

St. Ignatius of Antioch

Letter to the to the Smyrnaeans

Translated by Cyril Richardson

Heartiest greetings in all sincerity and in God's Word from Ignatius, the "God-inspired," to the church of God the Father and the beloved Jesus Christ, which is at Smyrna in Asia. By God's mercy you have received every gift; you abound in faith and love, and are lacking in no gift. You are a wonderful credit to God and real saints.

1 I extol Jesus Christ, the God who has granted you such wisdom. For I detected that you were fitted out with an unshakable faith, being nailed, as it were, body and soul to the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, and being rooted in love by the blood of Christ. Regarding our Lord, you are absolutely convinced that on the human side he was actually sprung from David's line, Son of God according to God's will and power, actually born of a virgin, baptized by John, that "all righteousness might be fulfilled by him," and actually crucified for us in the flesh, under Pontius Pilate and Herod the Tetrarch. (We are part of His fruit which grew out of his most blessed Passion.) And thus, by his resurrection, he raised a standard to rally his saints and faithful forever — whether Jews or Gentiles — in one body of his Church.

2 For it was for our sakes that he suffered all this, to save us. And he genuinely suffered, as even he genuinely raised himself. It is not as some unbelievers say, that his Passion was a sham. It's they who are a sham! Yes, and their fate will fit their fancies — they will be ghosts and apparitions.

3 For myself, I am convinced and believe that even after the resurrection he was in the flesh. Indeed, when he came to Peter and his friends, he said to them, "Take hold of me, touch me and see that I am not a bodiless ghost." And they at once touched him and were convinced, clutching his body and his very breath. For this reason they despised death itself, and proved its victors. Moreover, after the resurrection he ate and drank with them as a real human being, although in spirit he was united with the Father.

4 I urge these things on you, my friends, although I am well aware that you agree with me. But I warn you in advance against wild beasts in human shapes. You must not only refuse to receive them, but if possible, you must avoid meeting them. Just pray for them that they may somehow repent, hard as that is. Yet Jesus Christ, our genuine life, has the power to bring it about. If what our Lord did is a sham, so is my being in chains. Why, then, have I given myself up completely to death, fire, sword, and wild beasts? For the simple reason that near the sword means near God. To be with wild beasts means to be with God. But it must all be in the name of Jesus Christ. To share in his Passion I go through everything, for he who became the perfect man gives me the strength.

5 Yet in their ignorance some deny him — or rather have been denied by him, since they advocate death rather than the truth. The prophets and the law of Moses have failed to convince them —

nay, to this very day the gospel and the sufferings of each one of us have also failed, for they class our sufferings with Christ's. What good does anyone do me by praising me and then reviling my Lord by refusing to acknowledge that he carried around live flesh? He who denies this has completely disavowed him and carries a corpse around. The names of these people, seeing they are unbelievers, I am not going to write down. No, far be it from me even to recall them until they repent and acknowledge the Passion, which means our resurrection.

6 Let no one be misled: heavenly beings, the splendor of angels, and principalities, visible and invisible, if they fail to believe in Christ's blood, they too are doomed. "Let him accept it who can." Let no one's position swell his head, for faith and love are everything — there is nothing preferable to them.

Pay close attention to those who have wrong notions about the grace of Jesus Christ, which has come to us, and note how at variance they are with God's mind. They care nothing about love: they have no concern for widows or orphans, for the oppressed, for those in prison or released, for the hungry or the thirsty.

7 They hold aloof from the Eucharist and from services of prayer, because they refuse to admit that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ, which suffered for our sins and which, in his goodness, the Father raised. Consequently those who wrangle and dispute God's gift face death. They would have done better to love and so share in the resurrection. The right thing to do, then, is to avoid such people and to talk about them neither in private nor in public. Rather pay attention to the prophets and above all to the gospel. There we get a clear picture of the Passion and see that the resurrection has really happened.

8 Flee from schism as the source of mischief. You should all follow the bishop as Jesus Christ did the Father. Follow, too, the presbytery as you would the apostles; and respect the deacons as you would God's law. Nobody must do anything that has to do with the Church without the bishop's approval. You should regard that Eucharist as valid which is celebrated either by the bishop or by someone he authorizes. Where the bishop is present, there let the congregation gather, just as where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church. Without the bishop's supervision, no baptisms or love feasts are permitted. On the other hand, whatever he approves pleases God as well. In that way everything you do will be on the safe side and valid.

9 It is well for us to come to our senses at last, while we still have a chance to repent and turn to God. It is a fine thing to acknowledge God and the bishop. He who pays the bishop honor has been honored by God. But he who acts without the bishop's knowledge is in the devil's service.

By God's grace may you have an abundance of everything! You deserve it. You have brought me no end of comfort; may Jesus Christ do the same for you! Whether I was absent or present, you gave me your love. May God requite you! If for his sake you endure everything, you will get to him.

10 It was good of you to welcome Philo and Rheus Agathopus as deacons of the Christ God. They accompanied me in God's cause, and they thank the Lord on your behalf that you provided them every comfort. I can assure you you will lose nothing by it. Prisoner as I am, I am giving my life

for you — not that it's worth much! You did not scorn my chains and were not ashamed of them. Neither will Jesus Christ be ashamed of you. You can trust him implicitly!

Your prayers have reached out as far as the church at Antioch in Syria. From there I have come, chained with these magnificent chains, and I send you all greetings. I do not, of course, deserve to be a member of that church, seeing I am the least among them. Yet it was will to give me the privilege — not, indeed, for anything I had done of my own accord, but by his grace. Oh, I want that grace to be given me in full measure, that by your prayers I may get to God! Well, then, so that your own conduct may be perfect on earth and in heaven, it is right that your church should honor God by sending a delegate in his name to go to Syria and to congratulate them on being at peace, on recovering their original numbers, and on having their own corporate life restored to them. To my mind that is what God would want you to do: to send one of your number with a letter, and thus join with them in extolling the calm which God has granted them, and the fact that they have already reached a haven, thanks to your prayers. Seeing you are perfect, your intentions must be perfect as well. Indeed, if you want to do what is right, God stands ready to give you his help.

12 The brothers in Troas send their love to you. From there I am sending this letter to you by Burrhus. You joined with your Ephesian brothers in sending him to be with me, and he has altogether raised my spirits. I wish everyone would be like him, since he is a model of what God's ministry should be. God's grace will repay him for all he has done for me. Greetings to your bishop (he is such a credit to God!), and to your splendid presbytery and to my fellow slaves the deacons, and to you all, every one of you, in Jesus Christ's name, in his flesh and blood, in his Passion and resurrection, both bodily and spiritual, and in unity — both God's and yours. Grace be yours, and mercy, peace, and endurance, forever.

13 Greetings to the families of my brothers, along with their wives and children, and to the virgins enrolled with the widows. I bid you farewell in the Father's power. Philo, who is with me, sends you greetings. Greetings to Tavia's family. I want her to be firmly and thoroughly grounded in faith and love. Greetings to Alce, who means a great deal to me, and to the inimitable Daphnus and to Eutecnus and to each one of you. Farewell in God's grace.