

IN DEFENCE OF UNITY: ST. IRENAEUS, THE HERESIES, AND THE APOSTOLIC FAITH

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Abstract St. Irenaeus of Lyons (130-202 AD) emerged on the theological scene during a time marked by upheaval, conflict, and profound searching. Considered “the most important theologian of the second century” and called “the father of Orthodox dogmatics,” he dedicated his entire life and efforts to the service of the Church. St. Irenaeus conveys with absolute certainty, born from his unshakeable conviction, that the truth received from his predecessors “is the one and only truth.” For this reason, he devoted himself to preaching, defending, and demonstrating this truth with extraordinary determination, firmly resisting all attacks, as is evident from his written work.

Keywords St. Irenaeus of Lyons, Apostolic Faith, true faith, heresies, unity of the Church.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to highlight the significant contributions of Saint Irenaeus of Lyon (130–202 AD) in defending the Christian faith and preserving its orthodoxy amidst the various heresies of the 2nd century. It examines his crucial role in shaping early Christian doctrine, particularly through the concept of the “rule of truth” (*kanōn tēs alētheias*), which served as a standard for interpreting the Scriptures and combating heresies.

The research methods used in this article combine theological and historical approaches, highlighting the fundamental differences between the orthodox teachings of the Church and the heresies of the time. The article provides a comprehensive analysis of Irenaeus’ theological works, particularly *The Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* and *Against Heresies*, and examines the impact of his teachings on the development of Christian orthodoxy. Additionally, it investigates how Irenaeus employed Scripture, Tradition, and his connection to Apostolic teachings to counter the spread of heretical ideas. Special emphasis is placed on the Church’s

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role as the sole custodian of revealed truth and the means by which the Holy Spirit continues to guide the Church.

Through this research, the author seeks to demonstrate that Irenaeus played a foundational role in ensuring the unity and integrity of the Christian Church, advocating for a truth accessible to all believers, rather than being restricted to an elite few. His defence of the Apostolic faith and Church unity serves as a safeguard against heretical interpretations, ensuring the preservation of the true Christian faith.

Historical background

Tertullian describes Saint Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130-202) as a “tireless explorer of the ancient Christian teachings,” emphasizing his importance as well as his holiness. The historian Eusebius of Caesarea considers him a credible witness and a courageous confessor¹ of the truth of the universal Christian faith. Later, Theodoret praises him among the apostolic men of the West, and Epiphanius includes him among the inspired ecclesiastical teachers upon whom the Holy Spirit descended. The deep connection that Saint Irenaeus had with Saint Polycarp,² the disciple of Saint John the Apostle, shaped his entire life, influencing his work, ministry, and vision. Of Saint Polycarp, who ended his life as a martyr, Saint Irenaeus of Lyons testifies that: “He always taught those things which he had learned from the Apostles, and which the Church handed down, and which alone are true.”³ This intimate connection with the Apostolic Tradition, transmitted directly through Polycarp, reveals to us the fact that Irenaeus, through his predecessors, was in direct communion with the Christianity of the second half of the first century, which, on the other hand, had a decisive impact on his theological doctrine. Through everything he accomplished and preached, wherever he travelled, Saint Irenaeus proved to be a genuine

¹ In his letters, Saint Irenaeus of Lyons distinguishes between a confessor (ὁμολογος) and a martyr (μάρτυς). A confessor is someone who confesses the name and is consequently imprisoned; a martyr is one who seals the confession with death. In his view, the title of martyr should not be granted to the confessor until after death. Yet, while awaiting death, the imprisoned confessor can exercise the “power of martyrdom” (δύναμις τῆς μαρτυρίας). See Liviu Petcu, “Πίστις ἡ Μαρτυρία. Martirii – mărturisitori jertfelnici ai dreptei credințe [Πίστις and Μαρτυρία. The Martyrs – Witnesses to the Ultimate Sacrifice of the Orthodox Faith],” *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai - Theologia Orthodoxa* LV, no. 2 (2010): 279–92.

² Irenaeus was likely born around 130 AD. He describes himself as having been a “boy” when he knew Polycarp in Smyrna, a relationship that lasted long enough for him to become familiar with Polycarp’s discourses and teachings. His birth is generally placed around 130 AD, considering the date of Polycarp’s martyrdom (155/6 AD) and his visit to Rome (154/5 AD). For details on the chronology of the life of St. Irenaeus and his writings, see John Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity*, Christian Theology in Context (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 66–71; and St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *On the Apostolic Preaching*, trans. John Behr (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), 1–5.

³ Eusebius Pamphili, *Ecclesiastical History*, IV, 14, 4 (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History. Books 1-5*, trad. Roy J. Deferrari, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, v. 19 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 231–2.

follower of the Apostles, spreading the word of God among peoples of various languages and traditions, being himself a perfect polyglot.⁴ He showed everyone that there is “one and only one truth, received from the Apostles and handed down through the Church.”⁵ His intense missionary work among the Gallic Celts, Greeks, and Latins – still pagans – was often successful, as confirmed by his canonization as a saint in southern Gaul.⁶

The age in which Saint Irenaeus lived was a time of significant challenges for the Christian Church. In addition to its traditional external enemies – Judaism and paganism – the Church would also face two particularly dangerous heresies that had their birth within its own: Gnosticism and Montanism.⁷

The Gnostics aimed to outline a form of Christianity adapted to the culture of the time, absorbing the religious myths of the East and placing too much importance on the religious philosophy of the Greeks. Consequently, they allocated too modest a space to the Revelation, as the foundation of all religious knowledge, faith, and the Gospel of Christ. However, the Montanists anticipated the end of the world and believed that an authentic Christian life required a total break from the world by adopting an extremely rigorous ascetic lifestyle. The Church thus faced a dual crisis: on one hand, Gnosticism threatened the spiritual essence and religious character, while Montanism questioned the universality of the Church’s mission. Towards the end of the second century, the Gnostic schools had become sects, breaking away from the Church. Significant representatives of these heretical groups included: Valentinus⁸ (2nd cent.), Basilides (2nd

⁴ See Ioan G. Coman, *Patrologie* [Patrology], vol. I (Bucharest: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1956), 23.

⁵ See St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus Haereses* 3.3.4 (Irénée de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies*. 3,2: *Texte et traduction*, ed. Adelin Rousseau and Louis Doutreleau, Édition critique, Sources chrétiennes 211 (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 2017), 40: ...*haec docuit semper quae ab apostolis didicerat, quae et Ecclesiae tradidit, et sola sunt uera*.

⁶ See Adrian Gheorghe Paul, “Elemente doctrinare de natură soteriologică în teologia Sfântului Irineu de Lyon [Doctrinary Soteriological Elements in the Theology of Saint Irénée de Lyon],” *Studia Universitatis Septentrionis. Theologia Orthodoxa* II, no. 1 (2010): 121–67.

⁷ Johannes Quasten, *Patrology. I: The Beginnings of Patristic Literature*, vol. I (Westminster, Md: Christian Classics, 1992), 254.

