



Most Reverend Raymond J. Boland

Bishop Emeritus

Diocese Kansas City ~ St. Joseph

Preaching The Just Word

Feast of St. Ignatius of Antioch

Conception Abbey

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IGNATIUS was the second, some say third, bishop of Antioch. He was a Syrian and a convert from paganism. He knew John and Paul and, in his younger days, he may have met Peter, who was, we believe, the first bishop of Antioch.

We know very little about his early life until he happened to run afoul of Trajan, who just happened to be the Roman Emperor. They had a disagreement about God and Ignatius made it quite clear that he, for one, was not interested in idolatry. "Wonderful," Trajan's Public Relations team surmised, "He has played into our hands. The Emperor has been out of Rome for a few years expanding the Empire and we fear his popularity may be slipping in the polls. We need to give the citizens something spectacular." So Ignatius was condemned to death. He was put in chains and with an armed guard he was shipped back to Rome there to be fed to the lions in the public arena. The Romans had a special love of entertainment with plenty of violence. They loved their lions and the lions seemed to love Christians. And come to think of it, even after 2000 years that strain of violence still haunts our genes and our games!

The trip to Rome was painfully slow. The first boat sailed along the Mediterranean shore of Asia Minor, today's Turkey, and they all disembarked in Smyrna. The new and very young bishop of Smyrna gave hospitality to Ignatius who had a layover of many weeks before the boat from Greece arrived. With time on his hands Ignatius wrote four letters, imitating Paul, no doubt, to the young churches of the region - one to Ephesus, one to Magnesia, one to Tralles and a rather unusual one to the Christian community at Rome telling them of his impending arrival and warning them not to do anything to prevent his martyrdom. The boat arrived and he set sail to Troas, where he sat down and wrote three more letters, one to Philadelphia, one to Smyrna and a personal letter to his gracious host, Polycarp. You should read his seven letters. They tell us so much about the Church in the early years of the second century, its challenges, its problems, its growing pains. He knew Polycarp was getting a rough time from some of his critics so he advised him -

"DO NOT LET THEM DISTURB YOU. STAND FIRM LIKE AN ANVIL UNDER THE HAMMER. A GREAT BOXER WILL TAKE A BEATING AND YET WIN THROUGH."

(Obviously, he had seen "Rocky!")

Ignatius preached the Just Word. The Christian, because of his love of God, must give himself totally in charity (agape) to the community

"IN CARING FOR THE WIDOW, AND THE ORPHAN, THE OPPRESSED, THE PRISONER, AS WELL AS THE FREEMAN, THE HUNGRY AND THE THIRSTY." (SMYR. 6:2)

(He did this for the future use of Fr. Walter Burghardt!)

Now, I want to let you in on a secret. Some months ago, there was a knock at my door on Janssen Place. I looked out, turned off the alarm, removed the chain - all reflections of the society we have created around us - and there was Ignatius. "Come on in," I said to him. "Sit down and have a glass of wine." He did so and I got the wine. "We have a winery here in our diocese in Weston, so this is a local vintage."

Ignatius stayed with me for a few weeks. He walked around Kansas City and traveled around the diocese. He observed and absorbed the local scene. Shortly before he left he asked for some writing paper indicating that he needed to write a few letters. He wasn't interested in e-mail. He left four of the letters next to my copying machine. Shortly thereafter he left Kansas City by boat for St. Joseph. When he arrived there he prepared three more letters, one of them addressed to me personally.

Let me show you the letters.

Letter 1: Addressed to the Board of Education

God has blessed your city with thousands of fine young men and women. Why are you short-changing them? Why do almost half of them never finish high school? Of those who do, why are so many functionally illiterate? Why are we lobotomizing the minds of our children, stunting their intellectual growth and condemning our city to mediocrity?

"A mind is a terrible thing to waste."

(Keep this sentence for a future commercial!)

Letter 2: Addressed to Whiteman A.F.B.

I visited the base. It is a shrine for the B-2 planes, popularly known as the stealth bombers. Even after billions of dollars have been spent on design and development, it is estimated that each plane costs about \$2 billion. There they sit regally enthroned, each baptized with the name of a state and each comfortably protected in its own hanger chapel.

