

“A STUDY OF “THE SAINTS THROUGH THE CENTURIES”

By Richard Thornton

SAINT IGNATIUS – FIRST CENTURY

AD C. 69 to 107

Saint Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch at the end of the first century, took as his surname Theophorus, “God – Carrier.” As I think about this loving saint, I believe he lived up to that name in a wonderful inspiring way.

According to the earliest biographies, Saint Ignatius was a disciple of the Apostle John. Fourth century histories report that Ignatius served as Bishop of Antioch for forty years, having been appointed there by the Apostles Peter and Paul. It was in Antioch that the Disciples were first called Christians. The Apostles Peter and Paul had worked there to evangelize the city, and tradition names Peter as its first Bishop.

Saint Ignatius was the first person in Christian literature to contribute to the Church the term “Catholic” or “Universal”: “Wherever Jesus Christ is,” he said, “there is the Catholic Church.”

We possess seven letters written by Saint Ignatius. As we read these letters we see that he was a man passionate for Jesus Christ, passionate for the Catholic Church, a man on a journey and on a mission. Saint Ignatius would perform his greatest work on the long voyage to his execution in Rome. He was condemned during the persecution of the emperor Trajan (reigned 98-107). As he “carried God” to the people and Churches, He wrote letters as he made the journey by land and sea from Antioch in Roman Syria (Antakaya in modern Turkey) to Rome in Italy where he would face his martyrdom, to be devoured by “wild beasts,” He was traveling under military escort to be executed for the crime of professing the Christian faith.

Saint Ignatius composed six letters to Churches of Asia Minor and Europe: Ephesus, Magnesia, Troas, Rome, Philadelphia, and Smyrna. A seventh letter was a personal letter to Saint Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna. His letters were pastoral and doctrinal in content, with loving words of encouragement. He testifies to early Christian teaching about marriage, the trinity, the Incarnation, the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, the primacy of the Roman Catholic Church and the authority of Priests and Bishops.

It is interesting to note that for all of his passion for the Christian faith, Saint Ignatius never mentions a detail of his own discipleship, conversion, election or ordination. It appears that he recounts no personal memories whatsoever. Concerning his martyrdom, he never mentions a betrayal, condemnation, or trial. He assigns no blame and seems to hold no grudges. I think it was his humbleness that make his letters so valuable. He was completely absorbed, not with himself, but with the lives and needs of his fellow Christians. I consider his letters as great treasures that show his acts of selfless love for others.

Because of Saint Ignatius's great love, he has left us an abundant record of the cares, concerns, and joys of the Catholic Church during the first century.

One of my favorite quotes of Saint Ignatius is: "A tree is shown by its fruits, and in the same way those who profess to belong to Christ will be seen by what they do. For what is needed is not mere profession, but perseverance to the end in the power of faith." In his life, in his letters, and in his death, Saint Ignatius left us a wonderful record of what it meant to be a Christian in the 1st century and perhaps a reminder of what it should mean to us in the 21st century.