

2.2 *Fathers of the East and West*

Writings of St. Ignatius

PATRISTICS

Who was St. Ignatius?

St. Ignatius was known as a friend of St. Polycarp and, along with him, were disciples of St. John the Beloved. He traveled with St. John and the Apostles consecrated him bishop for Antioch. He nicknamed himself Theophorus “the God-bearing”. When Trajan asked him about his faith and ordered he be taken to Rome to be thrown to wild beasts in the Colosseum.

St. Ignatius, a revered figure in early Christianity, served as the Bishop of Antioch from around 70 AD until his martyrdom in 107 AD. His life unfolded during the reign of Emperor Trajan, a time marked by both challenges and opportunities for the Christian faith.

According to the church traditions, Ignatius is believed to be the young boy mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 18, verses 2-5. “Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, and said, “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:2-5). In this passage, Jesus calls a little child to Him, emphasizing the importance of childlike humility and faith for entering the kingdom of heaven. If Ignatius was indeed this young boy, his early encounter with Jesus evidently significantly shaped his spiritual journey.

St. Ignatius was known for his close friendship with St. Polycarp, and together they were disciples of St. John the Beloved, one of the apostles of Jesus Christ. St. Ignatius traveled alongside St. John, and it was under the apostles' guidance that he was consecrated as the Bishop of Antioch. During his time as Bishop, Ignatius earned the nickname "Theophorus," meaning "the God-bearer." This title reflected his profound devotion to God and his unwavering commitment to spreading the Christian message. He believed that carrying God within his heart and soul was the greatest privilege and responsibility.

En Route to Rome, for Martyrdom

St. Ignatius's life was not without trials. When Emperor Trajan questioned him about his faith, Ignatius remained steadfast in his beliefs. As a result, Trajan ordered that Ignatius be taken to Rome, where he would face a cruel fate. He was sentenced to be thrown to wild beasts in the Colosseum, a gruesome spectacle intended to intimidate and deter Christians from their faith.

Christians, at the time, were not killed because they practiced Christianity, they were martyred because they refused to also practice Roman religion. While practicing Christianity alone was not the sole reason for their persecution, the primary factor was their steadfast resistance to incorporating Roman religious rituals into their beliefs and practices.

During the 1st and 2nd centuries, persecutions were generally localized and sporadic, occurring in specific regions or cities. However, several factors contributed to increased persecution during particularly stressful times. One of the primary reasons for this escalation was jealousy and resentment from neighbors and local communities. Christians were often seen as outsiders who challenged traditional beliefs and practices, leading to social tensions and conflicts. During times of political instability, economic hardship, or natural disasters, the Roman authorities and populace often viewed Christians as scapegoats for the Empire's problems. This scapegoating mentality led to intensified persecutions, with Christians being blamed for various societal ills and misfortunes.

In ancient Rome, blood sports were a popular form of entertainment. Gladiators, the sports stars of their time, played a crucial role in these events. The criminal and slave trade significantly influenced the success of circuses, providing a steady stream of participants for the bloody spectacles. The Colosseum, an iconic amphitheater of the Roman world, could accommodate up to 60,000 spectators. In contrast, the Circus Maximus, a vast chariot racing venue, had a capacity of 250,000. A typical day at these venues would start with animal fights in the morning, followed by the execution of criminals during lunch. The highlight of the day came in the afternoon, where gladiators engaged in intense combat, captivating the audience with their skills and bravery.

Despite the impending danger, St. Ignatius embraced his martyrdom with courage and grace. He viewed it as an opportunity to glorify God and demonstrate the unwavering strength of Christian faith. As he traveled to Rome under the guard of Roman soldiers, Ignatius met Christians along the way and wrote 7 Epistles: To the Ephesians, Magnesians, Trallians, Romans, Philadelphians, Smyrnaeans

and to St. Polycarp. The letters to various churches and individuals, expressed his love, encouragement, and wisdom. These letters, known as the Ignatian Epistles, have become treasured spiritual texts, offering insights into early Christian theology and spirituality. Eusebius, a historian of the early church, wrote on St. Ignatius as one who proclaimed to hold on to the traditions of the church. Remember, he was martyred in 107 AD!

