

St. Ignatius of Antioch



Martyrdom of St. Ignatius, drawing after a 9th century Greek manuscript

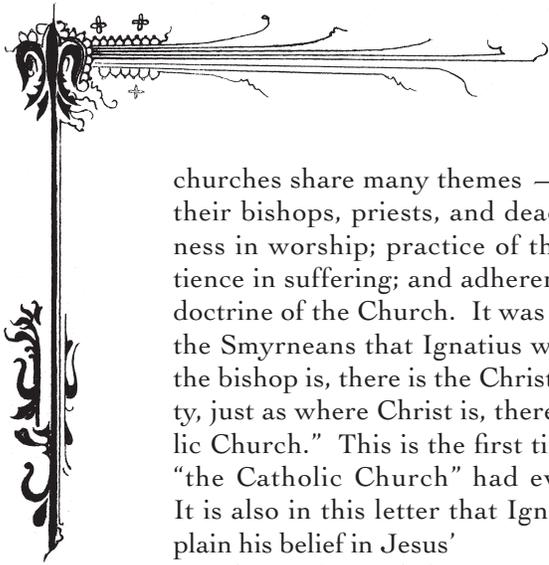
BORN 50; DIED ABOUT 107
BISHOP AND MARTYR
FEAST DAY: OCTOBER 17

THERE IS A CHARMING TRADITION (which of course cannot be verified) that St. Ignatius of Antioch was the child that Jesus placed in the midst of the apostles when they were arguing about who was greater. Jesus said to all of them: *“Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven”* (Mt 18:3-4).

Ignatius was born perhaps in Syria and was probably a disciple of the Apostle John. He became the second or third bishop of Antioch, Syria (modern Antakya near the southeastern coast of Turkey), the same city in which Christians had first been called by that name, serving as bishop for some forty years. Under the Roman emperor Trajan, he was condemned to death for failing to worship the gods to whom Trajan attributed great military victories.

Ignatius was taken under military guard from Antioch to Rome to carry out the sentence. In the usual way, the journey was not a direct voyage to Rome but done by means of coast-hopping and was therefore not short, with numerous stops. Wherever these occurred, he was met by the local Christian community for his blessing. He also took two opportunities, at Smyrna and Troas, to write a total of seven letters that are among the most treasured of early Christian documents. Five of the letters, addressed to the communities of Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Philadelphia, and Smyrna, were written in his episcopal capacity and have a strongly pastoral character. The sixth was written to his disciple St. Polycarp, and the seventh to the Christian community of Rome. This has a markedly different tone since he is not writing so much as a bishop but to ask their prayers and beg them not to interfere with his martyrdom. He died for the entertainment of the Roman population in one of the city's public arenas, devoured by lions.

The letters Ignatius wrote to the various



churches share many themes — obedience to their bishops, priests, and deacons; faithfulness in worship; practice of the virtues; patience in suffering; and adherence to the true doctrine of the Church. It was in his letter to the Smyrneans that Ignatius wrote: “Where the bishop is, there is the Christian community, just as where Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.” This is the first time the phrase “the Catholic Church” had ever appeared. It is also in this letter that Ignatius makes it plain his belief in Jesus’ true humanity and the Eucharist as his true body. To the Philadelphians, he wrote: “Use one Eucharist; for the flesh of the Lord Jesus Christ is one and the cup is one, to unite us all in his blood. There is one altar, as there is one bishop, together with the body of the priesthood and the deacons my fellow servants, that whatever you do, you may do according to God.”

Ignatius, in his long journey to Rome, very likely feared his death even while he welcomed the opportunity to be a martyr. He asked the Trallians to pray for him so that he would not fail the test that awaited him, and the Romans to pray that he may be given the grace to not only be called but be found a Christian. In a passage in his Roman letter, he asked them: “Suffer me

to be the food of wild beasts through whom I may attain unto God. I am God’s grain and I am to be ground by the teeth of wild beasts that I may be found the pure bread of Christ.”

It is not possible to read the seven letters of Ignatius without realizing that the Church had already taken the same organizational structure it has today, and that what Catholics believe today is what Ignatius believed then. In his letters are the doctrines of the Trinity, of both the divinity and humanity of Jesus, of his birth from a virgin, and of his true, not symbolic, presence in the Eucharist, calling the Eucharist “the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, which flesh suffered for our sins.” And while no one can ever know if Ignatius was that child singled out by

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Christ, he taught humility and gentleness, encouraging the Ephesians among others to “in all purity and sobriety abide in Christ Jesus in flesh and in spirit.” This wonderful man speaks to Christians from a distance of nearly nineteen hundred years — and his voice is the voice of Christ’s Church today. The faith of Ignatius is the faith of the apostles, the faith that has been handed down from the beginning to the present day. The witness of Ignatius is the witness of all the martyrs, desiring to die rather than deny their Lord.

