

THE LETTERS OF
SAINT IGNATIUS
OF ANTIOCH



INTRODUCTION

SAINT Ignatius the God-bearer was the third bishop of Antioch, following Saints Peter and Evodius. His episcopacy spanned nearly four decades, from the year 70 until his martyrdom in 107. He was an important figure in the early Church, participating in the passing of the torch from the apostles to their first successors, the bishops.

Born in Syria during the lifetime of Christ, he was an early convert to Christianity, and became a disciple of Saint John the Theologian (+100). As the first waves of martyrdom swept the Church, taking away most of the Apostles—including Saints Paul and Peter about the year 67—Ignatius became a leader in the second generation of Christians, who had received the Faith directly from the eyewitnesses of Christ.

The witness of the martyrs greatly impacted him, and he felt a calling to the “red martyrdom” of the arena. He proclaimed his faith fearlessly and was sentenced to death in Rome. He was marched through Asia Minor under heavy guard, and at Smyrna (modern İzmir, Turkey), his guards stopped for an extended time to rest.

While there, Bishop Ignatius received clergy and messengers from the churches, and he sent his letters in return.

These letters to key Roman cities are invaluable witnesses to the formation and teachings of the early Church.

He instructed the faithful to avoid false teachings and maintain the Faith at all costs—teachings that ring true in our own day. The value of worship, especially the Eucharist, is celebrated, along with the importance of caring for the poor. The structure and meaning of the Church hierarchy and government are also explained. Any Christian who wonders what the first-century Church was like ought to ponder his writings.

Ignatius wrote again from Alexandria Troas (modern Eski Stambul, Turkey), and finally made his way to Rome. There he spoke with the local Christians for the last time as he was being taken to the arena. He was particularly concerned that the Roman Christians would interfere and try to free him, which he would not allow. True to his desire, and to his understanding of death as the entry into a new and better life, the lions devoured him on December 20th, 107.

His powerful letters were preserved for centuries afterwards, as the writings of the apostles were. About the fourth century, heretics embellished Ignatius' writings and composed additional forgeries. The authentic originals were thought to be lost, but were rediscovered by the 17th century Anglican archbishop James Ussher. Scholars compared these letters with other historical accounts and Church tradition, establishing these letters as genuine and most valuable for readers today.

Let us be challenged by the writings of Saint Ignatius as a powerful witness with a profound faith in Jesus Christ, as we consider the apostolic era and all its implications for modern Christians today.

THE MARTYRDOM OF SAINT IGNATIUS

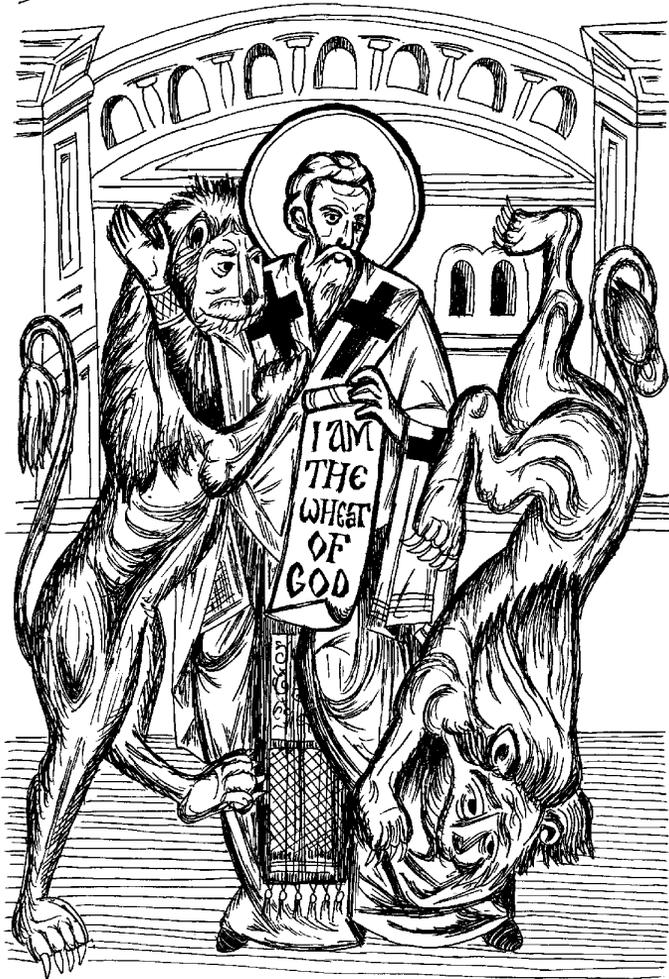
THE account of Ignatius' martyrdom, given as an epilogue to his letters in this book, comes down to us from the collection of first-through-fourth century writings known as the *Ante-Nicene Fathers*. The text indicates that it was written by Ignatius' traveling companions (likely Philo, Agathopus, and Crocus, who are mentioned in his letters) as he was taken to Rome.

