



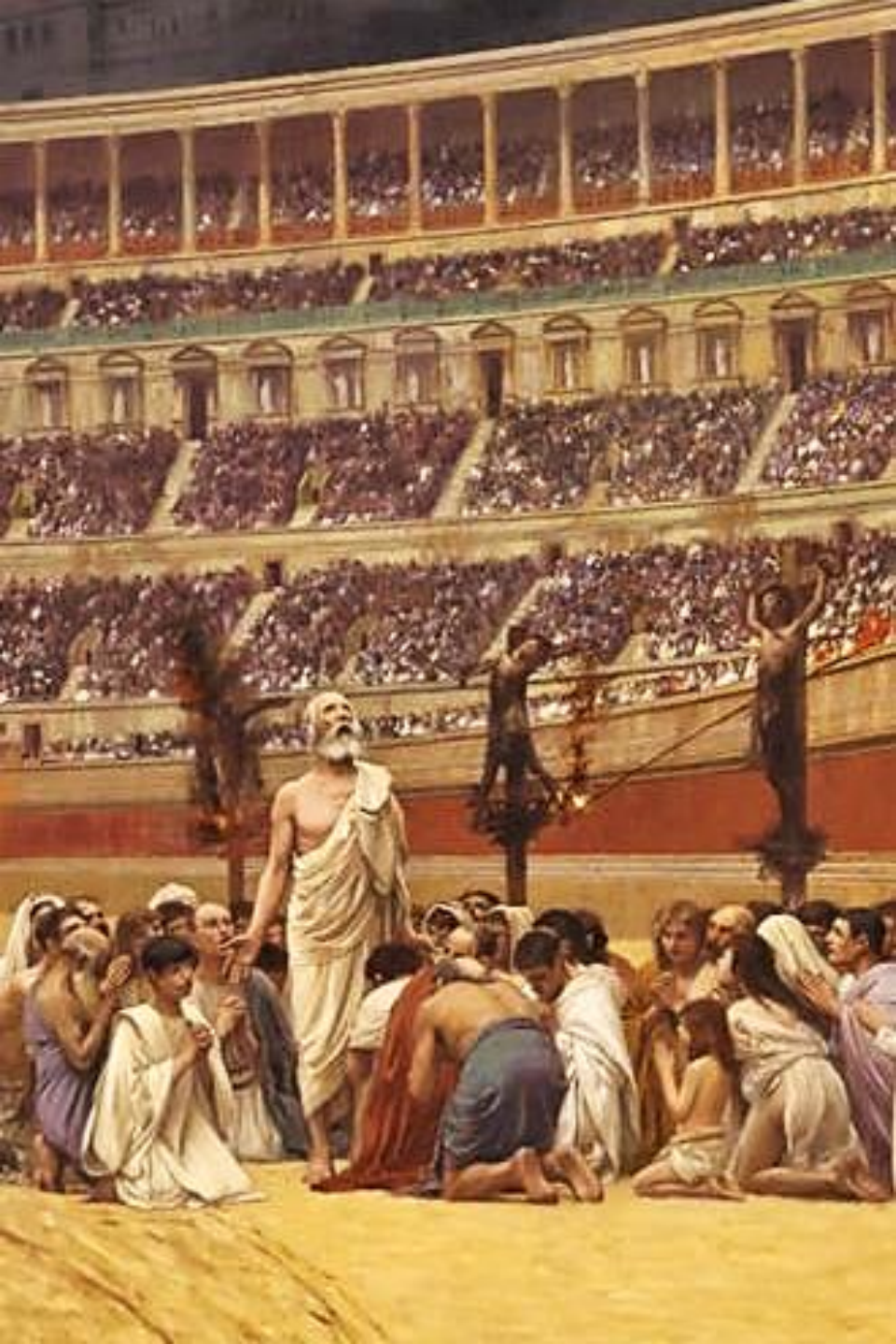
Catechetical Series:

What Catholics Believe & Why

THE LETTERS OF SAINT IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH

Behold The Truth

Discovering the What & Why of the Catholic Faith
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Bishop and Martyr

- ❖ Saint Ignatius was the third Bishop of the Church of Antioch, after Saint Evodius, the direct successor there of the Apostle Peter.
- ❖ Ignatius was also a disciple of the Apostle John; and friend to Saint Polycarp of Smyrna, another of John's disciples.
- ❖ In about 107 A.D., he was arrested by the Roman soldiers and brought to Rome to be thrown to the wild beasts in the Coliseum.
- ❖ On the journey from Antioch to Rome, he wrote seven letters to Churches in cities he passed along the way; and these letters have been handed down to us.

On the Blessed Trinity & Divinity of Christ

- ❖ Ignatius' letters provide invaluable insight into the beliefs and practices of the first generation of Christians to follow the Apostles.
- ❖ We find evidence, for instance, of the Christian belief in the Blessed Trinity. “You are like stones for a temple of the Father,” he writes, “prepared for the edifice of God the Father, hoisted to the heights by the crane of Jesus Christ, which is the cross, using for a rope the Holy Spirit.”
Letter to the Ephesians 9:1
- ❖ There is evidence as well for the belief in the divinity of Christ. In the opening of his *Letter to the Romans*, he writes, “I wish [you] an unalloyed joy in Jesus Christ, our God.”

