

Church History: St. Ignatius of Antioch

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The early Patristic literature, gleaned from the writings of the Church Fathers, provides an excellent source for studying the Catholic “deposit of faith.” In this deposit, the Fathers addressed many areas of theology, philosophy, and spirituality; areas that are fundamental today. A great contributor to this deposit was St. Ignatius, the Bishop of Antioch.

St. Ignatius of Antioch (A.D. 35—107), from Syria, is one of the early luminaries from the Eastern (Greek) Fathers. Designated an “Apostolic Father” (an immediate successor to the work of the Apostles), tradition holds that St. Ignatius actually heard the preaching of the Apostle John, the “Beloved Disciple” (cf. Jn.19:35; Rev. 1:1).

From a hierarchical perspective, St. Ignatius was Antioch’s 3rd bishop; the 2nd was Evodius and the 1st was St. Peter. The “Prince of the Apostles” (cf. Mt. 16:18; Acts 15:7), St. Peter, was at Antioch prior to heading to Rome. The locale of Antioch in Syria is noteworthy: Acts 11:26 says that here, for the first time, followers of the Lord Jesus were called “Christians.”

In the latter days of his life, St. Ignatius was eventually chained and sent to Rome — to be fed to the wild beasts in the arena. While heading to certain martyrdom, St. Ignatius wrote seven letters that are a testimonial to the Catholic Faith: the *Letter to the Ephesians*, *Letter to the Magnesians*, *Letter to the Trallians*, *Letter to the Romans*, *Letter to the Philadelphians*, *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*, and *Letter to Polycarp*. This last letter was addressed to the renowned St. Polycarp (A. D. 69—155); the Bishop of Smyrna.

These seven letters, memorized by the letter group “EMTRPSP,” are a Catholic gold mine for exploration. How does the Magisterium utilize these works of St. Ignatius? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1997) references the Ignatian epistles in Nos. 496; 498; 830; 834; 896; 1010; 1011; 1331; 1369; 1405; 1549; 1554; 1593; 2175; 2473; 2474; and 2837. One particular letter, the *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*, expounds several key points that are reiterated in the *Catechism*.

Commenting on trials and tribulations in our earthly life, St. Ignatius remarks: “Only let it be in the name of Jesus Christ, that I may suffer together with Him! I endure everything because He Himself, who is perfect man, empowers me” (*Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 4.2). The Antiochene bishop repeats the truth that our crosses, if united to the Lord, can be carried because of the “empowerment” provided by God’s grace (cf. *Catechism*, No. 272).

St. Ignatius writes in *Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 7.1: “They [heretics] abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer, because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the Flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, Flesh which suffered for our sins and which the Father, in His goodness, raised up again. They who deny the gift of God are perishing in their disputes.”

In this passage, the future martyr reveals a literal (i.e. Catholic) understanding of the Holy Eucharist (cf. *Catechism*, No. 1374).

“You must all follow the bishop as Jesus Christ follows the Father, and the presbytery as you would the Apostles. Reverence the deacons as you would the command of God” utters the Apostolic Father in *Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 8.1. A hierarchical structure, consisting of bishop, priest, and deacon, is enunciated by St. Ignatius (cf. *Catechism*, No. 1536).

A final point: it is St. Ignatius who first labeled in writing the organization, established by Christ Himself (cf. Mt. 16:18) and defended by St. Paul (cf. 1 Tim. 3:15), as *katholike ekklesia* — the “Catholic” Church. St. Ignatius writes: “Wherever the bishop is, let the people be there; just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church” (*Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 8.2). The close union between the Savior and the Catholic Church is noteworthy (cf. *Catechism*, No. 824).

The writings of St. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, provide a treasure trove for the history of dogma. For points of doctrine, or for spiritual nourishment, the Ignatian corpus has provided a great legacy of Catholic thought.

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