⁸ Saint Irenaeus gradually distances himself from the doctrine of Valentinus and his followers. During the first composition of *Adversus Haereses* (160–165), the infra-ecclesial conflict does not seem to have led to a complete rupture, as Irenaeus’ tone is not denigrating, and the dispute is conducted at the level of exegesis. By the time of the second edition (around 180), the rupture with the Valentinians is already complete or nearly complete, bringing with it a drastic distinction between orthodoxy and heresy, well documented a few years later by Tertullian’s attitude in *Adversus Valentinianos*. See Giuliano Chiapparini, “Irenaeus and the Gnostic Valentinus: Orthodoxy and Heresy in the Church of Rome around the Middle of the Second Century,” *Zeitschrift Für Antikes Christentum / Journal of Ancient Christianity* 18, no. 1 (May 15, 2014): 95–119 (here, 112–5).

cent.), and Marcion⁹ (d. ca. 160); Although the followers of the latter partly distanced themselves from the Gnostic movement, they still retained certain common features.¹⁰

Saint Irenaeus of Lyons, Tertullian (ca. 160 - ca. 225), and Hippolytus (ca. 170-236) rose against Gnosticism by emphasizing its pagan nature and appealing to Holy Scripture to counter it and articulate Orthodox doctrine. They particularly focused on the idea that the Almighty God is the only Creator, that the world was created good, and they supported the reality of the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. They argued that human salvation is deliverance from an existence that is not inherently evil but is made so by man's free will to sin. In the first centuries of its existence, the Christian Church faced not only Judaism, pagan persecutions, Gnosticism, and Montanism but also a series of internal tensions that endangered its unity. These conflicts erupted within the Christian communities and were based on various practices adopted by different local Churches. A notable example is the dispute over the celebration of Easter, which led to a sectarian movement outside the universal Church and persisted in Asia Minor until the 5th century. This movement, called the Quartodecimans,¹¹ celebrated Easter on the 14th day after the new moon, when the month of Nisan began according to the Jewish calendar, regardless of the day of the week it fell on – whether it was Sunday or another day. In contrast, Christians in Jerusalem and as far afield as Gaul argued that Easter should be celebrated exclusively on a Sunday, with the Crucifixion occurring on a Friday, regardless of whether it coincided with the 14th of Nisan.¹²

Saint Irenaeus thus steps onto the theological arena at a time marked by upheaval, conflict, and deep searching, characteristic of any beginning. Considered “the most important

⁹ Saint Justin Martyr discusses biographical details of Marcion, including his Pontic origin, and links these to his demonic inspiration and the role of “the ravaging wolf” (see Matt. 7:15), ultimately describing him as ‘the Pontic wolf.’ Marcion is associated with a vocabulary of “heresy” (αἵρεσις) and a series of “doctrines” (δόγματα), in a way that will be determinative for his future image. The term *hairesis*, meaning “choice,” was also used in contemporary descriptions of intellectual schools of thought – whether philosophical or medical – where it carried a neutral connotation without any negative implications. However, the critique of these “choices” would evolve into the central framework for categorizing diversity in Christian belief and practice, with “heresy” quickly becoming a term of condemnation, as seen in Irenaeus’ *Against Heresies*. See Judith M. Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic: God and Scripture in the Second Century* (New York: Cambridge university Press, 2015), 15–25.

¹⁰ See Remus Rus, “Introduction,” in *Demonstrația propovăduirii apostolice [Proof of the Apostolic Preaching]*, by Sfântul Irineu de Lugdunum (Bucharest: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 2001), 6–8.

¹¹ Irenaeus, in a letter to Victor, bishop of Rome, urged him not to excommunicate the Asian Churches that followed the Quartodeciman practice of celebrating Easter on the 14th of Nisan, emphasizing the importance of maintaining unity within the Christian community. He argued that the mystery of Christ’s resurrection should be celebrated on the “day of the Lord,” but he called for tolerance toward different liturgical traditions. See Eusebius Pamphili, *Ecclesiastical History*, IV, 24, 11 (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History. Books 1-5*, 183).

¹² See Rus, 8–11.

theologian of the second century"¹³ and called "the father of Orthodox dogmatics,"¹⁴ he dedicated his entire life and all his efforts to the service of the Church, producing a work of profound theological value, "one of the sources of primary importance for the knowledge of Christian history and culture in the first two centuries." He is among the first Holy Fathers to formulate the teaching of faith with clarity and rigor, systematically rejecting the attacks of all contemporary heresies.¹⁵

Saint Irenaeus conveys with complete certainty, stemming from his unshakeable conviction, that the truth received from his predecessors "is the one and only truth." For this reason, he dedicated himself to preaching, defending, and demonstrating this truth with extraordinary determination, firmly resisting all attacks, as is clear from his written work.¹⁶

"The rule of faith"

Saint Irenaeus is one of the true pioneers of the faith, and his work is essential for understanding how orthodoxy was formed in the earliest Christian centuries. From this perspective, the term "the rule of faith"¹⁷ is particularly important because Irenaeus of Lyons is the first Christian theologian to systematize and theorize doctrine around this fundamental idea.¹⁸ He borrows the

¹³ See Quasten, *Patrology. I: The Beginnings of Patristic Literature*, 287.

¹⁴ See Berthold Altaner, *Précis de Patrologie* (Mulhouse/Paris: Editions Salvator/Casterman, 1941), 115.

¹⁵ Ioan G. Coman, *Patrologie* [Patrology], vol. II (Bucharest: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1985), 16.

¹⁶ See Rus, "Introduction," 25–6.

¹⁷ The terminology used for the rule of faith was fluid, with different early Christian authors referring to it in various ways, such as "the rule of faith," "the faith," "the canon of truth," "truth," or similar expressions. By these terms, they referred to summaries of the faith preached and taught by the Churches. See Everett Ferguson, *The Rule of Faith: A Guide*, Cascade Companions 20 (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2015).

¹⁸ While Irenaeus is often credited with providing the first direct reference to the "rule of faith" [See Heinz Ohme, *Kanon ekklesiastikos: Die Bedeutung des altkirchlichen Kanonbegriffs*, Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte 67 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1998), 75: "Die häufiger anzutreffende Bemerkung, daß Irenaus der erste christliche Autor sei, der überhaupt Gebrauch von dieser Formel mache..."], there is a compelling argument that the term itself was shaped by Paul's use of the word *κανὼν* in Galatians 6:16 [See William R. Farmer, "Galatians and the Second-Century Development of the 'Regula Fidei,'" *The Second Century: A Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4, no. 3 (1984): 143–70]. See Jonathan J. Armstrong, "From the *Κανὼν Τῆς Ἀληθείας* to the *Κανὼν Τῶν Γραφῶν*: The Rule of Faith and the New Testament Canon," in *Tradition and the Rule of Faith in the Early Church: Essays in Honor of Joseph T. Lienhard, S.J.*, ed. Alexander Y. Hwang, Joseph T. Lienhard, and Ronnie J. Rombs (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 30–47 (here, 44–5, n. 56).

