

St. Irenaeus of Lyons

Plate V



Ancient fresco of two bishops who lived about fifty years after St. Irenaeus

BORN BETWEEN 120 AND 140; DIED 202 OR 203

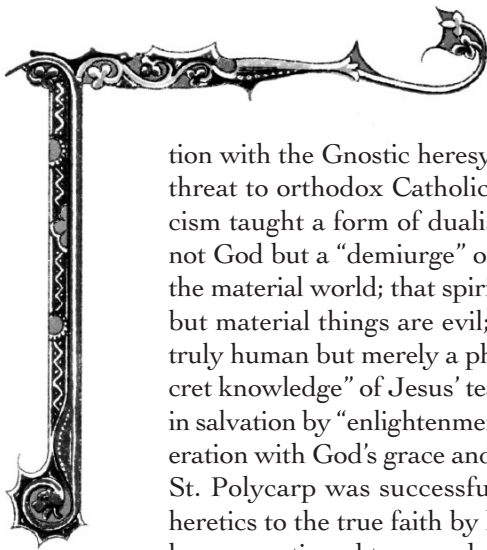
BISHOP

FEAST DAY: JUNE 28

AS THE APOSTLES DIED — all but St. John were martyred — the provisions they had made for the spreading of the Gospel and its faithful, inerrant transmission came into being. In the book of Acts, the apostles chose St. Matthias to replace the traitor apostle Judas. St. Paul named as bishops Sts. Timothy and Titus, those who became the successors of the apostles and are entrusted with safeguarding and teaching what they themselves had received. St. Irenaeus was also an early bishop.

Irenaeus' connection to the time of the apostles was very close. He was probably born in Smyrna (modern Izmir in far western Turkey) and was a disciple of St. Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, a disciple of St. Ignatius of Antioch. St. Ignatius was in turn a disciple of St. John the Apostle. St. Polycarp had himself heard St. John preach, so that Irenaeus could hear the words of St. John directly from his mentor's lips.

Shortly before his death in 155, St. Polycarp went to Rome, and Irenaeus followed him. There Irenaeus not only met the Pope and the famous St. Justin Martyr, a lay philosopher who had explained the faith to the Roman emperor Antoninus, but he observed St. Polycarp's confronta-



tion with the Gnostic heresy, the first significant threat to orthodox Catholic teaching. (Gnosticism taught a form of dualism, in this case that not God but a “demiurge” or angels had created the material world; that spiritual things are good but material things are evil; that Jesus was not truly human but merely a phantom; claimed “secret knowledge” of Jesus’ teaching; and believed in salvation by “enlightenment,” not by our cooperation with God’s grace and action in our lives.) St. Polycarp was successful in restoring many heretics to the true faith by his teaching, but the heresy continued to spread.

From Rome, Irenaeus journeyed to southern Gaul (modern France) and was ordained a priest in Lyons, a major trading center and the largest city in Gaul which had numerous connections with Irenaeus’ original home territory. In 177, a dreadful persecution of Christians began in Lyons under the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius. In the midst of the horrors that were occurring daily, Irenaeus was sent by the leaders of the Lyonnaise church to Rome to intercede with the Pope for leniency toward certain heretics in the churches in Asia Minor. Irenaeus was thus spared the martyrdom undergone by his bishop and many citizens of Lyons and its sister city Vienne across the river. He returned to Lyons the following year to succeed his martyred bishop, the persecution by then having ended.

Irenaeus’ own tenure as bishop was largely peaceful. Although Lyons was itself still mission territory, he worked vigorously to evangelize Gaul, sending out missionaries to bring the faith to the native Celts. He learned Celtic, the everyday language of the region, and normally spoke that language rather than his own native tongue, Greek, so that he might truly be the shepherd of his people.

Irenaeus is best known for his writings against various heresies then spreading through Gaul and elsewhere in the Roman Empire, most notably the multi-volume treatise he wrote against Gnosticism in all its many variations, *Adversus haereses* (*Against Heresies*). It was the first systematic

presentation of Catholic doctrine, and Irenaeus is thus considered the first great Catholic theologian. He taught that closeness to God through charity is better than any amount of knowledge and gifts that are used badly. He also taught fidelity to the constant, public teaching of the bishops from the time of the apostles until his own time, both that recorded in Sacred Scripture and that handed down in Sacred Tradition. His treatise was so successful that Gnosticism faded as a threat to true Catholic doctrine.

Irenaeus lived up to the meaning of his name (which means “peaceful”) by again, in about 190, mediating another problem between the Pope and Christian communities in Asia Minor over when Easter would be celebrated. He begged the Pope to let the matter remain as it was, since the date used by these commu-

nities was part of their own tradition, a solution that allowed a peaceful, voluntary submission to the Roman method of determining the date of Easter one hundred thirty-five years later at the Council of Ephesus. Yet Irenaeus faithfully accepted the supreme authority of the Church in Rome; he merely

asked the Pope for moderation in its exercise in this particular instance.

Irenaeus is thought to have been martyred, perhaps in 202 under the persecution of the emperor Septimus Severus, but the evidence is not certain. His contributions to the universal Church lie principally in his great works of theology. He is a true heir of the apostles, faithfully transmitting what St. John himself experienced: *“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life — the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us — that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you”* (1 Jn 1:1-3). As in the time of Irenaeus, so today the truths of the faith continue to be carefully guarded and transmitted by the bishops in communion with the Pope, the Bishop of Rome.

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