

THE OFFERING OF ST. IGNATIUS

Annie Crawford on Enduring
Pain for God's Glory

What is a saint? Why should we give more attention to some believers than others? The disagreement between Protestants on the one hand and Roman Catholics and the Orthodox on the other hand about how to define a saint is usually exaggerated. While canonization is a significant difference, there is more common ground than most people realize. Much of the debate is largely a matter of semantics which resolves when we clarify our terms. The Protestant protests that every saved soul who accepts Christ as their savior is made a saint by the free gift of grace. If we are in Christ, the righteousness of Christ himself clothes us and makes us perfect in the eyes of God. This is justification. The Catholic argues that though at baptism we are brought into the body of Christ through the free gift of grace, we have not yet fully become saints. We are not yet perfected. We must grow up into the grace we have received; we must learn to imitate Christ in thought, word, and deed. Though saved, we still must be transformed. One becomes a saint when one has been perfected in Christ. This is sanctification.

Both uses of the word "saint" are Biblical. All Christians understand that both justification and

sanctification are part of every Christian's journey. In this earthly life, before the consummation of all things at the second returning of our Lord, we live in the paradoxical already/not yet. All in Christ are made saints in potentiality, yet we all must grow up into the full actuality of union with Christ.

This tension is precisely what we see both in Scripture and in the lives of the early Christians as revealed through the writings of the Apostolic Fathers. As Paul nears the end of his mission on earth, he tells the Philippians, "Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."¹ Even at the end of his life, the Apostle Paul had not attained perfection; he was still growing into the fullness of life in Christ, "straining" into perfect Sainthood. Sanctification is not passive, for God calls us to the participatory life of love. The life of Christ involves both the free gift of grace and our own responsive agency.

The canonized Saints of Catholicism and Orthodoxy show us what it looks like to fully manifest the life of Christ here in the shadowlands of earth. In every endeavor, we need an ideal to work toward. Jesus Christ, the God incarnate, came to both atone for our sins and to show us the ideal human life. He is both savior and exemplar. The Apostles imitated the life of Christ and then called Christians to imitate their "way of life in Christ Jesus."² Then the Apostolic Fathers, such as

¹ Philippians 3:13, NIV.

² 1 Corinthians 4:17. NIV.

Clement and Polycarp and Ignatius, imitated the Apostles whom they knew and were disciples by. And so the lineage of Saints, the myriad, glorious examples of men and women fully afire with the life of Christ, grows, giving us many models for how to run this race so we might obtain the prize of perfected union with Christ Jesus.

Different Saints will offer helpful models for different people to follow, depending on our own particular callings and the circumstances in which we find ourselves. This is the idea behind having a patron saint, of finding in the story of one particular saint a model for the particular life you or your community is called to live. Although most Protestants would not pray to canonized saints as do their Catholic brothers and sisters, all Christians can and should look for godly models to imitate.

While as an Anglican I do not have a patron saint I am formally connected to, I do have several icons over my desk to whom I look to as models for my work: St. Aquinas, the Prophet Elijah, and St. Sophia. I am called to intellectual work that speaks prophetically and sacrificially against the spirit of the age, and the visual embodiment of these Saints in the form of an icon helps me keep my eyes focused on the goal set before me. When I start to feel that this work is too hard, that I am doomed to fail, these saints remind me in particular, meaningful ways that with God all things are possible. This personalized little cloud of witnesses helps me lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely so I can “run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking

to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith,” manifested in the lives of real people.³

Traditionally communities, as well as individuals, looked to a patron saint. This is why churches are called “St. Paul’s” or “St. Peter’s” church. For the American church today, I want to suggest the life of Ignatius of Antioch as a model for us to imitate. Ignatius was the bishop of Antioch in the earliest years of the second century. He died as a martyr, thrown to the lions in Rome, sometime between 108-140 AD. While in prison and in transport to Rome, Ignatius wrote several letters to offer his final exhortation to the churches. In his letter to Rome, Ignatius explains his acceptance and even desire for martyrdom and asks the Roman Christians not to interfere and seek his release.

Christians in the post-Freudian West have led relatively comfortable lives for several generations, and we have fallen into a very therapeutic, feelings-centered culture. We have become so driven by emotivism, by the belief that all value judgments are nothing but expressions of preference or feeling, that we find it hard to discern the difference between our feelings and the truth or between what we want to do and what we ought to do. Even defining a scientific fact like biological sex often turns into a discussion on one's preference, a word defined by feelings.

For such a moment as this, the life of Ignatius speaks like lightning, flashing before us the possibility of a life so spiritually alive that we could dread any pity that might keep us from sharing in the sufferings of Christ.

³ Hebrews 12:1, NIV.

