WILLIAM A. JURGENS’S *THE FAITH OF THE EARLY FATHERS*

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Most people are not familiar with William A. Jurgens’s 3-volume work, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*. It is a compendium of excerpts from Christian writers (and heretics) from the Apostolic Fathers (c. ad 96-160) to John of Damascus (†ad 636). (Jurgens calls these writers “*Early* Fathers” because, for him as for many patristic scholars, the “Church Fathers” extend into the middle ages.)

Logos.com says of Jurgens:

William A. Jurgens (1928-1982) was an American Roman Catholic priest and historian. In 1956, Jurgens began studies in Rome at the Pontifical Music Institute, while simultaneously earning a doctorate in ecclesiastical history from Gregorian University. Almost immediately thereafter, he joined St. Mary Seminary faculty in Cleveland, and later, taught at Borromeo Seminary [presumably the one in Philadelphia], in chant and liturgical music. He would go on to serve as diocesan director of sacred music in Cleveland. In 1977, he was appointed by Bishop James Hickey of Cleveland as the diocesan research historian, commissioned to compile a history of the diocese. The first volume of *A History of the Diocese of Cleveland*: *The Prehistory of the Diocese to its Establishment in 1847* was barely finished before he passed away, and volume two was left in draft form.

Of Jurgens’s masterpiece, Logos.com says:

Providing a wide array of early church writings translated into English, *Faith of the Early Fathers* offers excerpts of critical theological developments in the first seven centuries of Christian history. From Clement of Rome and Polycarp to Augustine and Basil, and from Chrysostom to Ambrose and Jerome, these volumes track the formation of Christian doctrine—both the orthodox and the heretical.

The passages are keyed to the numerical order established in M.J. Rouët de Journel’s *Enchiridion Patristicum*. But these volumes are not just a translation of that standard work. William A. Jurgens has investigated and selected the most frequently cited patristic passages, including much that is in Rouët’s volume and much that is not. All passages have been freshly and accurately translated from the best critical editions.

Each selection is prefaced with a brief introduction addressing authorship, time and place of composition, and its purpose. Each volume is thoroughly and critically indexed by doctrine, Scripture, and general terms.

*The Faith of the Early Fathers* allows you to trace the development of doctrines—any doctrine. You do that by means of Jurgen’s “Doctrinal Index.”

Let’s say you want to know what the Church teaches about angels. If you go to the “Doctrinal Index,” you find these propositions:

“There exist angels created by God.”

“In regard to the time of the creation of the angels.”

“The angels possess by nature a certain excellence.”

“In regard to the spiritual nature of the angels.”

“Angels are not everywhere.”

“Although angels excel in knowledge they do not know the secrets of men’s hearts, nor do they know future events.”

“The angels were created free.”

“Angels are able to converse among themselves.”

“The angels are divided into various ranks or choirs.”

“The angels are elevated to the supernatural order.”

“Many angels, having attained eternal blessedness, are already confirmed in goodness.”

“Many angels, having fallen into grave sin, have hastened to eternal damnation.”

“The good angels are ministers of God and assist men in the business of working out their salvation.”

“There are guardian angels assigned to individuals, nations, societies, etc.”

“The devil and the other wicked angels are able to harm men.”

After each proposition is a list of passages from the Church Fathers concerning it. For example: what did the Church Fathers say about guardian angels? After the next-to-last proposition in the list above (“There are guardian angels assigned to individuals, nations, societies, etc.”), the “Doctrinal Index” lists these passages: “89, 430, 475, 895, 940, 1022, 1387, 2156, 2160, 2161, 2354.” If you look up passage 89, you find a quotation from *The Shepherd of Hermas* (c. ad 150), which says: “And the Son appointed the angels to guard over them [people] . . .” Quotation 430 is from Clement of Alexandria’s *Miscellanies* (*Stromateis*, c. ad 202-15): “For regiments of angels are distributed over nations and cities; and perhaps some even are assigned to particular individuals.” And so on. You can track the development of the doctrine of guardian angels through the Church Fathers. (But not to “Angel of God, my guardian dear”!)

The “Doctrinal Index” lists 1046 propositions that the Church Fathers taught, covering all of systematic theology. Each has its list of patristic passages, and each number in each list takes you to a quotation in the three volumes of Jurgens’s work.

Jurgens’s *The Faith of the Early Fathers* is an essential reference in any theologian’s library.