

Saint Ignatius of Antioch

Saint Ignatius of Antioch, also called Ignatius Theophoros (Greek: “God Bearer”) (died c. 110, Rome), bishop of Antioch, Syria, known mainly from seven highly regarded letters that he wrote during a trip to Rome, as a prisoner condemned to be executed for his beliefs. He was apparently eager to counteract the teachings of two groups—the Judaizers, who did not accept the authority of the New Testament, and the Docetists, who held that Christ’s sufferings and death were apparent but not real. The letters have often been cited as a source of knowledge of the Christian church at the beginning of the 2nd century.

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RECORD OF HIS LIFE.

Although St. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, was an influential church leader and theologian, he is known almost entirely from his own writings. There is no record of his life prior to his arrest, but his letters reveal his personality and his impact on the Christianity of his time. Ignatius represented the Christian religion in transition from its Jewish origins to its assimilation in the Greco-Roman world. He laid the foundation for dogmas that would be formulated in succeeding generations. His advocacy of a hierarchical structure of the church with emphasis on episcopal authority, his insistence on the real humanity of Christ, and his ardent desire for martyrdom are subjects that have generated much discussion.

Eusebius of Caesarea, whose *Ecclesiastical History* is the chief primary source for the history of the church up to 324, reported that Ignatius’ arrest and his condemnation to the wild beasts in the Roman arena occurred during the reign of the Roman emperor Trajan (98–117). Eusebius, on unknown grounds, dates the event to 107 or 108. Ignatius’ letters contain the only reliable information about him, but only one of them—that to the church in Rome—is dated (August 24), and even then no year is given.

Ignatius, surnamed Theophoros, was bishop of Antioch at the time of his arrest. Whether he was a native of the city is uncertain; his Greek prose, however, does have an Oriental flavour characteristic of that part of the Hellenistic world. His thought is strongly influenced by the letters of St. Paul and also by the tradition connected with the apostle John. It is possible that he knew John personally.

JOURNEY TO ROME.

Ignatius was taken prisoner during a persecution of the Antioch church; he was put in chains and escorted, along with others, by a unit of soldiers to Troas in northwestern Asia Minor for embarkation to Rome. By that time he must have been a well-known figure among Christians. All along his way delegations of churches, even from places off his route, accompanied him from town to town. For unknown reasons, the journey was interrupted at Smyrna (modern Izmir, Tur.), where he was warmly received by the local Christians and their bishop, Polycarp, who was to become his beloved friend.

There he was also met by representatives—the bishop, some elders, or presbyters, and some deacons—of the nearby churches of Ephesus, Magnesia on the Maeander, and Tralles, who as far as possible looked after his needs. After these delegations left Smyrna, he wrote letters to their respective communities thanking them for their attentions and offering them guidelines for their lives as Christians. At his request the deacon Burrus of Ephesus was allowed to stay with him. Ignatius also wrote to Rome, urging his fellow Christians there not to prevent his martyrdom by intercession on his behalf and commending to their charity Syrian Christians who had arrived there ahead of him.

From Smyrna his journey continued to the district of Troas, where a shorter stay was made pending embarkation. This stopover was not long enough for Ignatius to write to all the churches he wished to address. He did, however, write to the congregations at Philadelphia and Smyrna (these letters were delivered by Burrus, who had accompanied him to Troas) and to Bishop Polycarp, asking him in a personal letter to write to other churches in his name. At Troas he had been joined by the deacons Philo of Cilicia and Agathopus from Syria; they gave him the consoling news that Antioch was again “at peace.” It is not certain whether this meant a lull in the persecution of Christians or perhaps—to judge from Ignatius’ use of the word peace elsewhere—a return of the community to concord after some religious dissension. In his letter to Polycarp, Ignatius asked to have a deacon appointed to bring the people of Antioch the congratulations of the church of Smyrna and to encourage other churches to follow Smyrna’s example. Some time later Polycarp wrote to the church of Philippi in Macedonia for news about Ignatius and his companions, who had recently passed through their city. His death in the Roman arena is recorded by Polycarp’s disciple Irenaeus, who died about 200–203. Documentation ends here; the rest is inference.

THE LETTERS: WARNINGS AGAINST FALSE TEACHINGS.

The letters of Ignatius abound in warnings against false doctrines and false teachers and in admonitions to preserve peace and concord by willing subordination in all religious matters to the clergy and, above all, to the bishop. Nevertheless, he frequently assures his readers that their own church gives no cause for concern and that his words are prompted merely by pastoral solicitude. Only in his letter to the church of Philadelphia does he intimate that at

least some of the community tended to segregate, and, in a passage in the letter to the Smyrnaeans, he seems to imply that there had been dissenters.

Smyrna is the only place along his journey where Ignatius stayed for a sufficiently long time to have firsthand knowledge of the state of their church; he knew of the others from informants, who gave him little grounds for worry. Ignatius' anxiety, perhaps, had its roots in his experiences as a bishop at Antioch. If the peace that returned to Antioch after he left is to be understood as the restoration of concord within the Christian community, then the church of Antioch might have been divided on the very same issues about which Ignatius writes to the other churches.