Ignatius reminds us that our earthly compassion, though beautiful and good in its right measure, can become a hindrance to following Christ. Compassion can prove harmful when it becomes pity put to the service of idols or lies. As historian Carl Trueman writes in *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, “What is and is not compassionate must always rest on deeper, transcendent commitments.”⁴ It was Peter’s pity for Jesus, his desire to save him from terrible suffering, that earned him the terrifying rebuke, “Get behind me, Satan.”⁵ Judas betrayed Jesus not with a knife but with a kiss, and it was Judas who tried to rebuke Mary for her worship of Jesus by an appeal to pity the poor.⁶ Weaponized compassion is the cruelest of the devil’s snares, for it takes one of Christianity’s very highest values and turns it against truth.

Compassion itself cannot be our highest value, for a higher truth must tell us which of our feelings are rightly ordered with the way of Christ and which are not. Ignatius calls their compassion-motivated attempts to get him out of prison an “unkindness.” His life is not ordered toward the avoidance of pain as its highest principle but toward the True Highest Good: Christ. Ignatius so loves his Lord Jesus that he wants to witness to the glory of Christ’s Gospel in the fullest way possible. He knows that if he escaped and lived, his life would speak with the mere voice of a human, “a mere cry” as

⁴ Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 393.

⁵ Matthew 16:23, NIV.

⁶ Luke 22:47, NIV. John 12:4-6, NIV.

this translation puts it, but as a martyr his life will speak with divine power, “a word of God.”

Ignatius implored his brothers and sisters to “grant me nothing more than that I be poured out a libation to God.” For Ignatius to live in denial of Christ was to die, and to die in Christ was to truly live. He asked not to be spared the suffering of imprisonment and martyrdom but for prayer to be so strengthened in spirit that he might “be an imitator of the passion of my God.”

Read Saint Ignatius’s letter and receive his witness to something greater than our own feelings and earthly sympathies. Our emotions are important and good, but when made into idols, into the arbiters of truth and right action, they become demons that keep us from becoming Saints, men and women fully alive with the glory of God. Christian compassion should drive us not to rescue others from the inevitable pain that life brings but to suffer with others so their pain might be transformed into glory.

IGNATIUS’S LETTER TO THE ROMANS⁷

Intro: Ignatius, who is also Theophorus, unto her that hath found mercy in the bountifulness of the Father Most High and of Jesus Christ His only Son; to the church that is beloved and enlightened through the will of Him who willed all things that are, by faith and love towards Jesus Christ our God; even unto her that hath the presidency in the country of the region of the Romans,

⁷ "Ignatius to the Romans," in *Apostolic Fathers*, trans. J.B. Lightfoot & J.R. Harmer (London: Macmillan, 1891), accessed February 7, 2022, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/ignatius-romans-lightfoot.html>.

being worthy of God, worthy of honor, worthy of felicitation, worthy of praise, worthy of success, worthy in purity, and having the presidency of love, walking in the law of Christ and bearing the Father's name; which church also I salute in the name of Jesus Christ the Son of the Father; unto them that in flesh and spirit are united unto His every commandment, being filled with the grace of God without wavering, and filtered clear from every foreign stain; abundant greeting in Jesus Christ our God in blamelessness.

1:1 Forasmuch as in answer to my prayer to God it hath been granted me to see your godly countenances, so that I have obtained even more than I asked; for wearing bonds in Christ Jesus I hope to salute you, if it be the Divine will that I should be counted worthy to reach unto the end;

1:2 for the beginning verily is well ordered, if so be I shall attain unto the goal, that I may receive

mine inheritance without hinderance. For I dread your very love, lest it do me an injury; for it is easy for you to do what ye will, but for me it is difficult to attain unto God, unless ye shall spare me.

2:1 For I would not have you to be men-pleasers but to please God, as indeed ye do please Him. For neither shall I myself ever find an opportunity such as this to attain unto God, nor can ye, if ye be silent, win the credit of any nobler work. For, if ye be silent and leave me alone, I am a word of God; but if ye desire my flesh, then shall I be again a mere cry.

2:2 [Nay] grant me nothing more than that I be poured out a libation to God, while there is still an altar ready; that forming yourselves into a chorus in love ye may sing to the Father in Jesus Christ, for that God hath

vouchsafed that the bishop from Syria should be found in the West, having summoned him from the East. It is good to set from the world unto God, that I may rise unto Him.

3:1 Ye never grudged any one; ye were the instructors of others. And my desire is that those lessons shall hold good which as teachers ye enjoin.

3:2 Only pray that I may have power within and without, so that I may not only say it but also desire it; that I may not only be called a Christian, but also be found one. For if I shall be found so, then can I also be called one, and be faithful then, when I am no more visible to the world.

3:3 Nothing visible is good. For our God Jesus Christ, being in the Father, is the more plainly visible. The Work is not of persuasiveness, but Christianity is a thing of might, whensoever it is hated by the world.

4:1 I write to all the churches, and I bid all men know, that of my own free will I die for God, unless ye should hinder me. I exhort you, be ye not an unseasonable kindness to me. Let me be given to the wild beasts, for through them I can attain unto God. I am God's wheat, and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts that I may be found pure bread [of Christ].

