

THE WHEAT OF GOD

21ST CENTURY MEDITATIONS

ON

**1ST CENTURY CATHOLIC
EPISTLES**

NEW REVISED EDITION

by

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INTRODUCTION

The Harbor of Troas

It is the year of our Lord 107 and the sun shines brightly this day on the Harbor of Troas, a city of Asia Minor, not far from the Troy of the Trojan War. It sparkles on the waters of the Aegean Sea and glints off the armor of a squad of Roman soldiers who guard some prisoners headed for Rome. One prisoner, an elderly man with chains on his arms and legs, sits writing. The soldiers jest among themselves, throw dice, and at times roughly jostle and jeer at this man, but he continues writing. He is anxious to finish his letters before embarking on board ship for his ultimate journey to the Arena in Rome. There he is “to be thrown to wild beasts for the pleasure of the people” as, according to tradition, the Emperor Trajan said when he condemned him.

Who is this man? What is his crime? And, why is he writing letters so feverishly?

He will be known in Church history as St. Ignatius of Antioch, and his crime is being a Christian bishop. His letters will be the subject of discussion and meditation in this book.

More about Ignatius

In time various legends developed regarding him. One of them concerns an event in the gospel of Matthew in which Jesus was asked who was greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.¹ He called to Himself a young child standing on the fringe of the crowd. The child came running, and Jesus picked him up in His arms and placed him in the midst of His listeners. He told them that only those who were humble like this little child would enter the Kingdom of Heaven. According to legend, this child Our Lord placed among His listeners that day was Ignatius of Antioch. Although the story is probably not historically factual, it is valid regarding the time in which Ignatius lived; he could have seen a very young child at the time of Christ's ministry on earth, or shortly thereafter.

Early Christian history tells us that Ignatius became a prominent figure in the first century Church. Tradition also tells us that he was once, like his friend St. Polycarp, a disciple of the Apostle John. In his youth he may have sat at the feet of John many times and heard the old apostle tell of the days when he, in his youth, sat at the feet of Christ. Ignatius ultimately became the third bishop of Antioch, the second after St. Peter.²

Antioch in those days was a busy port in the Mediterranean and one of the most important cities in the world. Into this grand metropolis of marble buildings and temples sailed the Roman Emperor Trajan around the year 107. According to one account of Ignatius' martyrdom, the Emperor was anxious to establish peace and order in that area of his empire. The Christians, who were growing in numbers, were regarded as a disturbing element.

¹ Matthew 18:1-5.

² Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, III:36.

Ignatius, anticipating persecution of his flock, voluntarily, and perhaps somewhat rashly, appeared before the emperor. His writing gives the reader the impression that he was of an impetuous nature and that he recognized this in himself. He once wrote that a fellow bishop impressed him by his mildness and quiet dignity. Ignatius took note of his ability “to accomplish more by silence than by vain words” (Letter to the Philadelphians 1:1).

The interview with the emperor resulted in Ignatius’ being condemned to death in the Roman Arena. He was chained to and guarded by a squad of Roman soldiers whom he called “ten leopards—a band of soldiers who became worse when one treats them kindly” (Letter to the Romans V:1). They traveled by land thorough Asia Minor where his entourage stopped at Philadelphia, Smyrna, and Troas. He was then taken by sea to Neapolis in Greece, near Philippi, and from there to Rome. This trip, which lasted some months, is reminiscent of St. Paul’s journey to Rome in chains about fifty years earlier.

During this time, Ignatius wrote seven letters. The first three he wrote at Smyrna to the neighboring churches of Ephesus, Magnesia, and Tralles, which had sent delegates to meet him when he arrived at Smyrna. The fourth he wrote to the Church of Rome dated August 24. At Troas, he wrote letters to the churches of Philadelphia and Smyrna and to his friend, Bishop Polycarp. From there, he sailed into history as a martyr in Rome. The exact date of his martyrdom is uncertain. One story lists the date as December 20, just before the closing of the Arena for the Roman festival of the Saturnalia. The Greek Orthodox Church observes this as his feast day. The Roman Rite of the Catholic Church commemorates him on October 17, a day associated with his memory in Antioch since the fourth century.

The Relevance of Ignatius Today

This book, which takes the reader back to the days when the Church was young, is both discursive and devotional in nature. Each chapter consists of excerpts from Ignatius' letters concerning a particular Christian topic.³ Each topic is followed by a discussion that applies the quotations to the problems of modern life, and ends with a short prayer.

What is the purpose of discussing letters written so long ago? What relevance do the problems of the Church at the beginning of the second century have for the Church in the twenty-first? The relevance is especially significant for two groups.

First, faithful Catholics who are disturbed to see difficulties and dissent in the Church today may profit by comparing the situation in our time with that of Ignatius. Those striving to live Christians lives today are doing so in a mainly pagan society, just as the first Christians did. The realization that the early Church had to defend herself against those who were trying to tear apart her teachings so recently handed down from Christ should bring today's Catholics solace and encouragement as they realize that the problems of today's Church are not of this age alone.

Second, those who are confused or simply curious about what the early Church looked like will begin to discover that the Church back then was, as now, Catholic. Many lukewarm Catholics have been shaken out of their complacency by this exciting discovery, and many Protestant Christians have found their way into the fullness of the Catholic Faith after becoming acquainted with the early Church Fathers such as Ignatius.

³ The translation is that of the author. The manuscript used is the one currently accepted by scholars, known as the "short recension" (also called by some the "middle recension" or the Vossian Epistles").

