theological tradition. Thus, it is important both to look at Torrance, a major Protestant theologian who uses The Fathers, and work from Torrance towards an evangelical hermeneutic of interpreting The Fathers; indeed, an “evangelical patristic theology.”

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

After (1) exploring the pre-Torrancian history of the *Consensus Patrum* and (2) situating Torrance in his more immediate context, this book is organized by (3) major catholic (ecumenical) themes and (4) major catholic (ecumenical) figures in the Torrancian *Consensus Patrum* as organized primarily by Torrance in his magisterial text, *The Trinitarian Faith* (but also elsewhere) and (5) by exploring Torrance’s ecumenical relevance, especially as seen in the Reformed-Orthodox Dialogue within which he played a major role. In the conclusion, a proposed way forward, an “evangelical patristic theology,” is offered.

The chapters of the book are organized accordingly. Chapter 1 is an historical introduction to the concept of the *Consensus Patrum*. This chapter examines the manner in which all traditions approaching the patristic tradition have a lens through which they view The Fathers. This chapter offers an historical narrative of the prevailing approaches to The Fathers by Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestants. Chapter 2 places Torrance in his immediate context, namely, evangelical “discoveries” and “recoveries” of The Fathers, and begins to highlight Torrance’s uniqueness. Chapters 3 and 4 offer an exploration of the catholic themes and figures of Torrance’s

version of the patristic tradition. These chapters examine the way in which Torrance's approach to The Fathers is both faithful to the patristic tradition and to his own Reformed evangelical commitments and also involves significant changes to both standard readings of The Fathers and his own tradition. Chapter 5 explores Torrance's ecumenical relevance. This chapter argues that Torrance's appropriation of The Fathers into his Reformed and evangelical tradition is an achievement of his broad catholic (ecumenical) ecclesiology, which allows him to remain faithfully within his own tradition while appropriating truly Greek patristic themes and figures, allowing the two to dynamically inform and reform one another. The concluding chapter explores a critical appropriation of the Torrancian *Consensus Patrum* and offers the next steps towards an "evangelical patristic theology."

The argument throughout the book is that Torrance offers a viable Reformed evangelical reconstruction of The Fathers which has yet to be fully appreciated by patristics scholars and theologians. This is argued by means of exploration of the Torrancian *consensus* consisting of catholic themes and figures (primarily the *ἁποστόλων* and Athanasius). The argument is that Torrance's project has much merit and relevance and an "evangelical patristic theology" should critically adopt the Torrancian *Consensus Patrum* and move forward on the path paved by Torrance, assuming many elements of Torrance's reading while revisiting portions thereof.

CONCLUSION

Torrance's reconstruction of the *Consensus Patrum* is a bounteous well from which much can be drawn. Prior to exploring its nature and merit, it is necessary to first explore the history of the *consensus* in Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant theology in order to begin to view Torrance's project in its historical and theological context. Therefore, it is with an historical overview of the *Consensus Patrum* with which this book begins.

CHAPTER 1

The Consensus Patrum

AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

In the catholic church itself, all possible care must be taken, that we hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all. For that is truly and properly universal, which, as the name itself and the reason of the thing declare, comprehends all universally.

Vincent of Lérins, *Commonitory*, 2.6.

INTRODUCTION

Theologians throughout the centuries have long considered the notion of the existence of some sort of consensual tradition existing amongst the church fathers. From the earliest centuries, The Fathers themselves sought to prove that their theological views were in line with antiquity.¹ Tertullian pointed to the Rule of Faith.² Basil the Great referred to an “unwritten tradition.”³ Athanasius of Alexandria defended the doctrine of the Trinity as “preserved by The Fathers.”⁴ Eventually, the church began to formulate

1. For example, when they tried to prove the connection between Plato and Moses in order to prove the antiquity of their theology. See Justin Martyr, *1 Apology*, 59.

2. Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 4.2.1.

3. Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, 27.

4. Athanasius, *Letters on the Holy Spirit*, 1.28.

creeds to encapsulate their view.⁵ Then, in their polemics, The Fathers began to compile *florigelium* in their works, in order to portray their viewpoint as in line with the *Consensus Patrum*.⁶ Finally, upon the dawn of the Reformation in the Western church, the Reformers sought to prove that they were in line with The Fathers and that the medieval Catholics were not.⁷

By the time of the Reformation Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestants each viewed themselves as the community truly faithful to the classic patristic tradition. Accordingly, each group viewed The Fathers through the lens that they were the faithful continuation of the early church and read the patristic tradition in light of their current ecclesiastical situation, viewing their community as the faithful continuation of ancient Christianity. The Eastern churches tended to read the *Consensus Patrum* through the developments in Byzantine theology (especially Gregory Palamas). The Western churches, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, tended to emphasize Augustinian theological themes. Whereas the Protestant communities have continued emphasizing Augustine, the Roman Catholics filter Augustine through Aquinas.