Ignatius apparently fought two groups of heretics: (1) Judaizers, who did not accept the authority of the New Testament and clung to such Jewish practices as observing the Sabbath, and (2) Docetists (from the Greek *dokein*, "to seem"), who held that Christ had suffered and died only in appearance. Ignatius untiringly affirmed that the New Testament was the fulfillment of the Old Testament and insisted upon the reality of Christ's human nature. For him, Christ's Passion, death, and Resurrection were a vital guarantee of "life everlasting" in the risen Christ. Ignatius believed that, had Christ died only in appearance, his own suffering and his readiness to sacrifice his life for Christ would have no meaning.

Such sentiments are a strong argument against the proposition that Ignatius had come under the influence of some early form of Gnosticism—a dualistic religion that stressed salvation by esoteric knowledge, or *gnōsis*, rather than by faith. Some of Ignatius' formulations possibly echo Gnostic language, and he seems to have made an impression on certain Gnostic sects. Nevertheless, there is no trace in his letters of the basic Gnostic equation of good and evil with spirit and matter. He does not even take up St. Paul's antinomy of flesh and spirit. For him, the spirit is above the flesh rather than against it; even what the "spiritual man" does "according to the flesh" is spiritual.

MARTYRDOM AS UNION WITH CHRIST.

Concern for the doctrine that Christ is man as well as God is the main reason that Ignatius insisted so emphatically on "siding with the bishop." On this earth the bishop represents to his church the true bishop, Christ. Union with the bishop in belief and worship means union with Christ. Those who in a spirit of pride break away from the bishop destroy that union. The unity of the church with its monarchical structure is for Ignatius a concrete realization already on earth of the future life in Christ; authority within the church has not yet become for him a principle of institutional discipline. Ignatius used, for the first time in Christian literature, the expression "catholic church," meaning the whole church that is one and the same wherever there is a Christian congregation.

Ignatius' letter to the church of Rome is by far the longest and the richest in laudatory epithets. Throughout his letter he speaks of the Roman Christians in terms of special distinction. But even when he states that their church holds the first place in the whole Christian "community of love [*agapē*]," he acknowledges a position of preeminence rather than of jurisdiction.

Ignatius' desire to become a martyr is also linked with his understanding of union with Christ. To be a perfect disciple of Christ means to imitate Christ in his Passion, to share in it, to be united with Christ in suffering. Many times in his letters Ignatius accuses himself of being imperfect because he has not yet been put to this test. Now, on his journey to Rome, he at last "begins to be a disciple," and his great fear is that his friends in Rome might obtain for him a pardon and so deprive him of his way to perfection. This longing for martyrdom has sometimes been interpreted as a neurotic obsession. Although the language used by Ignatius in voicing this desire does often sound exaggerated, his attitude was shared by many Christians of his time. For Ignatius, love of martyrdom ultimately springs from a deep conviction that only by union with Christ's Passion will he participate in Christ's glory. Even this belief does not free him from the fear that he might recoil in the face of death, and he asks the churches to pray for his strength and constancy.

IGNATIUS' PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS.

Only rare glimpses of Ignatius' personal relations are possible from the letters. His greetings, in the manner of St. Paul, to individuals at the end of his letters seldom have a personal ring. In his letter to the church of Smyrna he singles out Tavia for special mention, but his reason seems to be pastoral. Another woman of that town, Alke, is remembered twice as "a name dear to me," and a certain Attalus as "my beloved." Among the clergy Ignatius finds words of special warmth for the deacons. They are "most dear" to him, and he likes to speak of them as his "fellow-slaves." By his time deacons apparently were no longer mere dispensers of the church's charities, as they are depicted in the Acts of the Apostles. If the bishop represents Christ as shepherd, the deacons are images of Christ as "the servant of all." In emphasizing his fellowship with them, Ignatius insists on the common bond among all Christians in the service of God.

Among all the persons known from Ignatius' correspondence, Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, stands out as his personal friend. Ignatius made the acquaintance of his younger colleague during his stay at Smyrna. He addresses him and generally speaks of him with an affection that is absent in his praise of other bishops. Polycarp received the only personal letter from Ignatius; it is a letter of advice from an experienced older man to a younger one who, for all the promise he shows for the future, still has to find his way. Polycarp, in turn, when writing to the Philippians, praises Ignatius as an example of patience and of willingness to suffer for Christ. Some 40 years later (perhaps in 155) Polycarp himself was to follow in his friend's footsteps to a martyr's death.

PRESERVATION OF THE LETTERS

Polycarp made a collection of Ignatius' letters and sent them to the church of Philippi, as he had been requested by the Philippians. The collection apparently contained some, if not all, of the seven letters that were known to Eusebius and are now commonly held to be genuine. The letter to the Romans was quoted as early as the 2nd century by Irenaeus, then bishop of Lugdunum (modern Lyon). In the 4th century these letters were corrupted by the heavy insertions of an interpolator, and the collection was augmented by six letters forged under Ignatius' name. This enlarged collection was commonly known in the European Middle Ages.

A single Latin version based on the original text of the seven genuine letters was, however, made in England in the 13th century, perhaps by the great scholar and translator Robert Grosseteste. The genuine collection, freed from interpolations and forgeries, was restored by 17th-century scholarship. In the period after the Protestant Reformation, Ignatius' notion of the church, as found in the enlarged collection, was greatly emphasized by Roman Catholics and harshly criticized by Protestants; the rediscovery of the letters in their original form, however, has led to a just and objective assessment of his personality and his views against their historical background.

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