concept of the “canon”¹⁹ or “rule of faith” (*kanon tēs alētheias*) from classical Greek culture, where philosophers use it as a criterion of logical, ethical, aesthetic, or musical validation.²⁰

For Irenaeus, the rule of faith serves as the standard by which normative Christian truth is defined.²¹ It brings salvation to those who confess its truth.²² It separates orthodox Christians from heretics. It is the rule of truth that is disregarded in Gnostic interpretations of the

¹⁹ Both κανών (*kanōn*) and κριτήριον (*kritērion*) were central terms in Hellenistic philosophy, particularly among the Stoics and Epicureans, as they sought to address questions about the existence of objective truth and how it can be known. These terms referred to standards or principles used to evaluate truth, with the Stoics and Epicureans asserting that truth could be known by following these criteria. For the Sceptics, who denied objective truth, the proposed *kanon* was a subject of critique. See Eric F. Osborn, “Reason and the Rule of Faith in the Second Century AD,” in *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*, ed. Rowan Williams and Henry Chadwick, 1. paperback ed (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), 40–61.

²⁰ In much the same way that Hellenistic philosophers refuted the infinite regression posited by the Sceptics through an appeal to a canon or criterion of truth, Irenaeus confronted the ever-shifting Gnostic mythology (noting that the Gnostics, according to him, felt compelled to invent something new each day; See *Adversus Haereses* 1.18.1; 1.21.5) by appealing to his own canon of truth. Employing terminology akin to that of the philosophers, Irenaeus declares that “we must keep the rule (κανών) of faith unswervingly and perform the commandments of God” for such faith “is established upon things truly real” and enables us to have “a true comprehension of what is” (*The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 3; St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *On the Apostolic Preaching*, 1997, 41). See John Behr, “The Tradition and Canon of the Gospel According to the Scriptures,” in *The Formation of Christian Theology. 1: The Way to Nicaea*, by John Behr (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 17–48 (here, 34).

²¹ See *Adversus Haereses* 1.9.4 [Irénee de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies. 1,2: Texte et traduction*, ed. Adelin Rousseau and Louis Doutreleau, Réimpr., Sources chrétiennes 264 (Paris: Cerf, 2008), 150]: *Sic autem et qui regulam veritatis immobilem apud se habet, quem per baptismum accepit, haec quidem quae sunt ex Scripturis nomina et dictiones et parabolas cognoscet... Vnumquemque autem sermonum reddens suo ordini et aptans veritatis corpuscula* – “And thus whoever keeps the rule of truth which he received through baptism, unchanged within himself, knows these name, phrases, and parables from the scriptures... Setting each word in its context and adjusting it to the body of truth...” [Robert McQueen Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons, The Early Church Fathers* (London: Routledge, 1997), 70.]

²² *Adversus Haereses* 3.15.1 (Irénee de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies. 3,2*, 2017, 278): *omnes sequentes et regulam veritatis inadulteratam habentes, saluari possint* – “that all, ..., keeping the Rule of the Truth, inadulterate, may be saved.” (John Keble, trans., *Five Books of St. Irenaeus Bishop of Lyons: Against Heresies with the Fragments That Remain of His Other Works* (Oxford: J. Parker/CrossReach Publications, 1872), 260–1).

Scriptures.²³ This rule of truth is established when Christian doctrine is shaped exclusively by the apostolic Gospels.²⁴

Irenaeus includes in the rule of faith the clear teaching of Scripture, the doctrine preached by the apostles, transmitted through succession, and taught in the Churches. It is the formula for interpreting Scripture²⁵ and, essentially, the living doctrine of the Churches.²⁶

The persuasive power with which Irenaeus established the principle of the apostolic “rule of truth,” or “tradition,” or simply “faith,” was unquestionably rooted, from his own perspective, in the fact that he already possessed a firmly articulated creed and “had no doubt regarding its interpretation.”²⁷

Using this rule, Irenaeus rejects doctrines that do not respect this canon of interpretation, labeling them as heretical.²⁸ In parallel, he builds a doctrinal corpus through a careful reading of the Old and New Testaments according to the principles of the rule of truth, which will become essential for the true faith.²⁹ The rule of truth presented by Irenaeus of Lyons

²³ *Adversus Haereses* 1.22.1 (Irénee de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies*. 1,2, 2008, 310): ...*hanc ergo tenentes regulam, licet ualde uaria et multa dicant, facile eos deuiasse a ueritate arguimus* – “If, therefore, we hold fast this Rule, we shall easily prove that they have strayed from the Truth, even though their statements are quite varied and numerous.” [Saint Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, *Against the Heresies*, trans. Dominic J. Unger and John J. Dillon., vol. I. Book 1, Ancient Christian Writers 55 (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1992), 81]. See *Adversus Haereses* 3.12.6; 2.27.1.

²⁴ *Adversus Haereses* 3.11.1. See Armstrong, “From the Κανὼν Τῆς Ἀληθείας to the Κανὼν Τῶν Γραφῶν: The Rule of Faith and the New Testament Canon,” 44–5.

²⁵ The debates surrounding the works that should be considered Scripture were closely tied to the issue of the correct interpretation of Scripture. It was not only a matter of accepting a body of Scripture, but also affirming that there is a proper way to read it, expressed through a canon that reflects the essence of Scripture itself. This belief in *one right faith* and one right reading of the Scripture is deeply connected to the confession of one Jesus Christ, the only Son of the Father, who alone has revealed (ἐξηγήσατο, “exegeted,” Jn 1:18) the Father. See Behr, “The Tradition and Canon of the Gospel According to the Scriptures,” 14–5.

²⁶ Osborn, “Reason and the Rule of Faith in the Second Century AD,” 43.

²⁷ Adolf Harnack, *History of Dogma*, trans. Neil Buchanan, vol. II (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1961), 27.

²⁸ Saint Irenaeus uses *haireseis* to refer to sects in a pejorative sense, following the heresiological framework of his predecessor, Saint Justin Martyr, with reference to philosophical schools. He innovates in three ways: 1) He strengthens the polemical analogy by positing doctrinal dependence between heresies and Greek philosophy. Philosophy is dismissed as erroneous, and a new mode of refutation emerges, leading to the extreme procedures of the *Elenchos*. 2) He emphasizes the disagreements among sects, a theme more central than in Justin’s work. 3) He develops the succession theory, tracing all heresies to a common origin. For an extensive treatment of this topic, see Alain Le Boulluec, *La notion d’hérésie dans la littérature grecque, IIe-IIIe siècles*, vol. I De Justin à Irénée (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1985), 257–88.

