Foreword

There is no positive usage of the term *mythos* in the New Testament. The first followers of Jesus were clearly mistrustful about the use of stories and characters that were not grounded in historical realities of God's chosen people. The New Testament authors thus came to contrast pernicious *mythos* with life-giving *logos* or *aletheia*, the truth which alone could set one free (cf. 1 Tim 4:4–7; 2 Tim 4:4; Tit 1:14; 2 Pet 1:16). Centuries later, we still hear Origen warn his readers that only those who seek truth above all are given the grace to flee from myth and its many entanglements (cf. *Contra Celsum* 8.66). Bishop Augustine even went so far as to draw from his own experience as a student in pagan schools to caution against the use of Roman myth. These stories deform the passions of the young (cf. *Confessions* 1.16.25), and prove to be nothing more than machinations of the fallen demons who try to allure the unsuspecting with fanciful tales and elaborate word play (cf. *City of God* 18.13). The lines had become clearly set: the Christian Church proclaimed one narrative, a life-giving account of the power of Jesus, and the pagans had their stories, moribund tales of deceit and destruction.

As Noël Pretila sets out to show in the following pages, however, envisioning the early Christians' understanding of myth in this way now seems overly-facile and misleading. While such binary accounts, a clear "us" versus "them," may make teaching the history of ideas a bit easier, it is rarely without serious scholarly shortcomings. For against this standard explanation of the use of myth in late antiquity, Pretila places Justin, the second century philosopher from Flavia Neopolis.

A hybrid between the pagan learning he acquired throughout his youth and the Christianity he later came to embrace, Justin saw in the governing stories of Hellenism, powerful apologetic possibilities. With great scholarly delicacy and an appreciation for the Greek nuance, Pretila deftly slices between Justin's synchronic incorporation and exclusion of non-Christian myth. Pretila thus shows exactly how and where Justin uses these

"marvellous fables" of Athens as an invitation for others to see the universal and timeless power of Christ to attract through stories that catch the human heart's desire for new life and beatitude. But then Dr. Pretila just as skillfully shows where Justin distances himself from Hellenic epics, arguing how demons use such fables to win innocent seekers over to their own prideful malevolence. As such, Pretila's great contribution is to show us modern readers how a second century Christian philosopher espied in the cultural milieu of his day the exact struggle which marks the church's very life in any culture—namely, how to encounter the divine in the world without ever being subsumed into the world.

With an intellect more spacious than any maltreatment or attack against him and his Church, Justin could write during the height of persecution that anyone who lived in accord with logos was already a Christian. This was true of Heraclitus, true of Socrates. In his subversive reading of Greek culture, Justin thereby appropriated all truth for Jesus Christ, arguing that the stories upon which Graeco-Roman culture had been built, can be read as refractions of the one and only true God. As Pretila deftly shows, Justin detects hints of the paschal mystery in the Greek poets' stories of death and resurrection. Like a skilled Greek wrestler, Justin uses the very literary moves which might otherwise cause harm against the faith in service of the faith, twisting and turning, reinterpreting and rereading, all traces of truth as instances of Christ's universal power.

Yet in this world-friendly approach to pre-Christian culture, Justin is as equally insistent (if not more so) that myth can also be a very powerful tool of Christ's enemies. Pretila therefore shows why a majority of the *First Apology* (§30–53) is dedicated to weaning the Greeks off their own poets and epics and inviting them to see in Moses and Prophets the true precursors to God's incarnation in this world. Here is the new chosen race, the Jewish people to whom God first comes. Pretila illumines this move by showing how Justin employs the same typological reading to both Hellenic as well as Hebraic literature: while Moses and the Prophets may be more trustworthy than the poets of Athens, in varying degrees and with varying levels of insight, all authors of truth are in some way serving Christ by preparing his way. In such a welcomed reading of Justin, Pretila carefully shows the means by which Justin judges some non-Christian stories worthy of appropriation and why others must be shunned as too insidious to entertain. In this diverse use of myth, Pretila is also able to answer questions of Justin's intent, audience, and pedagogy.

Justin Martyr inaugurated a glorious legacy of Christian apologetic. He did this neither by naively believing his culture's defining stories, nor by simply shunning them outright (as his disciple Tatian would do). Instead,

Justin simultaneously displays a prudence which weaves what it can for Christ, as well as a courage which forbids what is dangerous into his church's story. As such, the pages that follow collect and commemorate beautifully the opening chapter of Christian philosophy and the church's post- apostolic engagement with culture.

Fr. David Vincent Meconi, S.J.