**Faith of Our Fathers**

**History of Hymn**

Frederick William Faber (1814-1863), composer of the hymn “Faith of our Fathers,” was born in Yorkshire, England. Raised as a strict Calvinist by his Huguenot parents, Faber reflects his initial choice to adhere to his parents' staunch beliefs in the numerous anti-Catholic tracts he wrote while studying at Oxford University. After his ordination by the Church of England he served so loyally at his assigned post that “he is credited with effecting 'a moral revolution.'”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Nevertheless, the Oxford Movement that pervaded the Anglican Church from 1833-1850 strongly influenced Faber. While the Wesleys had preached a gospel so simple even common unlearned men could understand and believe, many, more sophisticated leaders of the Oxford Movement taught “that a meaningful religious experience could only be gained through better liturgical and ceremonial church services.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Thus, in 1845, largely as a result of his association with and admiration of his friend, John Henry Newman, Faber turned away from his Huguenot background and joined the Roman Catholic Church. This step included joining an Oratory formed by Newman patterned after the order first “established in 1564 Rome by St Philip Neri.” These communities were all named Oratories because this group of “secular priests (not monks)” structured their lives around prayer . . .”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Since “the great Palestrina had been choirmaster in the mother Oratory in Rome under St. Philip himself and had made it the chief center of sacred music[,]” Faber's love for music fit well with the purposes of the established community.[[4]](#footnote-4) Remembering the tremendous impact of Protestant hymns written by Newton, Cowper, and the Wesleys on him personally in his youth, and concerned about the lack of good hymns that taught Catholic history and doctrine, Faber committed himself to amending the situation. Thus, before his death, Faber penned 150 hymns, intentionally corresponding with the number of Psalms.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Johnson reports that “few hymnists have been more often quoted than F. W. Faber.” Even though some critics have “described the language of his hymns as too extravagant, incongruous, sentimental, and obscure in meaning, they praise Faber's vivid imagination.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Sources disagree as to whether or not Faber wrote all his hymns after joining the Catholic Church, yet, we do know with certainty that he penned the words to the hymn “Faith of our Fathers” after changing his allegiance. His purpose in composing “Faith of our Fathers” was to focus on and honor Catholics, not Protestants, who had suffered for their faith. Nevertheless, throughout the centuries Christians everywhere and of various denominations have honored the memory of those who tenaciously held onto their beliefs even in the face of torture and death. Thus, many Protestants omit one of Faber's original stanzas and alter other phrases to fit their doctrine and then include this hymn in their worship. The awareness of present day persecution and ongoing martyrdom inspires Christians to remember the faithfulness of past martyrs.

Henri Hemy of England, a well known Catholic composer and organist, “compiled many books on sacred music.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Faber used a tune of Hemy's, entitled “St. Catherine's Tune,” for the words to “Faith of Our Fathers.” This melody “was originally composed for a Catholic hymn entitled, “'St. Catherine, Virgin and Martyr.'” When James G. Walton chose to include Faber's hymn in a collection he was compiling in the 1870s he added the final refrain “Faith of our fathers, holy faith, we will be true to Thee till death.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

**Literary Structure**

* Meter: 88.88.88
* Poetic feet: Iambic
* Rhyme scheme: abcbde
* Poetic devices and figures of speech:
  + - Alliteration:
      * The often repeated “**F**aith of our **f**athers”
* Anaphora:
  + Stanzas one and three as well as the refrain after each stanza begins with “Faith of our fathers”
* Paradox
  + “Faith of our fathers! living still in spite of dungeon, fire, and sword”
  + “Our fathers chained in prisons dark, were still in heart and conscience free.”
* Personification:
  + Faith is depicted as a person
    - “We will be true to thee till death.”
    - “How sweet would be their children's fate if they like them could die for thee”
    - “And preach thee too as love knows how”

**Thought Content**

St. Philip Neri, resident of Rome and founder of the Oratories, lived in the era of Henry VIII who cut ties with the Roman Catholic Church, established the Church of England with himself as the head, and proceeded to “butcher[ing] the Carthusian martyrs in England . . . St. Philip died in 1595 when Queen Elizabeth and her government, by bitter and ruthless persecution, were completing that severance [between the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England.]”[[9]](#footnote-9) Faber in reflecting on the persecutions against the Catholic Fathers in England, honored the memory of those martyrs with the words to this hymn. He wanted “to remind Catholic congregations of their many leaders who were martyred during the reign of Henry VIII in the early days of the establishment of the Anglican Church in Great Britain.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