²⁹ The notion of “true faith” began to be articulated in terms of the canon (or rule) of faith or truth, where the canon is not an arbitrary set of beliefs or a fixed list of authoritative books, but rather the crystallization of the underlying principles of Scripture itself. In this context, the canon serves as the foundational basis for interpreting Scripture on its own terms – it is the “canon of truth,” with Scripture representing “the embodiment of that truth.” See Behr, “The Tradition and Canon of the Gospel According to the Scriptures,” 15.

is inspired by the baptismal³⁰ symbol practiced by the first Christian communities and evolves toward the Nicene creed. Thus, Irenaeus remains an indispensable landmark in the process of establishing doctrinal orthodoxy.³¹

In the prologue to *The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*,³² St. Irenaeus emphasizes the imperative of preserving the orthodoxy of the faith, which is the faith transmitted by the elders, who are bearers of the seal of Christian baptism. The term *presbyteroi* designated, in the first place, the “Elders,” i.e., “those from ancient times,” or the Fathers who provided the immediate link of the early Church with the apostolic era. Subsequently, this title was transferred to later leaders of the Church in apostolic succession,³³ who became devoted transmitters of the teaching entrusted to them.³⁴

Faith must not be preserved only on an intellectual level; it must also be manifested in the purity and holiness of one’s body and soul, as well as in justice towards one’s neighbour. The purpose of life in Christ is to follow “the way that leads to the Kingdom of Heaven, uniting man to God,”³⁵ so that “we may no longer be sons of mortal men, but of the eternal and everlasting God; and that the eternally existing God is... above everything that has come into being.”³⁶

³⁰ In *Adversus haereses* 1.9.4, Irenaeus explains that the canon of truth is “received through baptism.” In *Adversus haereses* 1.10.1, he presents a structure based on the same three central articles of belief found in the earliest baptismal creeds, tracing back to Christ’s own baptismal command (Matt 28:19). Additionally, in discussing the rule of truth, Irenaeus affirms that “the baptism of our regeneration (παλιγγενεσία) takes place through these three articles” (*The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 7; St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *On the Apostolic Preaching*, 1997, 44). See Behr, “The Tradition and Canon of the Gospel According to the Scriptures,” 35. See also Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 27–8: “The rule of truth is the old baptismal confession well known to the communities...” For a more extensive discussion on the relationship between the rule of faith and the baptismal confession, see Armstrong, “From the Κανὼν Τῆς Ἀληθείας to the Κανὼν Τῶν Γραφῶν: The Rule of Faith and the New Testament Canon,” 32 sq.

³¹ See Gelu Sabău, “Irineu de Lyon în limba română [Irenaeus of Lyons in Romanian],” *Revista de filosofie* LXV, no. 1 (2018): 95–100 (here, 96).

³² *The Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* = gr. Ἀπόδειξις τῆς ἀποστολικῆς κηρύξεως = lat. *Ostensio Apostolicae Praedicationis*.

³³ On the relation between apostolic tradition and episcopal succession, see Ysabel de Andia, “Tradition apostolique et succession épiscopale chez Irénée de Lyon,” in *Heiligkeit und Apostolizität der Kirche: Forscher aus dem Osten und Westen Europas an den Quellen des gemeinsamen Glaubens; Wiener Patristische Tagungen V; Pro-Oriente-Studientagung “La Sainteté et l’Apostolicité de l’Église” - “Heiligkeit und Apostolizität der Kirche,” Thessaloniki, 22. - 6. September 2009*, ed. Theresia Hainthaler, Pro Oriente 35 (Studientagung La Sainteté et l’Apostolicité de l’Église - Heiligkeit und Apostolizität der Kirche, Innsbruck Wien: Tyrolia-Verlag, 2010), 93–112.

³⁴ See Rus, “Introduction,” 41. Saint Irenaeus includes in the rule of faith the clear teaching of Scripture, the doctrine preached by the apostles, transmitted through succession, and taught in the Churches. This serves as the formula for interpreting Scripture and, essentially, embodies the living doctrine of the Churches. See Osborn, “Reason and the Rule of Faith in the Second Century AD,” 43.

³⁵ See St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Ostensio Apostolicae Praedicationis* 1 (St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *On the Apostolic Preaching*, trad. John Behr (Crestwood, N.Y: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), 39–40.

³⁶ St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Ostensio Apostolicae Praedicationis* 3 (St. Irenaeus of Lyons, 42).

What the apostolic preaching teaches about the Lord Jesus Christ is true, because these teachings are foreshadowed in the Old Testament, and Christ brought them to fulfillment. Jesus is the Son of God,³⁷ consubstantial with the Father,³⁸ begotten before all ages. He will rule over Jew and Gentile alike.³⁹ The time, place, and circumstances of His birth, His miracles, His passion, His death, His resurrection, His ascension, and His sitting at the right hand of the Father in glory were all prophesied.⁴⁰ The events that followed His Ascension were also prophesied: the preaching of the faith by the Apostles, the abolition of the law of Moses, the calling of the Gentiles, the growth of the Church, the inner renewal through the new faith, and salvation through Jesus Christ.⁴¹ This faith, prophesied or anticipated by the prophets, finds its fulfillment in the Person of Jesus Christ and is preached by His Church: this is the true faith. All those, therefore, who separate the Creator from the Father, as well as those who reject the Incarnation⁴² of the Son or neglect the influence of the prophetic Spirit, are in error. It is imperative to avoid such teachings if we wish to attain salvation.⁴³

³⁷ Irenaeus affirmed an eternal and distinct coexistence of the Word-Son with God the Father as the one God. He explains that the union between the divine Word-Son and humanity is achieved in the Person of Jesus Christ. To clarify this, Irenaeus employs Stoic mixture theory, which helps conceptualize the Christological union, particularly the relationship between the human and divine in Christ's experiences and activities. On this topic, see Anthony Briggman, *God and Christ in Irenaeus*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

³⁸ The unity of the Son with the Father is most strikingly evident when associated with the act of creating all things (Jn 1:3). See St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus haereses* 1.22.1 (Irénee de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies*. 1,2, 2008, 308): *Cum teneamus autem nos regulam veritatis, id est quia sit unus Deus omnipotens qui omnia condidit per Verbum suum et aptavit et fecit ex eo quod non erat ad hoc ut sint omnia* – “The Rule of the Truth that we hold is this: ‘There is one God Almighty, who created all things through His Word; He both prepared and made all things out of nothing...’” (Saint Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, *Against the Heresies*, 80)

³⁹ See St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Ostensio Apostolicae Praedicationis* 43-51 (St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *On the Apostolic Preaching*, 68-74).

⁴⁰ See St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Ostensio Apostolicae Praedicationis* 52-85 (St. Irenaeus of Lyons, 74–92).

⁴¹ See St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Ostensio Apostolicae Praedicationis* 86-97 (St. Irenaeus of Lyons, 92–100).

