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St Justin, the Martyr and Philosopher

by Chris Baghos

On the 1st of June, we commemorate our Father among the saints, Justin, the Martyr and Philosopher. As his honorific titles suggest, Justin's defence of Orthodoxy was as fearless as it was brilliant. Drawing on his literary-rhetorical and philosophical training, this saint of tremendous importance gave his life in systematically refuting insults and rumours against the Church on the part of both pagans and Jews; callous assertions that were causing numerous atrocities against the faithful. Subsequently, he was instrumental in defining the medieval Christian attitude towards Classical culture.

Justin was born in Flavia Neapolis, Palestine (modern-day Nablus), during the late-first or early-second century, and very likely descended from Greco-Roman colonists judging from the names of his father and grandfather (Priscus and Bacchius, respectively). The Church Father probably proceeded through the Classical education system typical of Late Antiquity, which consisted in the analysis and memorisation of major poetical, historical, and oratorical works, including the literary figures and tropes featured therein.¹ He was certainly a seeker of wisdom prior to his adoption of Christianity, having earnestly attempted to become a Stoic, a Peripatetic, a Pythagorean, and a Platonist. Interestingly, Justin revealed that only his Platonist teacher offered him any knowledge of God and intelligible realities; the Stoic having considered such information unnecessary, the Peripatetic having been more concerned with payment, and the Pythagorean having demanded that he first learn music, astronomy, and geometry.²

Justin's conversion to Christianity occurred when he met a mysterious sage during one of his habitual meditative walks near the sea. In short, the mystic convinced Justin that he had fallen into grave contradictions with respect to his understanding of the human soul and its relation to God. When Justin realised that his cherished Platonists had failed to apprehend such realities, he asked the old man which teacher or method he ought to follow. The sage directed

¹ St Justin Martyr, *Ἰουστίνου ἀπολογία ὑπὲρ Χριστιανῶν πρὸς Ἀντωνίνον τὸν Εὐσεβῆ* [i.e. *First Apology*] 1.1 in *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr: Apologies*, ed. and trans. Denis Minns and Paul Parvis (Oxford University Press, 2009) 80-81 (hereafter referred to as *IA*); Thomas B. Falls, 'Foreword' to St Justin Martyr, *The First Apology, The Second Apology, Dialogue with Trypho, Exhortation to the Greeks, Discourse to the Greeks, The Monarchy or The Rule of God*, The Fathers of the Church 6 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1965) 9; Minns and Parvis, 'Introduction' to *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr* 32; L. W. Barnard, *Justin Martyr: His Life and Thought* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967) 5; Robert J. Penella, 'The Progymnasmata in Imperial Greek Education' *Classical World* 105:1 (2011) 77; J. N. D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom – Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995) 6; Chrysostomus Baur, *John Chrysostom and His Time*, vol. 1: *Antioch*, trans. M. Gonzaga (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1959) 10-11; John A. L. Lee, 'Why Didn't St Basil Write in New Testament Greek?' *Phronema* 25 (2010) 10.

² St Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 2.3-6, trans. Thomas B. Falls and Thomas P. Halton, ed. Michael Slusser, *Selections from the Fathers of the Church* 3 (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003) 5-7. Hereafter referred to as *Dial.*

him to the Old Testament Prophets, specifically their noble manner of life, their writings, and their miracles; how they exalted God the Father through such means and, just as importantly, made the Son known to humankind.³

Andrew Hofer convincingly argued that the Church Father implied in his account of this event that the old mystic was, in fact, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, albeit mystically concealed. This is because there are at least fifteen parallels between Justin's description of his encounter with the mysterious figure and that of Cleopas and his companion with the Godman on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-35). These include (among other things): initial feigned ignorance on the part of the teacher intended to expose the false thinking of their listener/s; the former's mysterious appearance and vanishing; and an interpretation of the Old Testament leading to illumination, warmth in the heart, and a desire to proclaim the Gospel. Moreover, the mystic can be taken as the 'Ancient of Days' referred to in the Scriptures, traditionally identified as the Lord Jesus by the Church (Dan 7:9-10, 13-14, 22; Rev 1).⁴

Having encountered Christ face to face, Justin immediately devoted the remainder of his life to the defence and dissemination of the Gospel. This is evidenced by his surviving works, particularly his first and second *Apologies*. These texts are not admissions of error or guilt as the term 'apology' typically suggests today. They are instead sophisticated justifications of the Christian faith and rituals for which countless were being persecuted throughout Late Antiquity, especially during the reign of Marcus Aurelius.⁵ Of relevance to our discussion is the Church Father's articulation of the *logos spermatikos* doctrine. Appealing to the complementary understanding of reason (λόγος) featured in the Stoic, Middle Platonist, and Johannine traditions – let us recall the opening passage of the *Gospel of St John* – Justin described how Christ (ὁ Λόγος τοῦ Θεοῦ) is the rational principle that gives order and meaning to the entire creation. He therefore proclaimed that whichever pagans had lived virtuously and arrived at accurate perceptions of reality – including the famous philosophers, Socrates and Heraclitus, as well as the lesser known Gaius Musonius Rufus – were ultimately indebted to Christ, Who implants the gift of reason within every human being.⁶ According to the apologist,

³ *Dial.* 3-8.2 (Falls and Halton 7-15).

⁴ Andrew Hofer, 'The Old Man as Christ in Justin's "Dialogue with Trypho"' *Vigiliae Christianae* 57.1 (2003) 1-21.

⁵ Chris Baghos, 'The Apologetic and Literary Value of the *Acts of Justin*' *Phronema* 34:1 (2019) 46-48; Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, The Penguin History of the Church 1 (London: Penguin Group) 28-29. Justin addressed his *Apologies* to Marcus Aurelius and the similarly intolerant ruler, Antoninus Pius. See *IA* 1.1 (Minns and Parvis 80); Minns and Parvis, 'Introduction' to *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr* 36-37.