The Importance of the Church & Sacraments

- ❖ Ignatius reveals a belief in the necessity of the Church and sacraments for salvation.
- ❖ “Do not err, my brethren,” he writes: “if anyone follow a schismatic, he will not inherit the Kingdom of God. Cf. 1 Cor. 6:9-10 If any man walk about with strange doctrine, he cannot lie down with the passion [of Christ]. Take care, then, to use one Eucharist; so that whatever you do, you do according to God: for there is one Flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup in the union of His Blood; one altar, as there is one bishop with the presbytery and my fellow servants, the deacons.” *Letter to the Philadelphians* 3:3-4:1



The Importance of the Church & Sacraments

- ❖ “Let that be considered a valid Eucharist which is celebrated by the bishop, or by one whom he appoints,” writes Ignatius. “Wherever the bishop appears, let the people be there; just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.”
Letter to the Smyrnaeans 8:1-2
- ❖ This is the earliest extant use of the name “Catholic” to identify Christ’s Church.



The Importance of the Church & Sacraments

- ❖ Interestingly enough, Antioch, Ignatius' bishopric, happens to be the same place where the followers of Christ were first called "Christians." Acts 11:26
- ❖ The first extant usage of "Trinity" comes from there as well, appearing in a letter of another of her bishops, Saint Theophilus, who states in about 181, "The three days before the luminaries were created [in *Genesis*] are types of the Trinity: God, his Word, and his Wisdom." *To Autolytus* 2:15

On Faith & Works

- ❖ The Church has always taught that faith and works together are necessary for salvation, as we read in the New Testament *Letter of Saint James*: “You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.” 2:24
- ❖ This teaching is also reflected in Ignatius’ letters. To his friend, Polycarp, for example, he writes, “Please him whom you serve as soldiers, from whom you receive your wages. Let none of you be found a deserter. Let your baptism serve as a shield, faith as a helmet, love as a spear, endurance as armor. Let your deeds be your deposits, in order that you may eventually receive the savings that are due you. Be, therefore, patient and gentle with one another, as God is with you.”
Letter to Saint Polycarp 6:2

On the Church Hierarchy

- ❖ Ignatius speaks repeatedly in his letters of the Church's three-tiered hierarchy of bishop, presbyter (priest), and deacon.
- ❖ To the Church in Smyrna, for instance, he writes, “Flee from schism as the source of mischief. You should all follow the bishop as Jesus Christ did the Father. Follow, too, the presbytery as you would the apostles; and respect the deacons as you would God's law. Nobody must do anything that has to do with the Church without the bishop's approval.”
Letter to the Smyrnaeans 8:1

On Episcopal Authority

- ❖ In his *Letter to the Trallians*, Ignatius implores the faithful to “respect the bishop as a type of the Father.” 3:1
- ❖ In this we see the roots of the Church’s practice of calling bishops and priest’s “father.”
- ❖ One can trace the roots of this practice back to the Apostles themselves, as Saint Paul reveals in his *First Letter to the Corinthians*, writing, “I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” 4:15

On Episcopal Authority

- ❖ It is clear that the bishop's chair was at the very center of the ancient Church's authority and the source of her unity.
- ❖ To the Philadelphians, Ignatius writes, "Those, indeed, who belong to God and to Jesus Christ—they are with the bishop. And those who repent and come to the unity of the Church—they too shall be of God, and will be living according to Jesus Christ. ... Take care, then, to use one Eucharist, so that whatever you do, you do according to God: for there is one Flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup in the union of His Blood; one altar, as there is one bishop with the presbytery and my fellow servants, the deacons. ... The Lord ... forgives all who repent, if their repentance leads to the unity of God and to the council of the bishop."

Letter to the Philadelphians 3:2-4:1; 8:1



On Reverence for the Church of Rome

- ❖ Of his seven letters, Ignatius' *Letter to the Romans* bears a distinctive tone.
- ❖ In the previous six letters, he speaks in the tone of a teacher. Yet in his *Letter to the Romans*, he takes on the reverent tone of a student.



On Reverence for the Church of Rome

- ❖ He calls the Church of Rome “the Church ... which holds the presidency in the location of the country of the Romans, worthy of God, worthy of honor, worthy of blessing, worthy of praise, worthy of success, worthy of sanctification, and, because you hold the presidency in love, named after Christ and named after the Father.”

Letter to the Romans Address



On Reverence for the Church of Rome

- ❖ Ignatius goes on to speak of the Apostles who earlier visited Rome and were martyred there, saying, “Not as Peter and Paul did, do I command you. They were Apostles, and I am a convict.”
Letter to the Romans 4:3



On Reverence for the Church of Rome

- ❖ Coincidentally, this is the only one of his letters in which Ignatius does not mention the bishop, imploring the faithful to obey him as he does in his other letters.
- ❖ It seems clear from the tone of the letter that he does not feel worthy to speak on behalf of the Bishop of Rome.
- ❖ “You have envied no one, but others you have taught,” he tells the Church of Rome, “I desire only that what you have enjoined in your instructions may remain in force.” *Letter to the Romans* 3:1



On the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist

- ❖ Ignatius' teachings on the Holy Eucharist are of particular interest since he learned directly from the sacred writer of the Fourth Gospel, in which Jesus declares, "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." John 6:54

On the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist

- ❖ In his *Letter to the Ephesians*, Ignatius calls the Holy Eucharist “the medicine of immortality, and the antidote which wards off death but yields continuous life in union with Jesus Christ.” 13:2
- ❖ And, warning the Christians in Smyrna to avoid the Gnostic Docetists due to their denial that Christ has truly come in the flesh, he says, “Take note of those who hold heterodox opinions on the grace of Jesus Christ which has come to us They abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer, because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the Flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, Flesh which suffered for our sins and which the Father, in His goodness, raised up again.”
Letter to the Smyrnaeans 6:2-7:2



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