⁴² For Irenaeus, the central theological issue is “man and becoming-man,” or “man and the Incarnation.” He discusses humanity extensively, not in opposition to the theocentric view of early Christianity – which he himself upholds – but in contrast to the Gnostic misinterpretations of man, whether through idolization or contempt. Irenaeus presents a distinctive view of the relationship between Christ and man, one that does not depict God and man in opposition, but rather in unity. This relationship forms the basis of his understanding of the Incarnation. The exploration of this relationship centers on two key aspects. First, Irenaeus addresses humanity's creation by God, made in the image of God through the Son, but disrupted by man's fall into bondage to the Devil. This disruption prevents man from fulfilling his intended purpose. Second, Irenaeus describes the Incarnation, where the eternal Son of God becomes man. Through the Incarnation, both God and man are revealed, with Christ embodying the ideal version of humanity. Unlike humanity's struggle against evil, Christ overcomes temptation, ultimately leading to victory rather than defeat. The Incarnation's culmination is not death, but the life of the Resurrection, signifying the restoration of humanity to its divine purpose. On this topic, see Gustaf Wingren, *Man and the Incarnation: A Study in the Biblical Theology of Irenaeus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004).

⁴³ See Rus, “Introduction,” 34–36.

The profound reason for the Incarnation of the Son, beyond the act of Redemption, lies in the union of the two natures – divine and human – in His Person. Hence comes the famous formulation of the Holy Fathers, starting with Saint Irenaeus of Lyons, continuing with Saint Athanasius the Great and the prominent representatives of the Orthodox Tradition: “God became man in order to make man God.”⁴⁴ Based on the Holy Scriptures, the Church has always confessed that Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, is both true God and true man,⁴⁵ defending this faith firmly, especially when confronting heresies.⁴⁶

Jesus Christ reveals the image of the perfect man, united with God. This is why St. Irenaeus emphasizes that, through the Incarnation of the Son, “the whole iconomy concerning man has been fulfilled.”⁴⁷ He maintains that God sent the Word into the world, in whose image He originally

⁴⁴ St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus Haereses* 3.16.3 (Irénee de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies*. 3,2, 2017, 298): ...*Filius Dei hominis Filius factus, ut per eum adoptionem percipiamus, portante homine et capiente et complectente Filium Dei* – “the Son of God, made Son of man, that by Him we may receive adoption, Man bearing, and receiving, and embracing, the Son of God.” (Keble, *Five Books of St. Irenaeus Bishop of Lyons: Against Heresies with the Fragments That Remain of His Other Works*, 265); 3.19.1 (Irénee de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies*. 3,2, 2017, 374: *Propter hoc enim Verbum Dei homo, et qui Filius Dei est Filius hominis factus est, < ut homo >, commixtus Verbo Dei et adoptionem percipiens, fiat filius Dei* – “For this the Word of God became man, and the Son of God Son of man, that man, mingled with the Word and thus receiving adoption, might become a son of God.” (Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 1997, 137). See *Adversus Haereses* 3.20.2 (Irénee de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies*. 3,2, 2017, 388 sq.)

⁴⁵ *Adversus haereses* 3.18.1 [Irénee de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies*. 3,2: *Texte et traduction*, ed. Adelin Rousseau și Louis Doutreleau, Édition critique, Sources chrétiennes 211 (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 2017), 342]: *Ostenso manifeste quod in principio Verbum existens apud Deum, per quem omnia facta sunt, qui et semper aderat generi humano, hunc in nouissimis temporibus secundum praefinitum tempus a Patre unitum suo plasmati passibilem hominem factum (...). Ostendimus enim quia non tunc coepit Filius Dei, existens semper apud Patrem; sed quando incarnatus et homo factus, longam hominum expositionem in seipso recapitulavit, in compendio nobis salutem praestans, ut quod perdideramus in Adam, id est secundum imaginem et similitudinem esse Dei, hoc in Christo Iesu reciperemus* – “It having been clearly shown, that the Word which was in the beginning with God, by Whom all things were made, Who also was ever present with mankind; – that He in the last times according to the time foreordained by the Father, was united to His own creation and made a Man capable of suffering (...) For we have shown that the Son of God hath not then His beginning, Who is for ever with the Father: but when He was incarnate and made man, He summed up in Himself the long explanations of men, in one brief work achieving salvation for us; that what we had lost in Adam, i.e., our being in the image and likeness of God, that we might recover in Christ Jesus.” John Keble, trad., *Five Books of St. Irenaeus Bishop of Lyons: Against Heresies with the Fragments that Remain of His Other Works* (Oxford: J. Parker/CrossReach Publications, 1872), 275.

⁴⁶ See Dumitru Radu, “Iisus Hristos, Mântuitorul lumii [Jesus Christ, the Savior of the World],” in *Îndrumări misionare* [Missionary Guidelines], ed. Dumitru Radu (Bucharest: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1986), 806.

⁴⁷ See *Adversus Haereses* 3.17.4 (Irénee de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies*. 3,2, 2017, 338): *Filio Dei Vnigenito, qui et Verbum est Patris, ueniente plenitudine temporis, incarnato in homine propter hominem, et omnem secundum hominem dispositionem implente* – “the only begotten Son of God, Who is also the Word of the Father, having, when the fulness of the time came, been incarnate in a human being for man’s sake, and

created man, so that, by redeeming him from the bondage of death and corruption, man might achieve the fulfilment of his being through his union with the Archetype.⁴⁸

Combating heretical teachings

In Saint Irenaeus' treatise against the Gnostics, *Adversus haereses*,⁴⁹ we discover the most precise information about the heretical⁵⁰ movements that, in the 2nd century AD, threatened the integrity and unity of the young Christian Church. The Bishop of Lyons did not limit himself to recording these movements but adopted a resolute stance against the teachings they preached, courageously defending the truth of the faith transmitted through Scripture and Tradition.⁵¹ The Truth, Saint Irenaeus affirmed, can be only one. Heretics, by contrast, put forward multiple

having fulfilled His whole Economy as Man" (Keble, *Five Books of St. Irenaeus Bishop of Lyons: Against Heresies with the Fragments That Remain of His Other Works*, 274); 3.16.6 (Irénee de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies*, 3,2, 2017, 312): *Vnus igitur Deus Pater, quemadmodum ostendimus, et unus Christus Iesus Dominus noster, ueniens per uniuersam dispositionem et omnia in semetipsum recapitulans* – "There is therefore one God the Father as we have declared; and one Christ Jesus our Lord, coming throughout the Economy and gathering up all things into Himself." (Keble, *Five Books of St. Irenaeus Bishop of Lyons: Against Heresies with the Fragments That Remain of His Other Works*, 268.)

⁴⁸ See *Adversus Haereses*, 5.9.3 (Irénee de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies*, 5,2: *Texte et traduction / Éd. critique d'après les versions arménienne et latine par Adelin Rousseau*, ed. Adelin Rousseau, Retirage, Sources chrétiennes 153 (Paris: Éd. du Cerf, 2006), 112 sq.) and 5.36.3 (Irénee de Lyon, 460 sq.). On the Incarnation of the Word of God as the beginning of the Recapitulation (ἀνακεφαλαίωσις), the restoration of the face and the revealing of the likeness, see Eric Francis Osborn, "Recapitulation," in *Irenaeus of Lyons*, by Eric Francis Osborn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 95–140. On the relationship between "Recapitulation in Christ" and the plan of salvation for the human race, see James G. Bushur, *Irenaeus of Lyons and the Mosaic of Christ: Preaching Scripture in the Era of Martyrdom* (London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 51–79.