But English Protestants only dimly remember that segment of history. Instead they recall with clarity the persecutions of Catholic Bloody Mary, against the Protestants. In close by France, Protestants think back to Catherine de Medici and Louis XIV's treatment of the Huguenots[[11]](#footnote-11) while Anabaptists remember the persecutions of their forefathers at the hands of both Catholics and Protestants. Although these varying memories distinguish the different denominations, many Christians throughout the world remembering their common roots sing, “Faith of our father! Living still in spite of dungeon, fire, and sword” and think of the martyrs spoken of in Hebrews 11 or the persecutions the Romans inflicted on the Early Christians.

In this hymn Faber celebrates the fact that torture and death cannot weaken or kill faith itself. He says persecution fails to silence man's joyful connection to his faithful forefathers and fails in its endeavor to enslave the hearts of its victims. The end of the second stanza speaks of the sweetness of martyrdom. Although hard for us to imagine today, history records that many, believing such a death brought greater heavenly rewards, did indeed desire to die as martyrs and actively sought persecution. One of Faber's heroes, the renowned St. Philip mentioned above, desired to die for his faith, but was refused the opportunity to actively pursue it.[[12]](#footnote-12) The final stanza speaks of loving our enemies and preaching the living faith using both the avenue of words and holy living, a concept supported by many Scripture references. The Church Hymnal quotes Jude 3, “Earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints” as an underlying base for the focus of this hymn.

**Musical Characteristics**

* Melodic movement: The movement is mostly step by step with one significant jump in the third score
* Meter: 3/4
* Form: ABCBDE

**Evaluative Questions**

So much is packed behind these simple yet beautiful words; the hymn begs explanation of historical background. Even a sketchy understanding of the various persecutions throughout the ages that continue to draw Christians of many lands and denominations to love this hymn greatly enhances the depth and richness of the words. However, the ideas of torture and persecution need to be presented carefully to young children. A teacher's sensitive narration coupled with constant eye contact greatly reduces potential fear. The wise adult will select with care not only spoken words, but also visuals incorporated in the narration.

Young students with little knowledge of world history and more of Biblical history, would benefit from the instructor beginning with already familiar stories of people such as King David, Stephen, and Paul as examples of people persecuted for righteousness' sake. A good picture book on the Roman Colosseum would open the door to talking about the persecutions of early Christians. The Living History Project Strands 3-4 offers a very good section on this.

If possible, the teacher should present a brief introduction of the Anabaptist origins, the formation of the Church of England and consequent Catholic persecutions, followed by English Protestant persecution, and the later Huguenot persecutions. Doing this over a period of several days—only one per day—along with the use of a world map and a time line would combine rich history lessons with the learning of this hymn while significantly broadening the singers' potential appreciation and worship experience.

Words and phrases that need explanation include:

* **dungeon**: a dark prison, usually underground
* **whene'er**: whenever
* **were still in heart and conscience free**: this concept, rather similar to the idea of crying for joy present a difficulty for children. Talking about doing a disliked job, such as washing dishes, while nursing angry and resentful feelings inside versus doing it happily and singing with your siblings gives a picture to young minds of how prisoners could still be free inside. The freedom in conscience they could easily relate to it's opposite: the guilt/fear felt when having done something wrong.
* **fate**: what happens to a person in the end
* **foe**: enemy
* **strife**: trouble
* **virtuous**: godly

The range of the tune is more within reach of young voices than many hymns. With the exception of three notes on the D line, no notes go higher than C. While the repetitive refrain and simple words make this a hymn children and adults alike can easily memorize, understanding the historical background invites them all to sing this hymn with either a new or a renewed awareness that indeed “death is swallowed up in victory”[[13]](#footnote-13)

Bibliography

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1. Guye Johnson, Treasury of Great Hymns (Grenville: Bob Jones University Press 1986). 284. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Kenneth W .Osbeck, 101 Hymn Stories. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1982). 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Albert Edward Bailey, The Gospel in Hymns. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950.) 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bailey, 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Osbeck, 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Johnson, 285. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Johnson, 286. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Osbeck, 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Bailey, 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Osbeck, 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Bailey, 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Bailey, 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I Corinthians 15.54 King James Version [↑](#footnote-ref-13)