"The Report says that he [Ignatius] was sent from Syria to Rome, and became food for wild beasts on account of his testimony to Christ. And as he made the journey through Asia under the strictest military surveillance" (he *called* the guards "ten leopards" in his Letter to the Romans, 5: 1), "he fortified the parishes in the various cities where he stopped by homilies and exhortations, and warned them above all to be especially on their guard against the heresies that were then beginning to prevail, and **exhorted them to hold fast to the tradition of the Apostles**".

St. Ignatius's unwavering faith and heroic death in the Colosseum left an enduring legacy. He became a symbol of Christian perseverance in the face of persecution, inspiring countless believers throughout history. His writings continue to be studied and cherished, providing valuable guidance and inspiration to those seeking a deeper understanding of the Christian faith.

Importance of Antioch

Antioch, a city of great significance in the history of Christianity, holds a unique distinction as one of the only cities to have been evangelized by both Saint Peter and Saint Paul. It was here, in the bustling streets and vibrant markets, that the followers of Jesus Christ, then known as "the Way," were first referred to as "Christians." This momentous event is recorded in the book of Acts in the New Testament (Acts 11:26).

Antioch's Christian heritage is deeply rooted in the presence of Saint Peter, who served as its first bishop. Saint Peter, one of the most prominent apostles of Jesus, played a pivotal role in the establishment and growth of the early Church. His leadership and teachings in Antioch helped shape the beliefs and practices of the fledgling Christian community.

Following Rome and Alexandria, Antioch emerged as a significant and influential center of Christianity during the 2nd through 4th centuries. With a bustling port and a diverse population, Antioch became a melting pot of cultures and ideas. Christian scholars, philosophers, and theologians gathered in Antioch, engaging in lively dialogues and discussions that contributed to the theological development of Christianity.

Today, Antioch, known as Antakya in modern-day Turkey, continues to hold its place as a significant site of Christian pilgrimage and historical exploration. The city's rich tapestry of Christian history, from the footsteps of Saint Peter and Saint Paul to the emergence of the term "Christian," serves as a reminder of the enduring legacy of the early Church and its profound impact on the shaping of Christianity.

Goal of His Epistles

St. Ignatius of Antioch addressed several key issues in his writings. These issues shed light on the challenges and concerns facing the early church, and provide valuable insights into the development of Christian thought and practice.

Martyrdom

St. Ignatius placed a high value on martyrdom and saw it as the ultimate act of faith and love for Christ. In his letters to various churches, he encouraged believers to embrace martyrdom if necessary, emphasizing that it was a way of imitating Christ's sacrifice and achieving eternal glory. St. Ignatius himself was martyred in Rome around 107 AD, and his writings reflect his readiness to face death for the sake of his faith.

Early Heresies

St. Ignatius confronted several heretical teachings that threatened the unity and purity of the early church. Among them were Docetism and Judaizers. Docetism, a Gnostic heresy, denied the physical reality of Jesus's incarnation, claiming that he only appeared to be human. He refuted this heresy, asserting that Christ genuinely suffered, died, and rose from the dead in a physical body.

Judaizers, on the other hand, insisted on the necessity of observing Jewish laws and rituals for salvation. Ignatius argued against Judaizers, who did not accept the authority of the New Testament, emphasizing that salvation came through faith in Christ alone and that the Mosaic Law had been fulfilled in him.

Church Structures

St. Ignatius played a crucial role in shaping the structure and organization of the early church. His letters reveal his emphasis on episcopal authority and the importance of a hierarchical structure. He believed that each church should be led by a bishop,

assisted by presbyters (elders) and deacons. Ignatius stressed the need for unity and obedience within the church and urged believers to submit to their leaders. He also emphasized the significance of the Eucharist as a central act of worship and a symbol of the unity of the church.