You are supposed to be a nation of peacemakers. Peacemakers? How can we be "peacemakers" if all we can say is -- "Do what we want you to do or we will bomb you to hell?"

Your cities have wonderful museums dedicated to the past. You have various academies of science and you even have a War College in Washington, D.C. Why not forgo the building of one less bomber and use the two billion dollars to build an Academy for Peace. We badly need an Academy for Peace.

Letter 3: Addressed to Holy Family Worker House

Thanks for letting me dole out the bread, two slices for each outstretched plate, a little stale perhaps, but better than nothing. Yes, I expected to see the old men in ragged clothes, even the winos clutching their paper bags. . .but the women and the children, their only meal that day -- something is awfully wrong!!

Letter 4: Addressed to Jefferson City -- to the Governor and the Legislature

I know that I have been condemned to die. My crime is that I have found and I worship the one true God. Of this I am guilty and not afraid to die. But, I wonder. If I had been a Roman citizen I could not have received the death penalty. I am puzzled by the color of Death Row. Can it be true that for the same crimes those who have pale skins receive a better defense and rarely merit the death penalty?

Letter 5: Addressed to the Army Corps of Engineers

I enjoyed the river. But what has happened to it? This was once a place of crystal clear waters and pristine beauty. Lewis and Clark came this way to open the West. Now it is dirty, streaked with chemical waste, poisoned by toxic fertilizers, a premature graveyard for unsuspecting waterfowl and thirsty animals, the creatures of Genesis! The barges of commerce don't move anymore -- the water level is too low. Unemployment is mounting, up and down the river. Ironically, there are boats, big boats, legally parked in pools of water. They don't go anywhere! They promote gambling, big time gambling.

Letter 6: [addressee blank]

Amazingly I found that this page was blank. I immediately suspected that Ignatius had placed the letter upside down on the fax machine.

Letter 7: Addressed to the Bishop Personally

Thanks for your hospitality. You have a nice chapel but you don't seem to be wearing out the kneelers on the prie-dieu!

Took a peak in your closet -- do you really need all those clothes? And the ice box -- how many "Healthy Choice" dinners can you really eat? And the books, you know, at your age, you're never going to read half of them! Make it easier for your executor -- get rid of the stuff. Remember what I said in my letter to the Romans,
"There is no more zeal in me to love material things."

Now I'm on my way to Rome. I have a date with God.

(signed) *Ignatius*

P.S. that Weston wine was awful -- did you ever hear of California?

P.SS. When you celebrate my feast remember to identify me as Ignatius of Antioch. I don't want to be confused with that other Ignatius -- you know, the one from Loyola. I am not a Jesuit.

A few weeks later I received a phone call from Ignatius. I said, "Hello Iggy." We've become good friends so he's "Iggy" to me at this time.

"Iggy, I want to ask you about that blank page. Did you put it upside down on fax machine?" "No," he said, "I did that deliberately. That letter is for your staff, for all your priests, your deacons, your teachers, your social workers, indeed for all your co-workers. Each one of them is

working for the Lord. Each one of them has their own special apostolate. Tell them to listen to the Just Word, to preach the Just Word, to do the Just Word." (This is an unsolicited endorsement.)

"OK, Iggy, I'll tell them. I'll be speaking to them on October 17th. Have you any final message for them?"

"Yes, tell them what Churchill said."

"Iggy, how do you know about Churchill? He came well after your time."

"I know all about Churchill - remember I'm now a saint!"

"Alright, do you want me to tell them about fighting on the beaches and protecting the green fields of merry old England?"

"No."

"Should I tell them about what Churchill said to the Royal Air Force - 'never was so much owed by so many to so few?'"

"No, although that is certainly true."

"Do I offer them what Churchill did, 'blood, sweat and tears?'"

"No, although that is true also. Tell them what he said to the last Graduation Class he addressed."

"Yes, I remember there were seven words, perhaps one word for each of your seven letters. I have never forgotten them. He proclaimed,

'NEVER GIVE UP, NEVER NEVER GIVE UP.'"

"Iggy, I'll certainly tell them."