⁶ *IA* 5.4, 46.2-4 (Minns and Parvis 90-91, 200-1); St Justin Martyr, [*Pars Secunda*] τοῦ αὐτοῦ ἁγίου Ἰουστίνου φιλοσόφου καὶ μάρτυρος ἀπολογία ὑπὲρ Χριστιανῶν πρὸς τὴν Ῥωμαίων σύγκλητον A [i.e. *Second Apology*] 7(8).1, 7.3, 10.8, 13.3, 13.5 in *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr* 296-299, 312-13, 320-21 (hereafter referred to as 2A). See also: Minns and Parvis, 'Introduction' to *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr* 61, 65-66; Mario Baghos, 'Hellenistic Globalisation and the Metanarrative of the Logos' in *Thinking Diversely: Hellenism and the Challenge of Globalisation*, A Special Edition of *Modern Greek Studies, Australia and New Zealand: A Journal for Greek Letters*, ed. Elizabeth Kefallinos (Dec. 2012) 31; Barnard, *Justin Martyr* 89; Basil N. Tatakis, *Christian Philosophy in the Patristic and Byzantine Tradition*, trans. George Dion Dragas (Rollinsford, NH: Orthodox Research Institute, 2007) 29.

this gift has moral implications, its proper use resulting in a lifestyle consistent with that of the Logos Incarnate.⁷

It is significant that Justin did not repudiate his Greco-Roman heritage, choosing instead to appropriate various aspects of different philosophical traditions for the purposes of catechetical instruction and conversion. To draw and convince crowds in Palestine and Rome (and possibly Ephesus), the Church Father preserved not only the philosophical vocabulary that both he and they had inherited but even the customary cloak typically worn by the Hellenic seekers of wisdom – at least until he was arrested, tried, and executed in Rome with his disciples for refusing to offer sacrifices to the pagan gods.⁸

The saint's mission did not instantly lead to a fusion between Christianity and Greco-Roman culture. It took another century and a half before St Constantine the Great granted state protection to the Church.⁹ Nonetheless, his attitude was generally adopted by the faithful throughout the Greek East and Latin West, which likewise preserved his memory through the continued publication of his works, as well as in martyr acts, treatises, and the hymns of his feast day.¹⁰ We are greatly indebted to Justin for his wise and nuanced approach, which helped justify the use of Greek philosophical concepts and terms for all later Church Fathers, especially in their development of Orthodox Christology and cosmology. Justin's lasting influence on the Greek Orthodox Church in particular – mediated through Byzantium – can be discerned today at the Holy Monastery of Great Meteoron located in Central Greece. Above the monastery's entrance doors there is an icon of the Lord, from Whom proceeds a vine that ties together the Prophets. Flanking the doors on either side are Justin and St Paul the Apostle accompanied by ancient Greek poets, philosophers, and historians. These include Homer, Thucydides, Aristotle and Plato, in addition to Solon, Pythagoras, and Socrates. Each of the ancient figures carries a scroll featuring a passage from their works that points to Christ's Incarnation and ministry.

There is much we can learn from Justin, and it is incumbent on us to both explore his writings and celebrate his feast day. What the Church Father undoubtedly expects from us is that we do not bury the unique talents that we have received from Christ (Mt 25:14-30; Lk 19:12-27), whether these be of a practical or contemplative nature. We must preach the Gospel

⁷ IA 46.4 (Minns and Parvis 200-1); 2A 7(8).1-2 (Minns and Parvis 296-99).

⁸ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.18.6 in *Ecclesiastical History, Volume I: Books 1-5*, trans. Kirsopp Lake, Loeb Classical Library 153 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926) 370-71; *Dial.* 1.2 (Falls and Halton 3). See also Minns and Parvis, 'Introduction' to *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr* 32-33; Barnard, *Justin Martyr* 12-13; Thomas P. Halton, trans., 'Introduction to This Edition' of *Dial.* xii. Three recensions of Justin's martyr act have been transmitted to us, the latest of which dates from the early-fifth century. See Herbert Musurillo, ed., 'Introduction' to *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972) xvii-xx. For a thorough assessment of the most authentic versions and their theological and cultural significance, see Baghos, 'The Apologetic and Literary Value of the *Acts of Justin*' 25-54.

⁹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 10.1-4 in *Ecclesiastical History, Volume II: Books 6-10*, trans. J. E. L. Oulton, Loeb Classical Library 265 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932) 391-97.

¹⁰ *A Calendar of Orthodox Saints and Feast Days*, ed. Joseph Irvin, Orthodox Service Books 9 (Fr. Joseph Irvin, 2019), Kindle edition, location 3808; St Jerome of Stridon, *On Illustrious Men* 23, trans. Thomas P. Halton, *Fathers of the Church* 100 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1955) 43-46.

using whatever gifts the Lord has bestowed on us while displaying compassion towards all, even our enemies. In this secular age – where Christians are generally being persecuted, intellectually if not physically – we are often called to bear witness at the expense of our respective reputations. So long as we remember to pray to Justin and similar intercessors, we will surely find the strength to act accordingly. Furthermore, bearing in mind the great saint's behaviour in his wider society and his written teachings, we must not be afraid of those aspects of secular culture that are compatible with the Gospel – Christ is indeed the source of everything rational and noble in this world. It is therefore essential for us to seek common ground with unbelievers for the sake of mission, whether this be in relation to art and culture or the hard sciences. We certainly have a wonderful intercessor before Christ who will assist us in this undertaking, having dwelt in a world remarkably similar to our own and experienced many of the same challenges.