

THE LETTERS OF
SAINT IGNATIUS
OF ANTIOCH

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INTRODUCTION

Jesus accomplished many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. If they all were written, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain all the books that could be written. Amen.¹

AFTER Jesus' Resurrection, he spent forty days teaching His disciples many things that have not been recorded. What is written in the Gospel is sufficient for coming to faith in Him,² but what happened next? What was expected of Christians?

Exactly what the Lord said in those forty days, we will never know for certain. But those who did hear His words taught us to stand firm and hold fast to the traditions which they have taught us.³

The Lord entrusted His Church to a small group of a few dozen faithful followers. They received His instructions and went out into the world to baptize all people into His Name. These apostles in turn

¹John 20:30; 21:35. ²John 20:31. ³2 Thess. 2:15.

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taught their disciples, and an unbroken chain of truth was forged.

One of the leading figures in early Christianity was Saint Ignatius of Antioch, also known as “the God-bearer.” As a disciple of the disciples, and a writer whose letters have survived and come down to us today, he is able to give us an intimate look into the life and times of the early Church.

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF SAINT IGNATIUS

IN first century Antioch,⁴ the ancient metropolis and third-largest city in the world at the time, we encounter a remarkable man: Ignatius. A bright beacon of the early Christian Church, he served as the city’s third bishop, following in the footsteps of Saints Peter and Evodius. His reign of nearly forty years saw the passing of the apostles and the rise of Christianity’s second generation of faithful believers, striving to live out the Faith in a consumerist, opulent, and hostile world.

Ignatius was born in Syria in the early first century. According to ancient Christian tradition, he was present at one of Jesus’ well-known teachings:

⁴*Modern-day Antakya, Türkiye.*

Ignatius was the little child whom the Lord set before His disciples as an example of those who would enter the kingdom of heaven.⁵

Sometime after Pentecost, Ignatius was baptized as an early convert to Christianity. He was a disciple of Saint John the Theologian, the author of the fourth Gospel. From this experience, Ignatius was taught by the Beloved Disciple who had witnessed the Lord’s life and teachings, receiving the truth directly from him and others who had walked and lived with Christ.

Gruesome stoning, crucifixion, beheading, and the ravages of wild beasts were the common fate of the apostles, and many other Christians besides. To ensure that the Church would not be left without earthly shepherds, the apostles began to appoint bishops to take over their role in the Church.

As you will read in these Letters, the bishop has a special role: to lead the activities of the local Church, to preach the Gospel, to preside over liturgical worship, to defend the Faith against errors and enemies, and in a mystical way to manifest the presence of God. While few details are known about Ignatius’ life before becoming bishop of Antioch, for

⁵*Matt. 18:1-5.*

the apostles to make him a leader in their footsteps, he certainly would have proven himself faithful in every way.

Knowing that wolves would come among the flock, twisting and changing the Faith to suit their own opinions and desires,⁶ the apostles established a strong framework for the early Church. This included the bishops to lead the churches in each city,⁷ as well as councils to determine matters of faith and practice,⁸ and liturgical worship.⁹ These pillars of Church government were upheld by Ignatius and his fellow bishops, continuing through the centuries to this day.

About the year 70, following the martyrdom of Saint Evodius, Saint Peter personally appointed Ignatius as the bishop of Antioch. This major city of 400,000 was the center of Christianity at the time, when the entire Church had perhaps only a total of 2,500 members. He faithfully undertook all his duties for nearly forty years, and by modern estimates, he would have seen the Church grow as much as seven-fold under his faithful leadership.

But as he saw the witness of the martyrs all around him for decades, Ignatius felt called to do

⁶Acts 20:29-30. ⁷1 Tim. 3:1-2. ⁸Acts 15. ⁹Seen throughout the book of Acts, as well as in the *Didache* and the *Epistle of Clement* (ca. 1st century).

more. As he had so faithfully imitated the apostles in his public ministry, he also deeply desired to imitate them in a very personal way: suffering and even dying for Christ.

His opportunity for this ultimate demonstration of his devotion and faith came when Emperor Trajan was visiting Antioch. He fearlessly went before Trajan and declared his faith, and even debated with him. Before long, Ignatius was arrested and sentenced to death in Rome.

