

Many Christians were persecuted and sentenced to death in the early centuries of the church. One of the notable Church Fathers is Ignatius, the Bishop of Antioch, who died in Rome in the 2nd century being fed to the wild beasts in the Coliseum. As he made the long journey from Antioch to Rome by sea and land, he was under the watchful eye of Roman soldiers. However, they permitted him to write letters to various communities and to continue some of his pastoral ministry. Ignatius took every opportunity to strengthen the faithful as he prepared to follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

“In his Letter to the Romans, St. Ignatius speaks of his desire for the Eucharist and how he prefers it to all earthly things:”ⁱ

Do not talk about Jesus Christ while you desire the world. Do not let envy dwell among you... There is no fire of material longing within me, but only water living and speaking in me, saying within me, “Come to the Father.” I take no pleasure in corruptible food or the pleasures of this life. I want the bread of God, which is the flesh of Christ who is of the seed of David; and for drink I want his blood, which is incorruptible love.

Clearly, Ignatius has prayed long and hard about the Bread of Life Discourse we hear in today’s Gospel. Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst” (Jn 6:35).

In addition to asking for the Eucharist as his final meal, Ignatius also wanted to participate in the redemptive suffering of Christ. Ignatius urges believers not to interfere with the death sentence he has willingly accepted as his cross in life. “Allow me to become food for the wild beasts, through whose means it will be granted me to reach God. I am the wheat of God, and am ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ.”ⁱⁱ Ignatius is looking beyond his own suffering to the joy of being united with Christ in death and he doesn’t want anyone to hinder his example as a witness for the faith.

Ignatius had ample time to prepare for the end of his life and he serves as a worthy example for his faith and trust in God. If we are afforded the same time to prepare, we may do so through the sacraments. “Just as the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist form a unity called ‘the sacraments of Christian initiation,’ so too it can be said that Penance, the Anointing of the Sick and the Eucharist as viaticum constitute at the end of Christian life ‘the sacraments that prepare for our heavenly homeland’ or the sacraments that complete the earthly pilgrimage” (CCC 1525).

- Jesus suffered and died for us that we would be set free from sin. In the sacrament of Penance we place our trust in Jesus as we confess our sins to a priest and receive absolution.
- The Anointing of the Sick may be administered when someone is seriously ill, not just in danger of death. In either case, the sick person unites their suffering with the passion of Christ which offers a spiritual good for the individual and the whole Church. The effects of the sacrament include:
 - “the strengthening, peace, and courage to endure in a Christian manner the sufferings of illness or old age;
 - the forgiveness of sins, if the sick person was not able to obtain it through the sacrament of Penance;
 - the restoration of health, if it is conducive to the salvation of his soul;
 - [and] the preparation for passing over to eternal life” (CCC 1532).
- Viaticum is food for the journey as one prepares to die. Receiving Holy Communion in the Body and Blood of Christ in this way “has a particular significance and importance. It

is the seed of eternal life and the power of resurrection, according to the words of the Lord: 'He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day' (Jn 6:54). The sacrament of Christ once dead and now risen, the Eucharist is here the sacrament of passing over from death to life, from this world to the Father" (CCC 1524).

And let us not forget our example from Saint Stephen who also died as a martyr for the faith. "As they were stoning Stephen, he called out, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he fell to his knees and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them'; and when he said this, he fell asleep" (Acts 7:59-60).

ⁱ Martin, Francis; Wright, William M. IV. The Gospel of John. Pg. 123.

ⁱⁱ christianhistoryinstitute.org/incontext/article/ignatius