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“Found to be above death”: Ecclesiology as Eucharistic Soteriology in the epistles of St. Ignatius of Antioch

Fr. John S. Romanides begins his paper, “The Ecclesiology of St. Ignatius of Antioch,” with this observation: “The key to understanding the ecclesiology of St. Ignatius is clearly his presuppositions concerning salvation.... his ecclesiology without at least a general examination of his soteriology would be incomprehensible” (Romanides, 1). Numerous papers and treatises have been composed regarding the ecclesiology of the second bishop of Antioch (d. 107) (whom Christian tradition holds to have been the child Christ brought into the midst of the disciples in Matthew 18), but most focus mainly on the institutional aspects of the saint’s ecclesiology. To modern Christians living in churches with episcopal government, it would be easy to project backwards onto St. Ignatius’s writings the images of their own institutional churches, while to some anti-episcopalian Christians St. Ignatius’s writings represent a deviation from the faith in that they advocate a style of church government to which they object. Both of these anachronistic approaches (being essentially mirror images of each other) miss the central point of Ignatius’s beliefs on the Church, that is, that the Church is a mystical, soteriological, Eucharistic community whose sole purpose is the salvation of its members from corruption and death. Therefore in this paper we shall examine the intrinsic and inseparable link between soteriology and ecclesiology in St. Ignatius’s epistles.

Ignatian Soteriology: Salvation is from Death and Satan

Salvation for Ignatius is from corruption and death, from the power of Satan. In his *Epistle to the Ephesians* (ch. 19), he writes “the virginity of Mary and her offspring, as well as the death of the Lord, seized (*elaven*) [sic] the prince of this world... Henceforth all things were in a state of tumult because He meditated the abolition of death” (Romanides, 2). Interestingly, Romanides’s text differs from the Greek found in Kirsopp Lake’s text, which uses *elathen* (“escaped the notice”) rather than *elaven* (Lake, 192). (The Sparks edition seemingly includes a translation of the same text as Lake.) Either way, the birth and death of our Lord thwarted the purpose of Satan, freeing the Christian united to Him from the control of the enemy. (Given the strong images which Ignatius tends to use elsewhere in his epistles, the Romanides rendering would seem to be more consistent with the saint’s style.) Ignatius in this passage directly connects death with Satan, the prince of this world. When Christ abolishes death by means of His birth and death, He thus frees man from Satan’s power. Ignatius’s association here is none other than that found in Hebrews 2:14-15:

Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through their fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage (NKJV).

The Apostle’s writing here also confirms the other association Ignatius makes in the passage in his *Ephesians* – that is, that the Incarnation of Christ is the means by which death is abolished and the devil’s power annulled. For Ignatius, the Incarnation is intimately bound up with the nature of salvation, and it is because of the Son of God

taking on flesh that we can be saved.

Further, as this passage from Hebrews indicates, the bondage which those in the power of Satan experience is expressed primarily as the fear of death. Fearing death, man in bondage tends to do everything he can to make his own life comfortable and secure, even at the expense of others. Only in this light is Ignatius's joy at his own martyrdom properly understood. He was not going so joyfully to his death in Rome because of some psychosis or "eschatological enthusiasm," but rather his joy is "the consequence of the realization of the inseparable relationship existing between death and Satan." Fleeing martyrdom "would have meant slavery to Satan" (Romanides, 5).

Salvation as a Mystical, Eucharistic Experience Constituting the Church

In St. Ignatius's *Letter to the Smyrnaens* (3:2), he directly connects a mystical, physical experience of the Apostles to their salvation:

And when he came to those with Peter he said to them, "Take, handle me, and see that I am not an incorporeal demon" [cf. Luke 24:39]. And they immediately touched him and believed, being mingled with his flesh and spirit. Therefore, they despised death and were found to be above death (Sparks, 111).

This physical element of mystical (i.e., uniting) experience is found throughout Ignatius's writings, as is evident in his frequent references to the Eucharist and especially owing to his ongoing fight against the Docetists (those who regarded Christ's humanity as being an illusion). This touching of Christ mystically united the Apostles to Him in "flesh and spirit," strengthening their faith – it is a Eucharistic experience. When the Apostles

experienced Christ physically and mystically, they both “despised death and were found to be above death.”

