

1. February 2024

The letters of Saint Ignatius

In the traditional calendar, today is the feast of St Ignatius of Antioch. If anyone prefers a meditation based on the current calendar, it can be found here:
<http://en.elijamission.net/2022/02/03/>

According to Church tradition, St Ignatius of Antioch was a disciple of the Apostles Peter and John. He was later appointed Bishop of Antioch, the capital of Syria. He died a martyr's death and was venerated as a saint in the Church from the earliest times. He always called himself Theophorus (θεοφόρος), which means "God-bearer".

According to Origen, Eusebius and Jerome, St Ignatius would have been the third bishop of Antioch, if we count the apostle Peter as the first and his successor Evodius as the second. What is certain is that he was a bishop and that he was condemned to death under the Emperor Trajan. On his journey from Antioch to Rome, Ignatius wrote the seven letters that have come down to us and that are considered a jewel of early Christian faith and deep piety.

In today's meditation we will reflect on some extracts from this treasure of the Church. The first quotation we will hear is from chapter 15 of the Letter to the Ephesians by St Ignatius of Antioch:

"It is better for a man to be silent and be [a Christian], than to talk and not to be one. It is good to teach, if he who speaks also acts. There is then one Teacher, who spoke and it was done; while even those things which He did in silence are worthy of the Father. He who possesses the word of Jesus, is truly able to hear even His very silence, that he may be perfect, and may both act as he speaks, and be recognised by his silence. There is nothing which is hid from God, but our very secrets are near to Him. Let us therefore do all things as those who have Him dwelling in us, that we may be His temples, and He may be in us as our God, which indeed He is, and will manifest Himself before our faces. Wherefore we justly love Him".

Silence has great value. It is not silence out of fear of people, or out of insecurity, which tends to lead to muteness. Rather, it is a silence that comes from resting in the Lord and

being aware of the meaning of the word. Too many words can lead to the death of the spirit, while what really counts and is essential cannot be realised.

Let us think of churches: how valuable they are when they offer us a place of silence and worship, but how destructive is unnecessary and worldly chatter that prevents us from listening to the voice of the Lord! In fact, God wants to communicate with us in silence and through our attentive listening, so that our words also gain new value and strength.

How important it is to have good teachers who transmit the Word of God and teach us how to live it! They are more precious than gold. Let us remember these words of the Lord *"The righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father"* (Mt 13:43).

If we are to glorify God and serve people, there must be consistency between what we teach and what we do. In English we have the expression "walk your talk", which means: "Put into practice what you say".

Those who have received the gift of teaching must be aware of the great responsibility they have and the importance of their example. They will understand this if they look at Jesus Himself: Not only did He preach the Word, but He glorified God with all His being and with all His works.

Let us listen to another passage from a letter of St Ignatius, this time to the Romans (Chapter 6):

"All the pleasures of the world, and all the kingdoms of this earth, shall profit me nothing. It is better for me to die on behalf of Jesus Christ, than to reign over all the ends of the earth. For what shall a man be profited, if he gain the whole world, but lose his own soul? Him I seek, who died for us: Him I desire, who rose again for our sake. This is the gain which is laid up for me. Pardon me, brethren: do not hinder me from living, do not wish to keep me in a state of death; and while I desire to belong to God, do not give me over to the world. Allow me to obtain pure light: when I have gone there, I shall indeed be a man of God. Permit me to be an imitator of the passion of my God. If any one has Him within himself, let him consider what I desire, and let him have sympathy with me, as knowing how I am straitened (cf. Phil 1:23)".

These words express St Ignatius' longing for martyrdom. He wanted so much to be like his Lord that he actually longed to die like Him. It seems that he was even a little afraid that his own people might prevent him from suffering such a death.

This attitude can only be explained by the spirit of fortitude that was working intensely in him, for the longing to suffer the tortures of martyrdom in order to resemble the Lord is something that exceeds our ability and our own desire to please God.

But we too need the spirit of fortitude to remain faithful to the witness of the faith in our time. Certainly, St Ignatius of Antioch is ready to intercede for us, so that, just as he did not flee from the lions that would have torn his body to pieces, we may not flee from the "lions" that "*prowls around , seeking some one to devour*" (1 Pet 5:8), but may resist them in the strength of the Lord.