

Readings: 2 Timothy 2: 22 – 26; Psalm 36 (37):3 – 6,31,32; John 17: 20 – 26.

Irenaeus was born about AD 125 in Asia Minor (today part of Turkey). As a boy he knew Polycarp (23rd February), who was bishop of Smyrna (Izmir), and a disciple of John the Evangelist (27th December). So, Irenaeus provides a link between the original apostles and the Greek-speaking Church in the East and the second century, Latin-speaking, Church in the West.

Irenaeus was a highly educated man, having studied in Rome under Justin Martyr (1st June). He was one of the early missionaries to Gaul, and by AD 177 had become a priest and a senior member of the household of Pothinus (2nd June), the first bishop of Lyons, which was the chief city of the province and a great trading centre. Irenaeus was sent to Rome with a letter for the Pope, asking for his help for Christians in a part of Asia Minor. The letter describes Irenaeus as a priest “filled with zeal for the testament of Christ”, and a lover of peace (his name comes from the Greek word *irene* meaning ‘peace’).

By the time of this journey the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire was increasing, and the Church in Lyons and its region was a target for violence. Several of the clergy were in prison, and soon the ninety-year-old Bishop Pothinus and many others were martyred.

When Irenaeus returned to Lyons he was consecrated as successor to Pothinus, and set about restoring the life of the Church. In addition to his pastoral work, he made a great contribution to the development of theology. His principal work, *Against Heresies*, is a defence of the apostolic teaching and the fourfold witness of the Gospels against heretical teachings known as Gnosticism. What these heresies had in common was belief in a secret knowledge (*Gnosis* in Greek), hidden from ordinary Christians and known only to an inner circle of members.

Against these secret teachings Irenaeus set out the Christian view of the Trinity: *The Father is above all, and he is the head of Christ, but the Word is through all things, and he is himself the head of the Church, while the Spirit is in us all.* He lays emphasis on God’s care, not merely for those who have secret knowledge, but for all, and on the real human nature of Christ, by which Christians are enabled to share in the life of God. Irenaeus died about AD 202 and was buried in Lyons. His shrine was destroyed by Calvinists in 1562, during the French wars of religion.