This approach continued in Protestantism following the Reformation until nineteenth-century Protestant liberal theology.⁸ Following the time of Protestant liberalism, Protestants, whether liberal or evangelical, tended towards the view propagated by liberalism: that Protestantism bypassed the patristic era and returned to true, biblical Christianity. The ensuing neglect

5. As Williams puts it: "While the ancient Christians always regarded the past with esteem, one can point to an increasing number of instances in the late fifth and sixth centuries when writers thought of the earlier fathers as privileged witnesses to Christian truth." See Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition*, 50.

6. These were lists of patristic sayings in support of their viewpoint. See Louth, *St John Damascene*, 14f. Louth notes that they first were used leading up to the Council of Chalcedon. Eventually, *florigelium* were used by The Fathers in polemics in instances such as the *filioque* debate.

7. See Lane, *John Calvin*, 3; Oort, "John Calvin" 697–99. Indeed, as one scholar aptly puts it: "In the controversies that followed the Reformation, Catholic and Protestant scholasticism took on a more polemical edge, coloring their development of theology's rational conclusions by their needs to defend respective ecclesial positions. Catholic theology stressed the structures and role of church authority, and the legitimacy of practices and beliefs lacking obvious roots in scripture; Protestant scholasticism stressed the primacy of the Word of God in church organization and worship, and distanced itself from any aspects of Catholic teaching lacking biblical warrant." See Flynn and Murray, *Ressourcement*, 335.

8. Though, as Fairbairn argues, even the liberals (e.g. Harnack) had a lens through which they read The Fathers. See Fairbairn, "Patristic Soteriology," 290–93. As shall be explored below, the liberal approach often assumed the lens that the Protestant church faithfully and rightly *bypassed* the patristic era returning to a better, more biblical Christianity.

of not only patristic scholarship but also allowing The Fathers to undergird dogmatic theology was a denial of the way of the Reformers and it opened the door towards twentieth-century Protestant “retrievals” of The Fathers.⁹ Torrance, a Protestant in the Reformed and evangelical tradition, has much to offer as an excellent example of a largely successful retrieval.

This chapter will explore the different approaches to the *Consensus Patrum* within historical Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Protestantism by looking at the vision of various figures and their ideas in order to put Torrance’s project in its historical and ecclesiastical context. The most detailed analysis will be upon Protestantism because Torrance emerged out of this group and, indeed, was most faithful to the Protestant, especially Reformed and evangelical, approach to The Fathers. This chapter will argue that each group had its own lens through which they viewed The Fathers. The conclusion will be that Torrance’s notion of the *consensus* and the lens through which he views it emerges out of his own Protestant tradition, sharing many core traits and convictions with it, although there are substantial points of contact between Torrance and other figures as well.

THE *CONSENSUS PATRUM* IN ROMAN CATHOLICISM

There have been a variety of components contributing to Roman Catholic readings of the *consensus*. However, three fundamentals have dominated their reading throughout history: (1) their conception of the *consensus* as quantitative, (2) their tendency to interpret The Fathers through Augustine and, eventually, Thomas Aquinas, and (3) their conception of the *consensus* as developing.

In the theology of Counter-Reformation, Roman Catholicism turned to the famous adage of Vincent of Lérins that:

In the catholic church itself, all possible care must be taken, that we hold that faith which has been believed everywhere (*ubique*), always (*semper*), by all (*ab omnibus*). For that is truly (*vere*) and properly (*proprieque*) universal (*catholicum*), which, as the name itself and the reason of the thing declare, comprehends all universally. This rule we shall observe if we follow universality, antiquity, consent. We shall follow universality if we confess that one faith to be true, which the whole church throughout the world confesses; antiquity, if we in no wise depart from those interpretations which it is manifest were notoriously held by

9. “Theologies of retrieval” is John Webster’s term. See Webster, “Theologies of Retrieval,” 584–99.

our holy ancestors and fathers; consent, in like manner, if in antiquity itself we adhere to the consentient definitions and determinations of all, or at the least of almost all priests and doctors.¹⁰

For the Roman Catholics, the key to Vincent's credo is in the statement's first sentence, "everywhere, always, and by all." To Roman Catholics of the Counter-Reformation this implied a numerical *consensus*. Roman Catholics of this era maintained that individually The Fathers could err but taken as a whole they were authoritative and even infallible.¹¹ Thus, unanimity was greatly stressed.¹² Indeed, only the teaching of The Fathers as a whole was considered to be authoritative.¹³

