

Reflection for Saturday 17 October

A bishop on the move

Today the Church commemorates St Ignatius of Antioch. We gain our knowledge of him from his epistles, written by him in the second decade of the second century. He became a Christian at an early age and eventually became bishop of Antioch.

During that time he encountered opposition to his forthright from two Christian groups.. These groups were “Ebionites” who wanted the Jewish law to be kept, and “Docetists,” a Greek word meaning ‘those who seemed,’ believing that Jesus only seemed to die on the Cross.” It was probably some from these groups who reported Ignatius to the Roman authorities out of spite. Because the opposition to him was so strong that the legate in Antioch ordered Ignatius be taken to Rome and executed there.

Now began Ignatius’s long journey to Rome. He travelled through western Asia Minor in modern day Turkey. His first stop was in Smyrna where he met the bishop there called Polycarp who became a great friend to Ignatius and gave him a lot of encouragement for what he was doing. The route to Smyrna bypassed the cities of Magnesia, Tralles and Ephesus. On hearing that the churches in those places were having similar problems to those Ignatius faced in Antioch, he wrote letters to them as to how they should deal with the problems, by insisting that those churches remained faithful to the bishop and his clergy. For example in his letter to the Magnesians, he wrote:

“Take care to do all things in harmony with God, with the bishops presiding in place of God, with the presbyters (priests) in the place of the council of the apostles and the deacons who are most dear to me, entrusted with business of Jesus Christ.....”

Altogether Ignatius wrote seven letters: to the Smyrnaeans, Magnesians, Trallians, Ephesians, Philadelphians, Romans and to Polycarp. From Smyrna Ignatius went on to Philadelphia and then to Toas where he boarded a ship to Neapolis in Macedonia. He then visited Philippi and finally arrived in Rome.

It is possible that this long route was that Ignatius’s journey to Rome was not the main purpose of the Roman soldiers’ trip and the various stops on the way in Asia Minor were for state reasons. This would explain Ignatius’s relative freedom to meet with Christians on his journey. It has to be remembered that he was a prisoner and was shackled.

To Ignatius can be attributed the first use of the Greek word “katholikos”to the Church, meaning “of the whole,” “universal”, Ignatius wrote:

“Wherever the bishop appears, let the people be, as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.”

Ignatius’s overwhelming desire for martyrdom came from his understanding of being one in Christ. To be a perfect disciple meant he had to imitate Christ in his Passion, to share in it, to be united with him in his suffering. On his journey to Rome he at last “begins to be a disciple.” Ignatius was martyred in 117AD.

Let us desire to be faithful disciples of Christ by growing into him daily. St Ignatius pray for us.

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