With unwavering conviction, St. Ignatius affirmed that the New Testament represented the completion of the Old Testament and emphasized the genuine humanity of Christ. He viewed Christ's Passion, death, and Resurrection as pivotal events ensuring "eternal life" in the resurrected Christ. If Christ's death was merely an illusion, St. Ignatius held that his own suffering and willingness to sacrifice his life for Christ would be rendered meaningless.

These key issues in St. Ignatius's writings provide a valuable glimpse into the challenges and triumphs of the early church. His focus on martyrdom, his opposition to heresies, and his contributions to church structures helped shape the development of Christianity and continue to influence Christian thought and practice today.

Importance of Structure and Hierarchy

According to St. Ignatius of Antioch, a prominent early church father, the bishop holds a crucial role within the church. He represents to his local community the one true bishop, Christ himself. This representation extends beyond mere symbolism; it signifies a profound spiritual connection. Union with the bishop, both in terms of belief and worship, symbolizes union with Christ.

St. Ignatius firmly believed that those who break away from the bishop in a spirit of pride and arrogance sever this sacred union. He viewed such actions as a detrimental disruption of the church's unity. For St. Ignatius, the unity of the church, with its hierarchical structure, was not merely a practical arrangement but a concrete manifestation of the future life in Christ, which would be fully realized in heaven.

While St. Ignatius acknowledged the importance of authority within the church, his primary focus was not on institutional discipline. Instead, he emphasized the spiritual significance of the bishop's role as a representative of Christ and the importance of unity among believers. He believed that by aligning themselves with the bishop and participating in the church's worship, individuals

could deepen their connection with Christ and experience a foretaste of the heavenly kingdom on earth.

"It is fitting that you should concur with the will of your Bishop, which you also do. For your justly renowned presbytery, worthy of God, is fitted as exactly to the Bishop as the strings are to the harp. Therefore, in your concord and harmonious love, Jesus Christ is sung. And man by man, you become a choir, that being harmonious in love and taking up the song of God in unison you may with one voice sing to the Father..." – St. Ignatius's epistle to the Ephesians (Ephesus 4:1-2).

St. Ignatius placed great emphasis on the significance of unity within the church, drawing parallels between the Triune nature of God and the oneness of the Christian community. He believed that God's essence is unity, and that true unity can only be found in God. His teachings on unity were rooted in his understanding of the Trinity. He believed that God exists as three distinct persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—yet these three persons are inseparably united in one God. This unity of the Trinity, he argued, is a model for the unity that should exist within the church. "Be one, one supplication, one mind, one hope in love.... Therefore, all run together as into one temple of God, as to one altar, as to one Jesus Christ who came forth from one Father, and is with and has gone to one" – Epistle to the Magnesians (7: 1-2).

Seeing the church as a reflection of the Trinity, with Jesus Christ as the head and the members of the church as his body, he believed that unity within the church is essential for the church to fulfill its mission of proclaiming the gospel and bringing people to salvation. When the church is united, it can more effectively witness to the love of God and the reconciling power of the cross. "Let no man do anything connected with Church without the Bishop" (to the church of Smyrna)

St. Ignatius' emphasis on unity extended beyond the local church. He believed that all Christian communities should be united in faith and love, regardless of their geographic location or cultural background. For the first time in Christian literature, he employed the expression "catholic church." This term, derived from the Greek word "katholikos," signifying "universal" or "whole," captured the essence of the church as one unified entity. It transcended geographical boundaries, encompassing all Christian congregations worldwide.

According to St. Ignatius, the catholic church was not merely an abstract idea but a tangible reality experienced in the present. He viewed the church's unity, including its structure and organization, as a concrete manifestation of the future life in Christ. For him, the church on earth mirrored the heavenly kingdom, embodying the ultimate goal of unity and harmony among believers.

His writings and teachings laid the foundation for future discussions and developments in ecclesiology, influencing subsequent generations of theologians and church leaders. The idea of the catholic church as a universal and unified entity remains a central tenet of Christian faith and practice to this day.