Francis Turretin, hailing from the Reformed tradition, provides a witness to this numerical emphasis historically. Turretin lists three opinions that the Roman Catholics of his time held concerning the authority of The Fathers: (1) their writings are equal to Scripture both individually and collectively, (2) their writings are merely human, and (3) individually The Fathers are fallible but collectively they are infallible.¹⁴ Furthermore, according to Turretin, the council of Trent asserts "the traditions of The Fathers pertaining both to faith and practice must be received with equal affection of piety with the Old and New Testaments."¹⁵ Turretin sees the majority of the Catholics of his time contending that the collective teaching of The Fathers was as authoritative as the Scriptures. Thus, at least according to certain of their opponents, in their Counter-Reformation polemics the Catholics held the collective tradition in equal authority to the Scriptures.¹⁶

The second element of the Roman Catholic reading of the *Consensus Patrum* is their emphasis on Augustine. Western theologians from at least the medieval period onward emphasized Augustine and Augustinian theological themes. Peter Lombard is an illustrative example. As Bougerol

10. Vincent of Lérins, *Commonitory*, 2.6. PL 50.0640.

11. Quantin, "The Fathers in Seventeenth Century," 960.

12. *Ibid.*, 960–67.

13. According to Geoffrey Bromiley this often amounted to "patristic prooftexting" e.g., in Peter Lombard. See Bromiley, "Promise of Patristic Studies," 129.

14. Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, II.21.3.

15. *Ibid.*, II.21.3.

16. This was not simply a polemical attack by Turretin. Thomas Aquinas held to this view and placed the writings of The Fathers on the side of the Bible in terms of authority. See Elders, "Thomas Aquinas," 339–40 citing Aquinas, *Quodlib.* XII, art. 26 (q.17, art. Un.): *Dicendum quoad ab eodem Spiritu Scripturae sunt expositae et editae* ("the writing [of The Fathers] and the Scripture were written and explained by the same Spirit").

puts it, for Lombard, “Augustine by far outclasses any other ‘authorities.’”¹⁷ This was no less the case for Thomas Aquinas.¹⁸ Indeed, according to Elders’ helpful chart, Aquinas cited Augustine far more than any other theological figure.¹⁹ Thus, for medieval Catholic theologians, Augustine and Augustinian theology dominated.

Eventually, this emphasis on Augustine developed into an emphasis on Augustine filtered through Thomas Aquinas. By the turn of the twentieth century, Roman Catholic theology was steeped in Thomistic thought. In his book on twentieth-century Catholic theologians, Fergus Kerr humorously paints a picture of the context leading up to the theologians in the Nouvelle Théologie school of Catholicism and the Second Vatican Council: a boring recitation of neothomist theology.²⁰ However, when the Nouvelle Théologie theologians entered the scene, they began to protest this bland form of neoscholastic Thomist theology. Yves Congar²¹ and Henri de Lubac²² jump-started this movement and it was carried on by figures such as Hans Urs von Balthasar.²³

These Catholic theologians attempted, by means of a departure from bland neoscholasticism/neothomism and return to the broader *consensus*, to read Aquinas as a part of the whole tradition rather than a-contextually

17. Bougerol, “The Church Fathers,” 115.

18. Elders, “Thomas Aquinas,” 338. Aquinas no doubt read and appropriated the Greek Fathers as well, particularly Pseudo-Dionysius. See 344–47. Here he perhaps paved the way for the return to the mysticism of Origen by twentieth-century Catholic theologians. See below. However, Aquinas cited Pseudo-Dionysius significantly less than Augustine.

19. *Ibid.*, 346–47.

20. Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, 1–6.

21. According to Kerr, Congar believed neoscholasticism was not a preservation of the ancient tradition, as it claimed to be. Accordingly, Congar held that, “the reform or renewal of the Catholic Church . . . was to be on the basis of a retrieval of the fullness of the Catholic tradition that he believed had been lost as Catholics reacted against Protestantism in the so-called Counter-Reformation, and against the ancient churches of the East when they rejected papal authority as conceived and practiced in the early Middle Ages.” See *ibid.*, 37–38. Accordingly, the movement was inherently ecumenical in nature.

22. According to Webster, de Lubac et al. traced the fall of Catholic theology to Duns Scotus and Ockham. See Webster, “Theologies of Retrieval,” 588. Webster also notes that Radical Orthodoxy has picked up this stream of retrieval.

23. Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, 122–25. Though there were undoubtedly differences between each of these figures. See Flynn and Murray, *Resourcement*, 279–88 for an excellent discussion of the differences between de Lubac and Balthasar, that latter of whom these authors say was more in line with neothomism than the former.

and a-historically.²⁴ Accordingly, in their polemics the theologians of the Nouvelle Théologie school worked to portray neoscholasticism as a departure from the classic tradition of The Fathers and present the Nouvelle Théologie movement as truly faithful to The Fathers, and therefore, providing the faithful interpretation of Thomas Aquinas.²⁵ Interestingly, in their reinterpretation of Aquinas, they returned to Origen.²⁶ Their attempt to read Aquinas and scholastic theology in light of the broader theological tradition was, nevertheless, an emphasis on Aquinas. Therefore, this “new” theology, while ecumenically relevant in many ways,²⁷ is typically Western in its focus upon Augustine and typically Roman Catholic in its centeredness upon Aquinas.

The third element of the Roman Catholic approach is their emphasis on doctrine as developing. John Henry Newman²⁸ has played a major role in developing the Roman Catholic tradition’s approach to the *Consensus Patrum* in this regard.²⁹ Newman contended doctrine continually “deepens” and “develops”³⁰ throughout the history of the church.³¹ He saw the “development of doctrine” as the way in which doctrine is brought into “consistency and form.”³² Newman held that one could not understand the

24. Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, 32–33. Here Kerr discusses Marie-Dominique Chenu; though, the recovery and re-reading of Aquinas was the main element of the other figures as well.

25. Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*, 85–86.

26. Kerr states: “The most surprising development in twentieth-century Catholic theology—for neoscholastic theologians and especially for Thomists—was the retrieval of Origen.” Kerr traces this to Jean Daniélou and Olivier Rousseau. See *ibid.*, 80. Notably, even Karl Rahner’s first text was on Origen (101).

27. The relation of, for example, Karl Rahner to T. F. Torrance will be discussed later in this book.

28. See King, *Newman and the Alexandrian Fathers* for an excellent tracing of Newman’s view of the Greek Fathers.

29. See Newman, *The Arians of the Fourth Century*; Newman, *Lectures on the Prophetic Office*; Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*; Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar* for Newman’s discussions of the tradition of The Fathers.

30. Newman certainly developed in his view of the tradition of The Fathers. During this early stage, Newman saw the Anglican tradition as “via media” and a faithful continuation of the early church. See Daley, “The Church Fathers,” 29. Early on Newman had a more static notion of tradition. Later, after concluding doctrine “develops,” Newman saw the Roman Catholic Church as the faithful continuation of the early church.

31. Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 21–22. Though this view was already developed to some extent by the Catholic faculty at Tübingen. See Biemer, *Newman on Tradition*, 1.

32. Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 28.

early Fathers without the later Fathers and from here began to understand doctrine as having developed throughout the patristic era and beyond.³³

Newman seemed to imagine that this view could imply a variety of outcomes with which he did not agree. Therefore, Newman laid out what he saw as the characteristics of faithful development: preservation of the type, shared principles, the same organization, anticipation in the beginning of the subsequent phases, later protection and subservience of the earlier, and the power of assimilation.³⁴ Without these characteristics the development could in no way be considered faithful. Rather, Newman saw any divergences as heretical development.

Despite seeing the Anglican tradition as a “via media” between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism in his earlier theology,³⁵ Newman’s eventual conclusion³⁶ was that “modern Catholicism is nothing else but simply the legitimate growth and complement that is the natural and necessary development of the doctrine of the early church.”³⁷ For him, though contemporary Roman Catholic doctrines could not be found in patristic theology explicitly, they were legitimate developments of the teaching of The Fathers. He included numerous examples of this in his *Essay on the Development of Doctrine*, which was, in many ways, a justification of his conversion to Roman Catholicism.³⁸ This is why for Newman, “to be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant”³⁹ and “were Athanasius to come to life he would undoubtedly recognize the Catholic Church as his own communion.”⁴⁰ In his mind, Protestant doctrine was not a faithful development of the theology of the early church, as was Roman Catholic teaching.

THE CONSENSUS PATRUM IN EASTERN ORTHODOXY

Turning now to Eastern Orthodoxy, there are a variety of elements which have influenced the Eastern Orthodox view of the *Consensus Patrum*.

33. King, *Newman and the Alexandrian Fathers*, 51–52.

34. Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 124.

35. Though he put Anglicanism closer to Roman Catholicism than Protestantism. See Chadwick, *Tradition and Exploration*, 160–61.

36. Of course, this is summing up Newman’s fascinating biography into far too small a space.

37. Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 123.

38. See McCarren, “Development of Doctrine,” 118. Though the view was present in a nascent form in Newman’s earlier works (119).

39. Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 6.

40. *Ibid.*, 71.