

Biography of Ignatius of Antioch By Thomas Weinandy

In the early years of the second century, Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, was arrested and taken to Rome to suffer martyrdom in the Coliseum. In the course of his travels, this lively and energetic man met and wrote to other Christian communities. In his seven letters to the communities at Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Rome, Philadelphia, and Smyrna he was primarily concerned with three issues: the unity of the church as lived in communion with the bishop and fostered in the Eucharist, the danger of heresy, and the glory of martyrdom.

For Ignatius (d. AD 70) the unity of the church was of supreme importance because this unity consisted of Christ (the head) and his body. This unity was first of all founded upon the unity of faith - all believed in the one true gospel (thus his concern for heresy which destroys the unity of faith). It was the bishop, as the earthly presence of Christ and successor to the apostles, who is the foundations of this present unity, for he is the authentic teacher and defender of the gospel and the pastor who oversees the proper care and harmony of all the faithful. The fullest expression and fostering of his unity, 'a symphony of minds in concert', is found in the Eucharist, for there the local faithful, in union with the bishop, gather to hear the gospel and to come into communion with Christ by receiving his risen body and blood, which is 'the medicine of immortality'.

The greatest heresy that faced Ignatius was Docetism (from the Greek word *dokesis* meaning 'to seem'), which held that the Son/Word of God only 'seemed' or 'appeared' to take on human flesh, but actually did not. Thus all that pertained to Jesus' humanity - birth, eating, suffering, dying and so on - was only apparent and not real. The Docetists argued that, if the Son/Word of God could not actually suffer and die.

In response to this, first, Ignatius argued that Jesus, being the true Word of the Father, was the full revealer of the Father. He speaks from the Father's 'silence' and the Word as the Father's 'mouthpiece'. As such Jesus is truly God. Ignatius calls Jesus God on fourteen occasions and on eight of these actually refers to him as *ho theos*, 'the God' - in Greek, names are preceded by the definite article. This is very surprising at such an early date, since the New Testament seems very hesitant to call Jesus simply 'God'.

Second, what is also surprising, Ignatius is one of the first, if not the first, to use 'the communication of idioms', that is, the predicating of divine and human attributes of one and the same person. He can speak of 'divine blood' or 'the passion of my God' This is a very stranger use of language. God does not have blood, and he can suffer, not as God but as man. This is why Ignatius used such language. It allowed him to express boldly and even scandalously, contrary to the Docetists, the truth of the incarnation. To the Ephesians Ignatius could write about Jesus in marvellous, poetic fashion:

*Very Flesh, yet Spirit too; Uncreated, and yet born; God-and-Man in One agreed,
Very-Life-in-Death indeed, Fruit of God and Mary's seed. At once impassible and torn by pain
and suffering here below; Jesus Christ, whom as our Lord we know.*

Ignatius's main argument for upholding the truth of the incarnation is based on the doctrine of salvation. If the Son of God only pretended to be a man, if his 'human' life were a mere charade

and thus his birth, baptism, suffering, and death were simply pantomime, then our salvation is a mere pretence and counterfeit. It has no reality either.

This leads to Ignatius's third concern, the glory of martyrdom. Ignatius pointedly told the church at Tralles that, when he arrives in Rome, he will be eaten by real lions with real teeth. He will shed real blood. He will actually suffer and truly die. If Jesus only pretended to shed blood and only feigned suffering and death, then he (Ignatius) is the most pitied. He is but a fool. Moreover, it is in becoming a martyr that one fully proclaims the gospel by imitating Jesus himself. Equally, martyrdom fulfills what takes place in baptism in that one dies and rises with Christ and so fully becomes an authentic Christian. Lastly, martyrdom is the living out of the Eucharist, for there, in receiving the body and blood of Christ, we are conformed into his likeness and thus in laying down one's life for Christ one is fully conformed into the true likeness of Christ.