The image Ignatius uses here is Eucharistic and thus inherently physical. For Ignatius, union with the physical reality of our Lord’s incarnation is central to membership in the Church, the Lord’s Body. Later in this same epistle (7:1), he indicates those who are outside the Church by virtue of their abstinence from the Eucharist: “They abstain from Eucharist and prayer because they do not acknowledge that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ which suffered for our sins, which the Father raised up by his goodness” (Sparks, 112). He then goes on to tell Church members that it is “fitting to keep away from such men and not to speak about them privately or publicly” (Sparks, 112). Only in the unity of the Church is Eucharistic communion possible; only in that context can mystical union be achieved.

In his letter to the church in Ephesus (13:1), the nature of the Church’s unity, destroying death and Satan’s power, is to be found in worship and even in terms of physical location: “Therefore be eager to meet more frequently for thanksgiving and glory to God. For when you frequently come together [i.e., in the same place, *epi to auto*], the powers of Satan are destroyed and his destructive force is annihilated by the concord of your faith” (Sparks, 81). It is essential for St. Ignatius that the Church sojourning in each city be gathered together in the same place so that the unity of the Body of Christ may be both constituted and manifest in the Eucharist (Eph. 5:2-3): “Let no man deceive himself: if any one [sic] be not within the altar, he is deprived of the bread of God... He, therefore, that does not assemble in the same place (*epi to auto*), has already manifested his pride and condemned himself” (Romanides, 7).

The Bishop and the Eucharist

Perhaps the theme most often explored in analyses of St. Ignatius's ecclesiology is the episcopacy. Ignatius mentions the bishop multiple times throughout his epistles, placing him directly at the center of Church activity. Unfortunately, most works on our subject examine the bishop primarily in terms of his institutional position or as the logical and necessary cause of ecclesial authenticity. One such analysis is in Martin Eastwood's journal article "Church, God, and Martyrdom, in Ignatius of Antioch and Justin Martyr." For Eastwood, Ignatius's bishop is mainly God's representative, "without whom there is no church, and no valid baptism, Eucharist or marriage" (Eastwood, 2). This statement is true as far as it goes, but it fails to go deep enough.

W.D. Killen, an Irish Presbyterian historian, in his 19th century book, *The Ignatian Epistles Entirely Spurious*, makes a similar analysis:

All who love the faith once delivered to the saints, may be expected to regard with deference the letters of a martyr who lived on the borders of the apostolic age; but these Ignatian Epistles betray indications of a very different original, for they reveal a spirit of which no enlightened Christian can approve, and promulgate principles which would sanction the boldest assumptions of ecclesiastical despotism (Killen, 2).

A further reading of Killen's book shows that his own ecclesiology is at stake here – not believing that bishops have anything whatsoever to do with the essence of the Church, Killen's central argument is that Ignatius's letters preach a doctrine of "ecclesiastical despotism" and therefore must be spurious, since no one in the early Church would have taught such a thing. Again, the episcopacy (this time, from one of its enemies) is cast in the light of an institutional anachronism which St. Ignatius himself would likely have

found alien.

By sharp contrast, for St. Ignatius, the bishop's role is not primarily institutional, either validating sacraments or ruling as a despotic administrator. Rather, the bishop is the locus of the Church gathering together for the Eucharist. As Romanides says, "According to the thought of Ignatius there exists an inseparable relationship between the bishop and the Eucharist" (Romanides, 10). The unity which the Church experiences in the bishop is precisely because of the Eucharist: "Unity with the bishop and unity with each other in the one bread within the altar is precisely one identical reality. There is one flesh of the Lord, one cup, one altar, as there is one bishop" (Romanides, 10). St. Ignatius testifies to this himself in his *Epistle to the Philadelphians* (ch. 4): "Be eager, therefore, to use one Eucharist – for there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ and one cup for union with his blood [cf. 1 Cor. 10:16], one sanctuary, as there is one bishop" (Sparks, 105).