⁴⁹ *Against the Heresies*, which, in von Balthasar's words, "marks the 'birth of Christian theology' and which was produced in a conscious struggle with living opponents." (Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 14.)

⁵⁰ Irenaeus' *Against Heresies* is the oldest surviving anti-heretical treatise, notable for its comprehensive scope, documentary value, and theological depth. While not fully original or structurally unified, it synthesizes diverse sources, including the "Presbyters," the "Elder," and Justin Martyr, along with uncredited works such as those of Theophilus of Antioch. His influences span both time – linking back to teachers close to the Apostles – and geography, from Asia Minor to the Churches of Rome and the Rhône. Despite the diversity of influences, Irenaeus successfully creates a coherent synthesis that shaped future heresiological thought. See Le Boulluec, *La notion d'hérésie dans la littérature grecque, IIe-IIIe siècles*, ch. II – "Traditions et innovations. La synthèse irénéenne," 113–4.

⁵¹ By the end of the second century, what comes to be recognized as normative Christianity is defined by an understanding of Christ through engagement with Scripture, rooted in the canon of truth and situated within the framework of Tradition (παράδοσις). See Behr, "The Tradition and Canon of the Gospel According to the Scriptures," 15.

teachings, considered to be products of their imagination.⁵² Saint Irenaeus asks himself: “How could it have been possible for the truth to have remained hidden for so long from the Church, and to have been revealed as a secret doctrine only to a small group of individuals?” In contrast to the doctrine of the heretics, the teaching of the Church is addressed to all men, wise and unwise, without discrimination, and is available to all who seek it with perseverance.⁵³

“The church, having received this preaching and this faith, as we have just said, though dispersed in the whole world, diligently guards them as living in one house,⁵⁴ believes them as having one soul and one heart,⁵⁵ and consistently preaches, teaches, and hands them down as having one mouth. For if the languages in the world are dissimilar, the power of the Tradition is one and the same.”⁵⁶

“Thus the tradition of the apostles, manifest in the whole world, is present in every Church to be perceived by all who wish to see the truth.”⁵⁷

According to Saint Irenaeus, the Church has been entrusted with “the gift of God” (*Ecclesiae creditum est Dei munus*),⁵⁸ and communion with Christ was established in the Church (*et in eo deposita est communicatio Christi*), “i.e., the Holy Spirit – the earnest of incorruption,⁵⁹ and confirmation of our faith,⁶⁰ and the ladder whereby to ascend to God.⁶¹ For in Church, it is said, God hath set Apostles, Prophets, Teachers,⁶² and all the other working of the Spirit: whereof

⁵² Irenaeus criticizes Gnostic exegesis for distorting the Scriptures by treating revelation as ever-evolving. He maintains that revelation is complete, and that Scripture must be interpreted according to the unchanging Tradition. This contrasts with the Gnostics’ view of revelation as incomplete and open to continuous interpretation. Irenaeus emphasizes that the authority of the Scriptures must align with the Church’s rule of faith to preserve the truth. On heresy and exegesis in Irenaeus, see Le Boulluec, *La notion d’hérésie dans la littérature grecque, IIe-IIIe siècles*, 215–53.

⁵³ See Rus, “Introduction,” 38–9.

⁵⁴ See Ps 68:6.

⁵⁵ See Acts 4:32.

⁵⁶ *Adversus haereses*, 1.10.2 [Irénee de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies*. 1,2: *Texte et traduction*, ed. Adelin Rousseau și Louis Doutreleau, Réimpr., Sources chrétiennes 264 (Paris: Cerf, 2008), 158]: *Hanc praedicationem cum acceperit et hanc fidem, quemadmodum praediximus, Ecclesia, et quidem in universum mundum disseminate, diligenter custodit quasi unam domum inhabitans, et similiter credit his uidelicet quasi unam animam habens et unum cor, et consonanter haec praedicat et docet et tradit quasi unum possidens os. Nam etsi in mundo loquelae dissimiles sunt, sed tamen uirtus traditionis una et eadem est* (Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 1997, 54).

⁵⁷ *Adversus haereses* 3.3.1 (Irénee de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies*. 3,2), 30: *Traditionem itaque apostolorum in toto mundo manifestatam in omni Ecclesia adest perspicere omnibus qui uera uelint uidere* (Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 94).

⁵⁸ Jn 4:10.

⁵⁹ See Eph 1:14; 2 Cor 1:22.

⁶⁰ See Col 2:7.

⁶¹ See Gen 28:12.

⁶² 1 Cor 12:28.

none are partakers, who run not unto the Church; rather they defraud themselves of life, by their evil views and intolerable doings.”⁶³

By interpreting the “ladder of ascent to God” (*scala ascensionis ad Deum*)⁶⁴ through “apostles, prophets, and teachers,” the Bishop of Lyons connects the acquisition of the Holy Spirit⁶⁵ (and thus our adoption by God the Father through the incarnate Son) to the hierarchy of the Church. He explicitly signals the start of outlining the distinction between the Great Church and the alternative model proposed by the Gnostic groups, who viewed the hierarchy of the Church as a betrayal of the true testimony of Christ.⁶⁶ Through this identification, the conclusion becomes obvious: *Vbi enim Ecclesia, ibi et Spiritus Dei; et ubi Spiritus Dei, illic Ecclesia et omnis gratia: Spiritus autem Veritas*⁶⁷ – “Οπου γὰρ ἡ ἐκκλησία, ἐκεῖ καὶ Πνεῦμα Θεοῦ· καὶ ὅπου Πνεῦμα Θεοῦ, ἐκεῖ ἐκκλησία καὶ πᾶν χάρισμα. τὸ δὲ Πνεῦμα ἀλήθεια – “Where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God, and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church and all grace; and the Spirit is truth.”⁶⁸

The light of God⁶⁹ does not shine for heretics, because they have dishonored and despised Him: “that it is He who is the only true God. They, however, dream of a non-existent deity above Him, so that they will be regarded as having discovered the ‘great God,’ whom no one can know, who does not communicate with the human race, who does not direct the affairs

⁶³ *Adversus haereses* 3.24.1 (Irénée de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies*. 3,2), 472–4: *id est Spiritus sanctus, arrha incorruptelae et confirmatio fidei nostrae et scala ascensionis ad Deum*. In *Ecclesia enim, inquit, posuit Deus apostolos, prophetas, doctores, et uniuersam reliquam operationem Spiritus, cuius non sunt participes omnes qui non concurrunt ad Ecclesiam, sed semetipsos fraudant a uita per sententiam malam et operationem pessimam* (Keble, *Five Books of St. Irenaeus Bishop of Lyons: Against Heresies with the Fragments that Remain of His Other Works*, 303.)