Although some in recent times have questioned the authenticity of this martyrdom account, the details were clearly known to the early Church, as confirmed by Eusebius (+340) and Saint John Chrysostom (+407), as well as the *Synaxarion* and the liturgical services for the feast of Saint Ignatius on December 20th. According to scholars, the simplicity of the account and the absence of embellishments and fantastical legends also weigh in its favor.

At the very least, *The Martyrdom of Saint Ignatius* reflects the ancient oral tradition of the martyr's last days, which has been maintained and accepted by the Church from the earliest times. It is worthy of reading, and Ignatius' manner of embracing his death for Christ is a model of true Christian faith. For this reason, we have included it here. ✠



SAINT IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH



SAINT IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH

— I —

TO THE EPHESIANS

IGNATIUS, who is called the God-bearer; to the Church in Ephesus of Asia, which has been blessed in greatness through the fullness of God the Father, foreordained before the ages to be in lasting and unchanging glory forever, united and elect in true suffering by the will of the Father and Jesus Christ our God, worthy of all blessings: abundant greetings in Christ Jesus and in blameless joy.

I welcomed in God your much-beloved name, which you acquired through your righteous nature, having an upright and virtuous mind, by faith and love in Christ Jesus our Savior. You are imitators of God and your hearts are aflame in His blood, so these things come naturally to you, and you have completed them perfectly.^a

When you heard that I was on my way from Syria, in chains for the sake of the Name and Hope that we share (and I was hoping through your prayers to fight with the wild beasts in Rome, so that by martyrdom I might finally be a true disciple), you were eager to visit me.

^aTitus 1:4, 2:13; Eph. 5:1-2.

Through your bishop Onesimus, a man of inexpressible love, I have received your whole congregation in the Name of God. I pray that you love him according to Jesus Christ, and that you all may be like him. Blessed is He Who granted you such a bishop, as you are worthy.

As for my fellow-servant Burrhus, who is your blessed deacon by the will of God, I pray that he will stay with me for the honor of yourselves and your bishop. And Crocus also, who is worthy of both God and you, as he is an example of your love for me. May the Father of Jesus Christ refresh him, together with Onesimus and Burrhus and Euplus and Fronto; in all of these men, I have seen you all with the eyes of love.

May I always have joy from you,^b if I am worthy of it. It is right for you to always glorify Jesus Christ, Who glorified you, so that, being united in a single obedience to the bishop and the priesthood, you may become holy in all things.

I do not command you, as if I were someone great. Even though I am in chains for the sake of Jesus Christ, I am not yet perfect in His Name. I am only beginning to be a disciple, and I speak to you as your fellow student. In truth, it is I who should be taught by you for the contest, in the ways of faith, and exhortation, and endurance, and patience.

But since love does not let me remain silent about you, I am compelled to urge you^c to run in harmony together with the will of God. Jesus Christ, our inseparable Life, is the vis-

^b Philemon 20. ^c Philemon 9.

ible Will of the Father, even as the bishops throughout the world have been appointed by the will of Jesus Christ.

So, then, continue to run in harmony with the will of the bishop. Your honorable and godly priests are in tune with the bishop as the strings of a harp. Through your unity and harmonious love, Jesus Christ is sung.

Each of you must be part of this chorus, united in harmony, receiving God's pitch and singing together with one voice through Jesus Christ to the Father. He will hear you and acknowledge your good deeds to the members of His Son.^d Continue in the purity of your unity, so that you may always rightly enjoy communion with God.^e

For if I, in a short time, had such fellowship with your bishop—which was not human but spiritual—how much more blessed must you be, who are joined to him as the Church is to Jesus Christ, and as Jesus Christ is with the Father, so that all things may be united in harmony.

Let no one deceive himself.^f If a man is not within the sanctuary, he does not have the bread of God.^g For if the prayer of one or two has such power,^h how much more is the prayer of the bishop and the whole Church!

So, then, anyone who does not assemble with the Church is consumed with pride and has cut himself off. For it is written, *God opposes the proud.*ⁱ Therefore, let us be careful not to oppose the bishop, so that, by our obedience, we

^d 1 Cor. 12:27. ^e 1 Cor. 10:17. ^f 1 Cor. 6:9. ^g Jn. 6:33; 1 Cor. 9:13, 10:18. ^h Matt. 18:19-20. ⁱ Prou. 3:34; 1 Pet. 5:5; Jas. 4:6.

may be subject to God.

The more anyone sees the bishop keeping silence, the more he should fear him. When the Master of the household appoints a man to oversee His own house, we should receive him as the One Who appointed him.^j Obviously, then, we should consider the bishop as the Lord Himself.^k

Indeed, Onesimus himself highly praises your good order in God, as you all live according to the truth,^l and no heresy has a home among you. Nor, indeed, do you even listen to anyone unless he speaks rightly of Jesus Christ.

There are some who, with wicked deceit, are carrying around the name of *Christian* while they are in the habit of doing things unworthy of God. Shun such men as wild beasts. They are mad dogs, biting in secret. Be on your guard against them, for their bites are hard to heal.