The institutional casting of the bishop's role in reading St. Ignatius is even further debunked in that the bishop of his time was not an administrator over multiple parishes but rather the pastor of a single community in each city where the Church sojourned. In Ignatius's early 2nd century context, the bishop's primary function is to be the president of the local liturgical community, not as a far-away middle manager or tyrannical despot.

Throughout Ignatius's epistles, the episcopacy is never cast in terms of an officer above the Church, but rather as a liturgical, Eucharistic president who serves within the Church; he refers even to the lowest rank of the clergy as his "fellow slaves" (Phil. 4). The bishop's proper place is at the altar. The reason that Ignatius so often asserts that disunity with the bishop equals disunity with the Church is not because the bishop is a tyrannical slaveholder but rather because he is the president at the Eucharist, and the

Eucharist is what constitutes the Church.

This theme is developed and synthesized from both Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christian viewpoints in Paul McPartlan's *The Eucharist Makes the Church*, whose title is taken from a statement by one of the book's subjects, French Cardinal Henri de Lubac. The other subject of the book's study is Metropolitan John Zizioulas, who makes a similar, deeper statement: "the Church constitutes the Eucharist while being constituted by it" (McPartlan, xvii). Both theologians examined in McPartlan's book, not surprisingly, make thorough use of the epistles of St. Ignatius of Antioch. With the Eucharist at the center of ecclesiology, the bishop is not a mediator so much as he is a liturgical regulator (Romanides, 12), and it is primarily in the liturgy that the faithful find, express, and develop their salvation. The essential identity of the Church is not as an institutional organization but as the local Eucharistic community gathered around its bishop.

Another point that Romanides quite aptly makes is that for Ignatius, the identification of bishops with the Apostles (popular in our day) would have been unthinkable (Romanides, 12). Ignatius himself makes a clear distinction in his *Epistle to the Trallians* (3:3): "I decided not to do so [i.e., write sharply on behalf of your bishop]... lest though actually a convict, I should give orders to you as if I were an apostle" (Sparks, 93). Indeed, if any comparison is drawn to the apostles in the letters of Ignatius, it is drawn with the presbyters, not the bishop (Tral. 2:2). Again, we see that Ignatius's notion of the episcopacy is not one with a dictatorial definition but is rather personal and pastoral, which is the effect of the Eucharist. That is, the bishop's office exists preeminently for a soteriological purpose within the community of the Church.

Summary and Conclusion

In the final greeting of his *Epistle to the Smyrnaens*, St. Ignatius closely associates the Eucharist, Christ's Incarnation, the Church hierarchy, and the mystical union of the Body of Christ:

I salute the bishop, worthy of God, and the presbytery, fit for God, and my fellow slaves the deacons and all of you, individually and together, in the name of Jesus Christ and in his flesh and blood, his passion and resurrection both fleshly and spiritual, in union with God and with you (Sparks, 114).

Packed into this salutation is a summary of Ignatius's ecclesiology. From the beginning, we see a clear hierarchy of the clergy – bishop, priest and deacon. Even within that hierarchy we see a paradox, for, far from regarding the deacons as beneath his episcopal dignity, Ignatius calls them his “fellow slaves.” He also is sure to salute the clergy with “all of you” (i.e., the whole church in Smyrna), both “individually and together,” indicating both the unity of the people of God and also their distinctiveness. The context and authority of his greeting is “in the name of Jesus Christ” and (Eucharistically!) “in his flesh and blood.” He goes further and salutes them not only in the name of Christ and in the context of the Eucharist, but also affirms the value and centrality of the historical events of Christ's life, “his passion and resurrection.” They are also “both fleshly and spiritual” (again, he denies Docetism). Finally, the mystical character of the Church is clearly indicated in that he greets them “in union with God and with you.”

For St. Ignatius of Antioch, the Church is precisely this: the local community of the

Body of Christ, with the believers mystically united with one another in equality and united with God, centered around the Eucharist, united in worship with the bishop and other clergy, in the name of Jesus Christ, in flesh and spirit, and partaking of the death and resurrection of Christ. In that community, worshiping together around the bishop and being mystically united to God and each other in the Eucharist, can salvation be found, which is life-giving, being freedom from the power of Satan, from corruption and death.

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