

Homily for October 17, 2017

SAINT IGNATIUS, bishop of Antioch, was a disciple of Saint John. When Domitian persecuted the Church, he obtained peace for his own flock by fasting and prayer. But for his part he desired to suffer with Christ, and to prove himself a perfect disciple. In the year 107, Trajan, the Emperor, came to Antioch, and forced the Christians to choose between apostasy and death. "Who are you, poor devil," the emperor said when Ignatius was brought before him, "who sets our commands at naught?" "Call not him 'poor devil,'" Ignatius answered, "who bears God within him." And when the emperor questioned him about his meaning, the saint explained that he bore in his heart Christ crucified for his sake. Thereupon the emperor condemned him to be torn to pieces by wild beasts at Rome. Saint Ignatius thanked God, who had so honored him, "binding him in the chains of Paul, his apostle."

He journeyed to Rome, guarded by soldiers, with no fear except of losing the martyr's crown. He was devoured by lions in the Roman amphitheatre. The wild beasts left nothing of his body, except a few bones, which were reverently treasured at Antioch, until their removal to the Church of Saint Clement at Rome, in 637. After the martyr's death, several Christians saw him in vision standing before Christ, and interceding for them.

As St. Paul had written some 50 years earlier, in his letter to the Romans, Ignatius was not ashamed of the power of the Gospel. He saw in it what St. Paul saw, that everything in this life is to help us be more fully conformed to Christ. He also saw that in a world like this, there are so many who live with a different agenda. People exchanging the truth of God for a lie and therefore being governed by the lust of their hearts.

St. Ignatius was a man who clearly saw the distinction between living for Christ and living for self. It was because of this clarity that he was able to write:

No earthly pleasures, no kingdoms of this world can benefit me in any way. I prefer death in Christ Jesus to power over the farthest limits of the earth. He who died in place of us is the one object of my quest. He who rose for our sakes is my one desire. The time for my birth is close at hand. Forgive me, my brothers. Do not stand in the way of my birth to real life; do not wish me stillborn. My desire is to belong to God. Do not, then, hand me back to the world.

Ignatius also understood the Lord's word in today's Gospel. The Pharisees had a way of seeing their religious practises as a series of obligations but were not always sincere from their hearts. As Jesus criticized them elsewhere, they were hypocrites, play actors, appearing devout on the outside, but interiorly filled with corrupt and self-serving motives.

Ignatius expresses what it is like to offer alms from those gifts that are within when he writes:

My desire is to belong to God. Do not, then, hand me back to the world. Do not try to tempt me with material things. Let me attain pure light. Only on my arrival there can I be fully a human being.

Ignatius in one of the earliest martyrs of the Church. While we will probably not be called to suffer for Christ in the way he did, may we affirm that what motivates my life is the Gospel of Jesus Christ that is my all in all and give ourselves completely to him.