⁶⁴ Irenaeus integrates into his work a discussion on the Church’s role in humanity’s spiritual growth, referring to it as the “ladder of ascent to God” (*scala ascensionis ad Deum*) (*Adversus haereses* 3.24.1). However, the Church as Paradise is not an escape from the present world. Those who enter remain within it while growing spiritually, becoming more able to participate in God through the unique and superior nourishment it provides. See, in this regard, Christopher A. Graham, “Irenaeus’s Church: Paradise in This World,” in *The Church as Paradise and the Way Therein: Early Christian Appropriation of Genesis 3:22–24*, by Christopher A. Graham, *The Bible in Ancient Christianity*, vol. 12 (Leiden Boston (Mass.): Brill, 2017), 109–35.

⁶⁵ On the theology of the Holy Spirit in St. Irenaeus, see Anthony Briggman, *Irenaeus of Lyons and the Theology of the Holy Spirit*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁶⁶ See Petru Molodet, “Introduction,” in *Împotriva ereziilor [Against Heresies]. Cartea a III-a [Book III]*, de Sf. Irineu de Lyon, vol. Cartea a III-a [Book III] (Bucharest: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 2018), 42–4.

⁶⁷ See 1 John 5:6.

⁶⁸ *Adversus haereses* 3.24.1 (Irénée de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies*. 3,2), 474, 476; Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 1997, 107.

⁶⁹ *Adversus Haereses*, 4.20.2 [Irénée de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies*. 4,1: *Introduction, notes justificatives, tables*, ed. Adelin Rousseau și colab., Réimpr., Sources chrétiennes 100 (Paris: Cerf, 2008), 630]: *et ut in carnem Domini nostri occurrat paterna lux, et a carne ejus rutila veniat in nos, et sic homo deveniat in incorruptelam, circumdatus paterno lumine* – “The paternal light shone forth in the flesh of our Lord and then, radiant from his flesh, came among us and thus mankind reached imperishability, enveloped by the paternal light.” (Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 1997, 51.)

of earth. In other words, they have discovered the god of Epicurus, who does nothing for himself or for anyone else, a god without providence.”⁷⁰

Saint Irenaeus emphasizes that the essence of the revealed message is simple and consistent: it speaks of one God⁷¹ and one Christ, the Son of God. This message finds its confirmation, first and foremost, in the texts of the Old Testament and then in those of the New Testament. The change brought about by the New Testament is not the presentation of a God that is different or superior to the one in the Old Testament, but the revelation of the Son of God who became incarnate for the salvation of humanity. The Incarnate Word is the very Son of the Creator of heaven and earth. Therefore, the novelty lies in how God unfolds His plan for salvation and deification⁷² of the human race.⁷³

⁷⁰ St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus haereses*, 3.24.2 [Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Scandal of the Incarnation: Irenaeus against the Heresies*, trad. John Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 38–9].

⁷¹ Irenaeus emphasizes that true faith consists of belief in one God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth and the seas, in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God who became incarnate for our salvation, and in the Holy Spirit. He further highlights the key events of Christ’s life, including His birth from a virgin, His passion, His resurrection from the dead, and His bodily ascension into heaven. This is the faith universally upheld by all genuine believers throughout the world. In contrast, Irenaeus charges that those who follow Valentinus contradict each other. As he points out, “everyone of them claims to reveal something new every day” (See *Adversus Haereses* 1.18.1) about the creation. Their purpose in all of this is to “draw people away from faith in one God.” See Elaine Pagels, “Irenaeus, the ‘Canon of Truth,’ and the ‘Gospel of John’: ‘Making a Difference’ through Hermeneutics and Ritual,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 56, no. 4 (2002): 339–71 (here, 351–2).

⁷² Irenaeus’ soteriology incorporates deification language to highlight both the inter-personal and intra-personal aspects of salvation. He connects the term “gods” to central soteriological concepts, emphasizing both the means and effects of salvation. In his polemical context, Irenaeus differentiates his view from Gnosticism, which maintains a genetic link between humans and the divine. Despite this, he embraces deification language, using the term “gods” for both God and humans, elevating humanity while preserving the distinction between Creator and created. Irenaeus focuses on key aspects such as incorruption (1 Cor 15:53-54; 2 Cor 5:4), adoption (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:4-6), and union with God through Christ’s exchange (Gal 4:4-6). Believers are seen as adopted sons and gods through Christ’s redemptive work, which not only establishes a relational connection but also associates deification with incorruption. The presence of the Spirit and the proleptic experience of life before physical resurrection enable believers to be called “gods” in the present. Deification is thus the restoration of the image and likeness of God through an ongoing relationship with Him, marked by incorruption and spiritual maturity. On this topic, see Ben C. Blackwell, *Christosis: Pauline Soteriology in Light of Deification in Irenaeus and Cyril of Alexandria*, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament* 314 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 35–70.

⁷³ See *Adversus Haereses* 1.10.1 (Irénée de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies*. 1,2, 2008, 154, 156): *Ecclesia enim per uniuersum orbem usque ad fines terrae seminata, et ab apostolis et discipulis eorum accepit eam fidem quae est in unum Deum Patrem omnipotentem, qui fecit caelum et terram et mare et omnia quae in eis sunt, et in unum Christum Iesum Filium Dei, incarnatum pro nostra salute, et in Spiritum Sanctum, qui per prophetas praedicauit dispositiones Dei et aduentum et eam quae est ex Virgine generationem et passionem et resurrectionem a mortuis et in carne in caelos ascensionem dilecti Iesu Christi Domini nostril et de caelis in gloria Patris aduentum eius ad recapitulanda universa et resuscitandam omnem carnem*

One of the fundamental reasons for the elaboration of the entire work *Against Heresies* is, as the Bishop of Lyons informs us in the preface to the first book, the perfidy of the Valentinians,⁷⁴ who, through a convincing discourse, “mislead the minds of the most ignorant.”⁷⁵ This accusation of the cunning and perfidy of heretics becomes a veritable leitmotif in the heresiological discourse, starting with *Adversus haereses*. Incorporated into a well-articulated argumentation technique, this accusation proves devastating for the survival of the Gnostic sects and will, over the centuries, frequently have adverse effects in the history of the Church. This rhetorical strategy was also the main reason why the work of the bishop of Lyons was often discredited, with its author being called on more than one occasion “the hunter of heretics.”⁷⁶

Saint Irenaeus insists that the danger of Valentinian hermeneutics lies in the fact that the truth seems to be reserved exclusively for the knowledge of an elite. The Bishop of Lyons perspicaciously identifies the risk that if the truth is monopolized by just a few individuals, it becomes subjective, and its foundation wobbles under the illusion of “revelation” for anyone who claims to have been its recipient: “so that the Truth by their account may well enough be now in Valentinus, now again in Marcion, now in Cerinthus: afterwards again it was in Basilides, or again in such another who is arguing against us.”⁷⁷ Moreover, truth is no longer objectively based on “what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked upon, and what our hands have handled concerning the Word of life”⁷⁸ – therefore on the public

humani generis... – “The Church, indeed, though disseminated throughout the world, even to the ends of the earth, received from the apostles and their disciples the faith in one God the Father Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth and the seas and all things that are in them; and in the one Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was enfleshed for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who through the prophets preached the Economies, the coming, the birth from a Virgin, the passion, the resurrection from the dead, and the bodily ascension into heaven of the beloved Son, Christ Jesus our Lord, and His coming from heaven in the glory of the Father to recapitulate all things, and to raise up all flesh of the whole human race...” (Saint Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, *Against the Heresies*, 48–9). See Molodet, “Introduction,” 14–6.