A group of soldiers transported him on foot from Antioch, walking some 320 km¹⁰ to Seleucia.¹¹ He was then taken by ship up the coast of Asia Minor to Smyrna,¹² where his guards stopped for an extended time to rest. While he was there, he received clergy and messengers from the churches, and in return he sent his letters to the small flocks of Christians scattered across the Roman Empire.

In these invaluable letters, he instructed the faithful to avoid false teachings and maintain the Faith at all costs—teachings that ring true in our own day. His writings helped to solidify the fledgling faith, practice, and values of the early Church. He honored the significance of worship, especially

¹⁰200 miles. ¹¹Modern-day Silifke, Türkiye. ¹²Modern-day İzmir, Türkiye.

the Eucharist, and stressed the importance of caring for the poor. He also explained the structure and meaning of the Church's hierarchy and government that the apostles had established.

They continued their journey over land and sea, sailing through the perilous waters of the Mediterranean Sea, and crossing overland on dusty cobblestone roads. Finally, after a journey filled with much suffering, Ignatius was led into Rome.

In the capital of the Empire, Ignatius spoke with the local Christians for one last time as he was being taken to the arena. He was particularly worried that the Roman Christians would try to free him, but his mind was set. As he wrote in his letter to the Romans:

*I am God's wheat, and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts, in order to become the pure bread of Christ.*¹³

True to his desire, and to his understanding of death as not the end, but as the entry into a new and better life, the lions devoured him on December 20th, 107, and he entered the glory of his Lord.

¹³Page 40.

As the account of his martyrdom says, his remains were reverently collected by the Christians of Rome and buried. Some time later, his relics were returned to his home city of Antioch. After Antioch was captured by the Persians in 540, his relics were taken back to Rome and interred in the Basilica of Saint Clement, fittingly in the shadow of the Colosseum, where they remain to this day.

HIS PRECIOUS WRITINGS

THE seven powerful letters of Saint Ignatius in this book have come down through the ages, preserved for us alongside the writings of the apostles we find in the New Testament. About the fourth century, heretics began to distort and add to Ignatius' writings, and they also composed new forgeries. The authentic originals were feared lost.

In the 17th century, the true letters of Saint Ignatius were rediscovered by Anglican archbishop James Ussher. Scholars meticulously compared these letters with other historical accounts and the reliable witness of Church tradition, establishing that these seven letters are genuine, valuable, and

critical for Christian readers today who want to discover the faith of the early Church.

The account of Saint Ignatius' martyrdom, given as an epilogue to his letters in the book you now hold, comes down to us from the collection of early writings known as the Ante-Nicene Fathers. The account seems to have been written by Ignatius' traveling companions (probably 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*¹⁴ 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.

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. Ignatius' manner of embracing his death for Christ is a model of true Christian faith.

¹⁴The book of the *Lives of the Saints*; known in the West as the *Martyrology*.

HIS CHALLENGE TO CHRISTIANS TODAY

As you read the pages of this extraordinary book, let yourself be challenged by the writings of Saint Ignatius: a powerful witness with a profound faith in Jesus Christ. We Christians today must come to know this colossal figure of the early Church, and consider what he taught and believed, and all its implications for us. ✠





SAINT IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH



THE LETTERS OF 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.

- 1** 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

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



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.

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.

² 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 sin-

^b*Philemon 20.*

gle obedience to the bishop and the priesthood, you may become holy in all things.

³ 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 visible Will of the Father, even as the bishops throughout the world have been appointed by the will of Jesus Christ.

⁴ 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

^c*Philemon 9.*

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

- 5 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 may be subject to God.

- 6 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 consid-

^d1 Cor. 12:27. ^e1 Cor. 10:17. ^f1 Cor. 6:9. ^gJn. 6:33; 1 Cor. 9:13, 10:18.

^hMatt. 18:19-20. ⁱProv. 3:34; 1 Pet. 5:5; Jas. 4:6. ^jJn. 13:20; Matt. 10:40.

er 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.

- 7 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.

- 8 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 way, faith cannot act accord-

^kGal. 4:14. ^lJn. 8:32-33. ^m2 Thess. 2:3. ⁿ1 Cor. 4:13.