Martyrdom As Union With Christ

St. Ignatius's intense desire to become a martyr is deeply intertwined with his profound understanding of union with Christ. For Ignatius, being a true disciple of Christ signifies emulating Christ's path of suffering and sacrifice, as expressed in his Passion. He believed that only through sharing in Christ's suffering could one truly imitate him and achieve spiritual perfection.

Throughout his letters, St. Ignatius frequently expressed his sense of imperfection due to not yet having endured the ultimate test of martyrdom. His journey to Rome marked a significant turning point, as he felt he was finally beginning to live as a true disciple. However, he harbored a profound fear that his friends in Rome might intervene and secure a pardon for him, thereby depriving him of the opportunity to achieve perfection through martyrdom.

Ignatius's ardent desire for martyrdom stemmed from his unwavering conviction that only by uniting himself with Christ's Passion could he partake in Christ's ultimate glory. Yet, despite his convictions, he was not immune to human fears. He recognized the possibility that he might falter in the face of death and humbly requested the prayers of the churches to bolster his strength and constancy.

“I write to the Churches, and impress on them all, that I shall willingly die for God, unless you hinder me. I beseech of you not to show an unseasonable good-will towards me. Allow me to become food for the wild beasts, through whose instrumentality it will be granted me to attain to God. I am the wheat of God, and let me be ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ. Rather entice the wild beasts, that they may become my tomb, and may leave nothing of my body; so that when I have fallen asleep [in death], I may be no trouble to any one. Then shall I truly be a disciple of Christ, when the world shall not see so much as my body. Entreat Christ for me, that by these instruments I may be found a sacrifice [to God]. I do not, as Peter and Paul, issue commandments unto you. They were apostles; I am but a condemned man: they were free, while I am, even until now, a servant. But when I suffer, I shall be the

freed-man of Jesus, and shall rise again emancipated in Him. And now, being a prisoner, I learn not to desire anything worldly or vain.” (to the Romans)

St. Ignatius's unwavering commitment to martyrdom serves as a testament to his deep faith and his willingness to follow in the footsteps of Christ. His understanding of union with Christ transcended mere intellectual assent; it manifested itself in his fervent longing to share in Christ's suffering and experience the fullness of his glory. His unwavering pursuit of perfection through martyrdom continues to inspire believers to strive for a deeper relationship with Christ and to embrace the path of self-sacrifice and service.

“For it is not my desire to act towards you as a man-pleaser, but as pleasing God, even as also you please Him. For neither shall I ever have such [another] opportunity of attaining to God; nor will you, if you shall now be silent, ever be entitled to the honor of a better work. For if you are silent concerning me, I shall become God's; but if you show your love to my flesh, I shall again have to run my race. Pray, then, do not seek to confer any greater favor upon me than that I be sacrificed to God while the altar is still prepared; that, being gathered together in love, you may sing praise to the Father, through Christ Jesus, that God has deemed me, the bishop of Syria, worthy to be sent for from the east unto the west. It is good to set from the world unto God, that I may rise again to Him.” (to the Romans)



Review Questions

1. St. Polycarp and St. Ignatius were disciples of St. John the Beloved. True or False? (A: True)
2. What did St. Ignatius nickname himself as? (A: Theophorus “the God-bearing”)
3. Why was St. Ignatius wanting to be martyred? (A: His love of martyrdom ultimately springs from a deep conviction that only by union with Christ's Passion will he participate in Christ's glory.)
4. What were the teachings of the Judaizers? (A: People who did not accept the authority of the New Testament.)
5. What were the teachings of the Docetists? (A: People who held that Christ's sufferings and death were apparent but not real.)

 <i>Books</i>	 <i>Supplementary Material</i>
 <u>St. Ignatius of Antioch: The Epistles</u>	<u>Saint Ignatius of Antioch Biography, Writings, & Martyrdom Britannica</u>
 <u>Bearing God: The Life and Works of St. Ignatius of Antioch the God-Bearer</u>	