⁷⁴ The Valentinians envisioned their soteriological goal in a Pauline manner, as a resurrection in a spiritual body. However, for them, resurrection did not imply the raising of dead bodies to face judgment on the last day. In fact, the concept of resurrection appears rarely in Valentinian texts, and when it does, it is usually reinterpreted as *apokatastasis* (restoration). For a detailed discussion, see Einar Thomassen, “Valentinian Ideas About Salvation as Transformation,” in *Metamorphoses: Resurrection, Body and Transformative Practices in Early Christianity*, by Turid Karlsen Seim and Jorunn Økland, Ekstasis, Vol. 1 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 169–86.

⁷⁵ 1 Pt 1.

⁷⁶ See, for instance, Bart D. Ehrman, *The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot: A New Look at Betrayer and Betrayed* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006).

⁷⁷ St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus haereses* 3.2.1 (Irénée de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies*. 3,2), 26: *...ut digne secundum eos sit ueritas aliquando quidem in Valentino, aliquando autem in Marcione, aliquando in Cerintho, postea deinde in Basilide fuit aut et in illo qui contra disputat...* (Keble, *Five Books of St. Irenaeus Bishop of Lyons: Against Heresies with the Fragments that Remain of His Other Works*, 205).

⁷⁸ 1 Jn 1:1.

activity of the incarnate Son of God –, but it becomes a subjective interpretation, impossible to prove except through one's own confessions.⁷⁹

The certainty of the true Tradition is based on the indissoluble bond between the Apostles and the bishops, and the testimony of this certainty is manifested in the unified preaching of Christian teaching throughout the world, in consensus, by all the apostolic Churches.⁸⁰ The Church, as the sole treasury of divine truth, serves as the only worthy guarantor of man's salvation.⁸¹ Only the sacrifices, prayers, and works of the Church are holy,⁸² for the faith of the Church is the only true and saving faith⁸³ (in this context, by faith we mean – the teaching and sacramental practice of the Church as a whole),⁸⁴ and the authentic Christian is the one who conforms to the institutions and norms of the Church.⁸⁵

⁷⁹ See Molodet, "Introduction," 22–3.

⁸⁰ See St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus haereses* 3.3.3 (Irénee de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies*. 3,2, 2017, 38: *Et est plenissima haec ostensios, unam et eandem uiuificatricem fidem esse quae in Ecclesia ab apostolis usque nunc sit conseruate et tradita in ueritate* – "This is a complete proof that the life-giving faith is one and the same, preserved and transmitted in truth in the church from the apostles up till now" (Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 1997, 125).

⁸¹ See St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus haereses* 5.20.2 (Irénee de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies*. 5,2, 256 sq.).

⁸² See St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus haereses* 2.32.5 [Irénee de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies*. 2,2: *Texte et traduction*, ed. Adelin Rousseau and Louis Doutreleau, Sources chrétiennes 294 (Paris: Cerf, 2006), 342].

⁸³ See St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus haereses* 3, Preface (Irénee de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies*. 3,2, 2017, 18): *sola uera et uiuifica fide, quam ab apostolis Ecclesia perceptit et distribuit filiis suis* – "the only true and life-giving faith, which the church received from the apostles and transmitted to its children" (Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 1997, 123).

⁸⁴ Although dispersed throughout the world, the Church ultimately exists in the Spirit: "Where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God, and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church" (Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus haereses* 3.24.1). This understanding clarifies questions regarding the Church's visibility, its connection to the baptized gathered around the sacraments, and the shortcomings of both individuals and local communities. Called by God to holiness, believers enter into this reality through conversion and repentance, becoming the body of Christ by the grace of the Spirit. "The Church is holy, not by the virtues of the individual believers, but by receiving the holy mysteries, through the hands of sinful believers." See, in this regard, John Behr, "The Trinitarian Being of the Church," *St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (2004): 67–88 (here, 83).

⁸⁵ St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus haereses* 5.20.1 (Irénee de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies*. 5,2, 254): *...omnibus unum et eundem Deum Patrem recipientibus, et eandem dispositionem incarnationis Filii Dei credentibus, et eandem donationem Spiritus scientibus, et eandem meditantibus praecepta, et eandem figuram ejus quae est erga Ecclesiam ordinationis custodientibus, et eundem exspectantibus adventum Domini, et eandem salutem totius hominis, hoc est animae et corporis, sustinentibus* – "...all receive one and the same God the Father and believe in the same economy of the incarnation of God's Son, and all acknowledge the same gift of the Spirit and practice the same commandments. All safeguard the same structure resulting from order in the Church. All await the same coming of the Lord, and all hold the same salvation of the entire man, namely, of soul and body." Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies: Books 4 and 5*, trans. Dominic J. Unger and Scott D. Moringiello, 1. Auflage, Ancient Christian Writers, no. 72 (New York Mahwah, NJ: The Newman Press, 2024). See *Adversus haereses* 3.15.2 (Irénee de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies*. 3,2, 2017, 278 sq.).

The “gift of teaching” allows bishops, according to Saint Irenaeus, “to discern false traditions, corruptions, and heresies.”⁸⁶ This is because the bishops were invested by the Holy Apostles with the responsibility of guarding the Church in every place. The teaching ministry, inseparable from the episcopate, does not constitute “a personal privilege of infallibility, but a function to be fulfilled within the Church and for the Church, because only the Church, considered as a whole, was seen as the guardian of the apostolic faith.”⁸⁷

Conclusion

The attitude that Saint Irenaeus adopts towards those who preach a doctrine other than that of the Church is extremely explicit. He does not acknowledge any access to divine truth outside the Tradition of the Church, which is the sole custodian of revealed divine truth and, therefore, the only authentic teacher of this truth. This is due to the bond that exists between the Holy Spirit and the Church. For St. Irenaeus, the Holy Spirit is the *scala ascensionis ad Deum* in which all believers partake. However, the Church’s guidance by the Holy Spirit is mediated through the Apostles, prophets, and teachers. All who wish to be guided by the Spirit must come to the Church.

Thus, the message of Saint Irenaeus of Lyons holds universal significance and resonates across the ages, continuing into the present day as a steadfast call to defend and affirm the essence of the Christian Orthodox faith.

⁸⁶ See John Meyendorff, “Theological Education in the Patristic and Byzantine Eras and Its Lessons for Today,” *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (1987): 197–213.

⁸⁷ See IPS Teofan The Metropolitan of Moldavia and Bukovina, “Facultatea de Teologie în misiunea Bisericii [The Faculty of Theology in the Mission of the Church],” *Teologie și Viață* 25, no. 9–12 (2015): 5–46 (here, 25–6).