

FR. CAMURATI'S CORNER

October 17, 2021

A rare event took place last week. Only 37 times in the Church's history, the Pope has declared a saint to be a Doctor of the Church. What does that mean?

No, we're not talking medicine...har har har (If I get the title "Father", I get to tell "Dad Jokes"). Rather, Doctor here refers to teaching, as it does for terms like doctrine and doctorate. The three standard components of what kind of saints make "good doctors" are eminent learning, a high degree of sanctity, and proclamation by the Church.

The first shouldn't be too surprising. Good teachers have to be good learners, and the Doctors of the Church have been so profoundly instructed as to be able to teach others.

The second, sanctity, might be a bit more surprising. But the gift of wisdom flows from our charity. The spirit of Wisdom and the spirit of Love arise from the same source—Holy Spirit. And so those who would instruct are best instructed when they have come to love as they have been loved. In the words of a modern theologian, theology has to be done "on one's knees". It is more a gift that flows from prayer than from cold reckoning.

And lastly, the rare instance of Ecclesial approbation. There are many learned saints, but only a few are so influential as to build up and illumine the Church in a special way as to merit the recognition and title.

Saint Irenaeus, the soon-to-be declared Doctor, is certainly an example of all of these. And yet, it wasn't easy to get to this point. The previous pope, Benedict XVI, tried to investigate whether it would be expedient to do so. There were two "obstacles", if you can call them such, that prevented him from going through with it. One is that St. Irenaeus is a martyr, and martyrs outrank doctors in the Church's estimation. Think back to "that whole love thing" I talked about above. Secondly, Saint Irenaeus is an exceedingly ancient witness. He studied at the feet of St. Polycarp, who himself studied at the feet of St. John. He was a bishop and teacher in the middle of the second century with a direct link back to apostolic teaching—and he wasn't afraid to say so at a time when many "Christians" were making up teaching on the fly with their own ideas. Many of these Christians had about as much connection with Christ's teaching as the watches you can buy on Canal Street have with Rolex. And yet, some have hesitated to affirm him a doctor because of just how ancient his teaching was.

But this is precisely why Pope Francis has taken this step that is almost universally well regarded (a rare thing to accomplish in the Church these days!). St. Irenaeus is one of the primary witnesses for the reliability and historicity of the Catholic Faith, to the point that many Protestants who read him and recognize the Catholicism he taught so soon after the time of Christ do the logical thing and become Catholics themselves. Thus, he is eminent in teaching. He was willing to defend that teaching to the point of shedding his blood for love of the truth—that is sanctity simply put. And he has been a constant source for historians and theologians, a constant reference for apologists and catechists, and a constant witness for Catholics and Orthodox. And this is why Pope Francis has taken the extraordinary but fitting step of declaring the first martyr to rank among the doctors. May he continue to pray for us as a saint of God, but may he instruct as a Doctor to understand the full sweep, splendour, antiquity, and veracity of the Apostolic Faith we profess each week.

Fr. Leo