



JEROME 347 – 420

St. Jerome begins the great line of scholars from the fathers of the Early Church to the Jesuit preachers of the Counter Reformation. He is considered one of the four Western Doctors (with Augustine, Ambrose and Gregory the Great) of the universal church. Certainly a man of letters, probably the most learned man of his age, he was also a monk. He began his studies in grammar and rhetoric in Rome at the age of twelve and was baptized there at age nineteen. After two years of living an ascetic life in northeastern Italy under Bishop Valerian, he traveled through Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey, ending up in Antioch. Shortly after, he began a two-year retreat in the desert; there he wrote of a dream in which he was accused of being a "Ciceronian, not a Christian," meaning that his studies had concentrated on Latin classical authors and on the beauty of fine rhetorical style. He subsequently began to study Hebrew and to perfect his knowledge of Greek, skills crucial to his work as a Biblical scholar. His authoritative translations of the Old and New Testaments became the definitive Latin text known as the Vulgate. He works in a variety of centers of learning, including Antioch and Constantinople, and, upon returning to Rome, became secretary to Pope Damasus I.

Jerome also became spiritual director for a group of noble Roman women, notably St. Paula, a wealthy widow. After the death of Damasus, Paula and her companions followed Jerome to Palestine and traveled to the monastic communities in the Egyptian desert before finally settling in Bethlehem. There Paula built a double monastery, that is, a single administrative unit with separate facilities for men and women, not an unusual structure in the Early Church. It was there that Jerome died. During his final fifteen years Jerome concentrated his efforts on producing exhaustive commentaries on the four major prophets, Daniel, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The Council of Trent referred to Jerome as *Doctor Maximus in sacris scripturis* (the greatest teacher for explanation of the Sacred Scriptures).

Jerome is revered in popular tradition as much for being a desert recluse and ascetic as for his prodigious learning. In the window, Jerome, in cardinal's robes, holds a church in his hands, representing his importance for the foundations of Catholic

teaching. The same image of a church appears in the lunette above his head. Although the dignity of cardinal was unknown in Jerome's time, the Renaissance admiration for classical learning and linguistic skills argued for his being given this honor retrospectively.

Countless works of Renaissance sculpture, painting and stained glass show Jerome in cardinals' robes with a lion at his feet. The lion is but one of many stories of his temptations and miracles. The *Golden Legend's* account explains that a lion once entered the monastery where Jerome was staying. The other monks fled but Jerome went forward to greet the animal. Finding him wounded by thorns in his paw, he



removed the thorns and bathed the wounds, bidding the monks to care for the beast. Thereafter the lion remained at the monastery as docile as a pet, demonstrating so great a conversion from his natural ferocity as to guard the monastery's ass when the animal went out to pasture. In the window the great lion seated at Jerome's feet places his paw on a large book. To show the penitential side of Jerome, the window includes at the left a small image of the saint scourging himself before a crucifix. In the borders are images of the scourge and lion. The narrative panel at the base of the window depicts Jerome writing in a cave. Before him is a crucifix bathed in light and behind him is an angel. Here it is obvious that the image is meant to convey a hand being guided by angelic supervision, thus establishing the authority of his commentaries and translations.