All Christians benefit from what Ignatius left us. As we read these ancient letters, we can sense in Ignatius a love for Christ that transcends the centuries. “I am the wheat of God,” he wrote, “and I am being ground by the teeth of wild beasts that I may be found to be the pure bread of Christ” (Letter to the Romans IV:1).

CHAPTER ❖ ONE

COMMITMENT

It is better for me to die in Christ Jesus than to rule over the ends of the earth.... Permit me to be an imitator of the Passion of my God.

Letter to the Romans VI:1,3

Only pray for me that I may have inward and outward strength, not only to speak, but to will, not only to be called a Christian, but to be found to be one.

Letter to the Romans III:2

It is fitting then not only to be called a Christian but also to be one.

Letter to the Magnesians IV:1

Discussion:

These quotations of Ignatius tell us of an essential attribute of a Christian: total commitment to Christ regardless of the personal cost. It was just such a commitment of the early Christians—despite the risk of property loss, imprisonment, and even death—that helped Christianity prevail over the might of the Roman Empire.

This attribute is often sadly lacking among Christians today. How many of us are actually ready to do what our Savior requires of us if we are to be His disciples? Are we prepared to take up our crosses and follow Him? Such commitment for those who live in modern Western society, where imprisonment and death for our faith is not a risk, still has its price. For the true Christian there is no room for compromise, and no justification for dividing one's life into two compartments, the religious and the secular. We can never succumb to the temptation to say, "As a Christian I personally believe *this*, but as a politician, physician, lawyer, businessman, etc., I do *that*, because that is the accepted thing in the secular culture. *That* will make me popular, gain me advancement, and make life easy for me in this world."

It is interesting to note that once the threat of physical persecution had ended, some of the early Christians shied away from public profession of their faith, just as most of us do today. St. Augustine⁴ tells the story of such a man, Victorinus, who did not want to make the public profession of Christianity that was required for Church membership. He was an elderly and much-respected teacher who had taught many members of the Roman Senate. So highly regarded was he that there was a statue of him erected in the Senate House. The Senate, even under the Emperors, was a prestigious institution. A great many of its members were pagans who thought that Christianity was only for the stupid and the uneducated. Victorinus did not want to announce his faith for fear of the laughter and ridicule that might come from his former students who held him in high esteem. He would say to a Christian friend, "I am already Christian." But the friend would reply, "I will not consider you such until I see you in the Church." Victorinus would

⁴ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book VIII, Chapter II.

laugh and say, “Do walls then make a Christian?” However, he knew in his heart why he did not become a member of the Church. After meditating long and hard on the Scripture passage in which Christ said that those who deny Him before men He would deny before His Father in Heaven,⁵ Victorinus was finally able to make a public profession of Christ.

How many of us today likewise hesitate to affirm our Christian beliefs in public? When we hear the Church criticized and defamed, do we speak in her defense, or do we instead keep silent? Are we ashamed of our faith? This is a matter for all of us to ponder in our hearts lest we be found worthless servants of the Lord.

⁵ Matthew 10:33.



Prayer:

Lord, give us the grace to be courageous Christians twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week. Give us the strength of the Holy Spirit to carry You to those we meet. Grant us the gift of discernment to avoid compromising our faith in order to make our worldly life easier. Amen.



APPENDIX

John Henry Cardinal Newman, the famous Anglican convert, found these Catholic doctrines in the Ignatian Epistles.⁴⁶

1. The Church was Divinely established as a visible society.
2. The salvation of souls is its end.
3. Those who separate themselves from it cut themselves off from God (Philadelphians, III).
4. The principle of dogmatic faith.
5. The doctrine of the Incarnation.
6. The dissemination of a new and divine nature in the fallen stock of Adam, and that by means of the Eucharist.
7. The divine origin and obligation of the Episcopal system of government (Philadelphians, VII).
8. The divine authority of the bishop (Magnesians, III).
9. The doctrine of the three orders (Ibid., VI).
10. The doctrine of unity (Philadelphians, III).
11. The holiness of the Church (Smyrnaeans, Magnesians, Ephesians, Trallians, and Romans).
12. The doctrine of the Church's Catholicity (Ephesians, III).
13. The diocesan system (Polycarp, I).
14. The sin of going by individual judgement in matters of faith (Philadelphians, III).

⁴⁶ The Ignatian Epistles played an important part in the conversion of John Henry Cardinal Newman.

15. The sacramental character of unity (Magnesians, VII).
16. The consecrating power and authority of bishops over all Church appointments (Smyrnaeans, VIII).
17. The religious character of matrimony (Polycarp, VI).
18. The importance of united prayer (Trallians, XII; Ephesians, XIII).
19. The supernatural virtue of virginity (Polycarp, V).
20. The acceptableness of good works (Polycarp, VI).
21. Of grace as inherent, not merely external (Ephesians' title).
22. Of ecclesiastical councils (Polycarp, VII).
23. Of departed saints remembering or at least benefiting us (Trallians, XIII).
24. Of communion with them in life and death (Ephesians, XII).
25. The infallibility of the Church (Philadelphians, III; Ephesians, XVI).
26. The doctrine of the Eucharist (Smyrnaeans, VIII) which word we find for the first time applied to the Blessed Sacrament.
27. The term Catholic Church is used for the first time to designate all Christians (Smyrnaeans, VIII).
28. The primacy of the See of Rome (Romans, Intro.).
29. The acceptableness of good works.
30. His recognition of the Lord's day.