

October 17 is the memorial of Saint Ignatius of Antioch, a man of unshakeable faith. Born in Syria, in the era of the Apostles, we believe that Ignatius received instruction in the faith from the Apostle John. He learned well and became Bishop of Antioch around 70 AD.<sup>i</sup> Before moving to Rome, Peter had served in Antioch.<sup>ii</sup> Antioch (located in modern day Turkey) was an important city in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, on a par with Rome and Alexandria as influential centers of the Christian faith.

Jesus invited his followers to pick up their crosses and follow him. There were plenty of opportunities in the early centuries of the church which suffered under heavy persecution. The Roman Emperor Domitian was the first to falsely claim that he was divine. He wanted others to refer to him as lord and god and he was willing to kill those who refused to show him such honors. Ignatius strengthened the faith of his diocesan flock by fasting and prayer amidst this direct challenge to the faith.

What one emperor started was soon adopted by successors. In the year 107, the Emperor Trajan came to Antioch and encountered a defiant Ignatius. He wanted the bishop and all Christians to deny their faith in Jesus and to worship him as emperor. Rather than commit the sin of apostasy, Ignatius, already having served 37 years as a bishop in Antioch, was willing to die as a martyr. By threatening the bishop, Emperor Trajan hoped to intimidate other Christians into submission. Instead, the powerful witness of Ignatius had the opposite effect. Christians were more willing than ever to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ.

The historian Eusebius writes, Ignatius “was sent from Syria to Rome, and became food for wild beasts on account of his testimony to Christ. And as he made the journey through Asia under the strictest military surveillance, he fortified the parishes in the various cities where he stopped by homilies and exhortations, and warned them above all to be especially on their guard ... and ... to hold fast to the tradition of the Apostles.”<sup>iii</sup>

During a 2007 teaching, Pope Benedict XVI highlighted some of the extraordinary ways in which Ignatius inspired Christians on his way to martyrdom:

- To the Christians of Ephesus, Ignatius thanked them for working with their priests and bishop: “For your justly renowned presbytery, worthy of God, is fitted as exactly to the Bishop as the strings are to the harp. Therefore, in your concord and harmonious love, Jesus Christ is sung. And man by man, you become a choir, that being harmonious in love and taking up the song of God in unison you may with one voice sing to the Father” (4: 1-2).
- To Bishop Polycarp and the people of Smyrna, he encouraged unity: “Labor together with one another; strive in company together; run together; suffer together; sleep together; and awake together as the stewards and associates and servants of God... Let your Baptism endure as your arms; your faith as your helmet; your love as your spear; your patience as a complete [suit of armor]” (Polycarp, 6: 1-2).
- Jesus poses the question, “What profit is there for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?” (Mark 8:36). In his letter to the Romans, Ignatius identifies with Christ: “It is better for me to die on behalf of Jesus Christ than to reign over all the ends of the earth... Him I seek, who died for us: him I desire, who rose again for our sake.... Permit me to be an imitator of the Passion of my God! (Romans, 5-6).”
- Antioch is where that the followers of Jesus were first identified as Christians (Acts 11:26). And in his letter to the Smyrneans, Ignatius is first to attribute to the Church the adjective catholic or universal: “Wherever Jesus Christ is there is the Catholic Church” (8: 2)

Jesus said to his disciples: “I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before others the Son of Man will acknowledge before the angels of God. But whoever denies me before others will be denied before the angels of God” (Luke 12:8-9). The Holy Spirit inspired Ignatius with the courage to die for his faith and the words to express it eloquently. Ignatius provided a strong witness to the early church which would continue to suffer persecution for two more centuries.

When we are challenged in our own faith, it is helpful to reflect on the sacrifices that others have made before us. Following the example of Jesus, each Christian is called to say yes to Jesus and no to the false gods of this world.

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<sup>i</sup> [Beviary for October 17, St Ignatius of Antioch, Bishop, Martyr](#)

<sup>ii</sup> [catholicnewsagency.com/saint/st-ignatius-of-antioch-396](http://catholicnewsagency.com/saint/st-ignatius-of-antioch-396)

<sup>iii</sup> [vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2007/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_aud\\_20070314.html](http://vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20070314.html)