4:2 Rather entice the wild beasts, that they may become my sepulcher and may leave no part of my body behind, so that I may not, when I am fallen asleep, be burdensome to any one. Then shall I be truly a disciple of Jesus Christ, when the world shall not so much as see my body. Supplicate the Lord for me, that through these instruments I may be found a sacrifice to God.

4:3 I do not enjoin you, as Peter and Paul did. They were Apostles, I am a convict; they were free, but I am a slave to this very hour. Yet if I shall suffer, then am I a

freed-man of Jesus Christ, and I shall rise free in Him. Now I am learning in my bonds to put away every desire.

5:1 From Syria even unto Rome I fight with wild beasts, by land and sea, by night and by day, being bound amidst ten leopards, even a company of soldiers, who only wax worse when they are kindly treated. Howbeit through their wrong doings I become more completely a disciple; yet am I not hereby justified.

5:2 May I have joy of the beasts that have been prepared for me; and I pray that I may find them prompt; nay I will entice them that they may devour me promptly, not as they have done to some, refusing to touch them through fear. Yea though of themselves they should not be willing while I am ready, I myself will force them to it.

5:3 Bear with me. I know what is expedient for me. Now am I beginning to be a disciple. May nought of things visible and things invisible envy me; that I may attain unto Jesus Christ. Come fire and cross and grapplings with wild beasts, [cuttings and manglings,] wrenching of bones, hacking of limbs, crushings of my whole body, come cruel tortures of the devil to assail me. Only be it mine to attain unto Jesus Christ.

6:1 The farthest bounds of the universe shall profit me nothing, neither the kingdoms of this world. It is good for me to die for Jesus Christ rather than to reign over the farthest bounds of the earth. Him I seek, who died on our behalf; Him I desire, who rose again [for our sake]. The pangs of a new birth are upon me.

6:2 Bear with me, brethren. Do not hinder me from living; do not desire my death. Bestow not on the world one who desireth to be God's, neither allure him with

material things. Suffer me to receive the pure light. When I am come thither, then shall I be a man.

6:3 Permit me to be an imitator of the passion of my God. If any man hath Him within himself, let him understand what I desire, and let him have fellow-feeling with me, for he knoweth the things which straighten me.

7:1 The prince of this world would fain tear me in pieces and corrupt my mind to Godward. Let not any of you therefore who are near abet him. Rather stand ye on my side, that is on God's side. Speak not of Jesus Christ and withal desire the world.

7:2 Let not envy have a home in you. Even though I myself, when I am with you, should beseech you, obey me not; but rather give credence to these things which I write to you. [For] I write to you in the midst of life, yet lusting after death. My lust hath been crucified, and there is no fire of material longing in me, but only water living and speaking in me, saying within me, Come to the Father.

7:3 I have no delight in the food of corruption or in the delights of this life. I desire the bread of God, which is the flesh of Christ who was of the seed of David; and for a draught I desire His blood, which is love incorruptible.

8:1 I desire no longer to live after the manner of men; and this shall be, if ye desire it. Desire ye, that ye yourselves also may be desired.

8:2 In a brief letter I beseech you; believe me. And Jesus Christ shall make manifest unto you these things, that I speak the truth -- Jesus Christ, the unerring mouth in whom the Father hath spoken [truly].

8:3 Entreat ye for me, that I may attain [through the Holy Spirit]. I write not unto you after the flesh, but after

the mind of God. If I shall suffer, it was your desire; if I shall be rejected, it was your hatred.

9:1 Remember in your prayers the church which is in Syria, which hath God for its shepherd in my stead. Jesus Christ alone shall be its bishop -- He and your love.

9:2 But for myself I am ashamed to be called one of them; for neither am I worthy, being the very last of them and an untimely birth: but I have found mercy that I should be some one, if so be I shall attain unto God.

9:3 My spirit saluteth you, and the love of the churches which received me in the name of Jesus Christ, not as a mere wayfarer: for even those churches which did not lie on my route after the flesh went before me from city to city.

10:1 Now I write these things to you from Smyrna by the hand of the Ephesians who are worthy of all felicitation. And Crocus also, a name very dear to me, is with me, with many others besides.

10:2 As touching those who went before me from Syria to Rome unto the glory of God, I believe that ye have received instructions; whom also apprise that I am near; for they all are worthy of God and of you, and it becometh you to refresh them in all things.

10:3 These things I write to you on the 9th before the Kalends of September. Fare ye well unto the end in the patient waiting for Jesus Christ.

Bibliography

The Offering of St. Ignatius

"Ignatius to the Romans." In *Apostolic Fathers*. Translated by J.B. Lightfoot & J.R. Harmer. (London: Macmillan, 1891. Accessed February 7, 2022.
<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/ignatius-romans-lightfoot.html>.

Trueman, Carl. *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020.