There is one Physician: of flesh and of spirit, begotten and unbegotten, God in the flesh, Son of Mary and Son of God, first passible and then impassible: Jesus Christ our Lord.

Do not be deceived^m (as indeed you are not), for you belong fully to God. When you are free of conflict and distress, you are living according to God's will. I dedicate myself as a sacrifice for you,ⁿ the Church of the Ephesians, which is famous forever.

Carnal and worldly men cannot do spiritual things, nor can spiritual men do carnal and worldly things. In the same

^jJn. 13:20; Matt. 10:40. ^kGal. 4:14. ^lJn. 8:32-33. ^m2 Thess. 2:3. ⁿ1 Cor. 4:13.

way, faith cannot act according to unbelief, nor can unbelief act with faith.^o But with you, even your worldly actions are spiritual, for you do all things in Jesus Christ.

I have heard that certain men have come among you, bringing false doctrine, but you did not let them sow their seed among you. You instead closed your ears to them^p and rejected their evil seed. You are the stones of the Father's temple,^q prepared for a building of God the Father, hoisted up to the heights through the crane of Jesus Christ—the Cross—and using the Holy Spirit as a rope. Your faith is your winch, and love is the way that leads up to God.

So then, you are all fellow-travelers, carrying your God and your shrine, your Christ and your holy things, adorned from head to toe in the commandments of Jesus Christ. I join in your celebration, rejoicing to be with you through this letter, for you have no love for anything in ordinary life, but only for God.

And pray unceasingly^r for the rest of mankind (for there is a hope for repentance with them), that they may find God. Let your works be a lesson for them.

Against their wrath, be meek. Against their arrogant words, be humble. Against their abuse, offer prayers. Against their errors, stand firm in the faith.^s Against their cruelty, be gentle. Do not imitate them or repay them for their deeds.

Let us patiently endure them, and be found their brothers. Let us imitate the Lord;^t let us compete with each other

^oRom. 8:5, 8. ^pPs. 57:5 LXX. ^q1 Pet. 2:5; 1 Cor. 3:9. ^r1 Thess. 5:17. ^sCol. 1:23. ^t1 Thess. 1:6.

er to see who can be the most wronged, defrauded,^u and rejected.^v Then no poison of the devil will be found in you, but in purity and self-control you will remain in Christ Jesus, in flesh and in spirit.

These are the last times.^w From now on, let us be devout and fear God's patience, that it may not become a judgment against us. Either fear the coming wrath or love the present grace; one way or the other, let us be found in Christ Jesus for the sake of true life.^x

Let nothing distract you from Him, for Whose sake I am a prisoner. My chains are spiritual pearls; may I rise again through them and your prayers, of which I desire to always partake. May I always be found among the Christians of Ephesus, who have agreed with the apostles without fail by the power of Jesus Christ.

I know who I am, and to whom I write. I am a convict; you have received mercy. I am in danger; you are secure.

You are the high road of those who are traveling to die for God. You are associates in the mysteries with Paul, who was sanctified, who was approved, who is worthy of all blessing, who in every letter mentions you in Christ Jesus.^y I would gladly follow in his footsteps when I finally reach God.

So, then, be diligent to meet together more often for your eucharistic worship of God. When you gather frequently, the powers of Satan are obliterated and his destructive power comes to nothing by the unity of your faith.

^u1 Cor. 6:7. ^vIsa. 53:3. ^w1 Cor. 7:29; 1 Jn. 2:18. ^xActs 17:30; 1 Thess. 1:10. ^yEph. 1:1.

There is nothing better than peace, in which all warfare, spiritual and physical, is abolished.

All these things are obvious to you if you have perfect faith and love toward Jesus Christ. These are the beginning and end of life: faith is the beginning and love is the end.^z When these two are united it is God, and everything that follows leads to holiness.

No one who professes faith can be a sinner, nor can anyone who obtains love also hold onto hatred.^a The tree is known by its fruit,^b so those who claim to be Christians^c will be proved by their actions. Salvation is not a matter of words uttered today, but of action which continues to the end by the power of faith.

It is better to be a true Christian and keep silent, than to talk and not be one. It is a fine thing to teach—if the speaker also does what he says. So, then, there is one Teacher Who *spoke and it happened*;^d and even the things He did in silence^e are worthy of the Father.

One who truly has the word of Jesus is able to hear His silence, so that he may be perfect. Through his speech he acts, and through his silence he is known.

Nothing is hidden from the Lord; even our secrets are known to Him. Let us therefore do everything with the knowledge that He dwells within us,^f so that we may be His temples and He may be within us as our God.^g And so it is,

^z1 Tim. 1:5. ^a1 Jn. 3:6; 5:18. ^bMatt. 12:33. ^c1 Cor. 1:12. ^dPs. 33:9. ^e1 Pet. 2:22-23. ^f1 Cor. 3:16. ^g1 Cor. 14:25.