

Our Patron: Saint Ignatius of Antioch

"I am the wheat of God. I must be ground by the teeth of wild beasts to become the pure bread of Christ."

In these words, Ignatius, the third bishop of Antioch, pleaded with his influential friends in Rome not to interfere with his impending martyrdom. Thus on December 20 in the year 107, Ignatius was escorted from the Roman galley that had taken several years to deliver its prisoner from Antioch to Rome and was brought to the Flavian Amphitheater, the Coliseum, where at the conclusion of the Roman festival he was fed to the lions.

Who was this man whose martyrdom became the example for all Christians? Who was this man whose life we here at Tarpon Springs honor and whose intercession we pray for?

Ignatius was a Syrian by birth who became attracted to the first generation of Christians. Some authors believe that he may have been a disciple of St. John the Evangelist. He certainly was friends with St. Polycarp, one of St. John's closest followers. Tradition has it that St. Peter himself made Ignatius the third bishop of Antioch, the second largest city of the entire Roman empire (only Rome was larger).

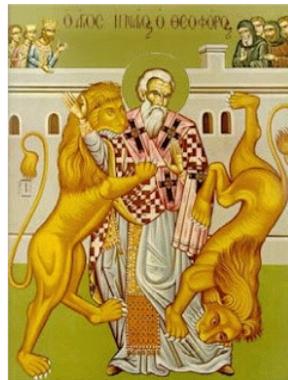
As Bishop of Antioch, Ignatius wrote seven letters that helped solidify the beliefs of our then second and third generation Church. He wrote that the Church can only preserve its unity if each member of the Church fulfill his or her role as a Christian in the world while recognizing that their bishop and priests represent Christ and his apostles. Of all the Churches, Ignatius emphasized the pre-eminence of Rome' for it was in Rome that Peter was executed.

Ignatius wrote that in Christ we see a unity of opposites. Christ is flesh and spirit, of Mary and of God, a subject of suffering and yet incapable of suffering. Through Christ God's life, the life of grace has come into the world. The prophets and patriarchs of the Old Testament received portions of this grace to prepare for his coming. We ourselves

can receive this grace and, like the prophets, become Instruments of God. Our main means of receiving this grace is through the Eucharist, which Ignatius calls the medicine of immortality and defines as the real presence of Christ.

By 98 A.D. when Ignatius was arrested in Antioch during the persecution of Trojan, he was known throughout the Christian world. Wherever the ship carrying him to Rome touched port he was greeted by hundreds of Christians. He literally had to beg wealthy Christians not to use their political connections to prevent his martyrdom. Within Thirty years from his death he was venerated as a saint by the universal Church.

Today St. Ignatius of Antioch is remembered in the listing of the saints in the First Eucharistic Prayer. He is remembered on his feast day of October 17th which is celebrated by the universal Church. And he is remembered by the people of the northern most parish of Pinellas County, Florida who have built a beautiful Church to honor the saint who pleaded with his friends to allow him to become the pure bread of Christ.



A Recreation of the Last Day of ST. IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH

The Flavian Amphitheater, the Roman Colosseum, the ancient equivalent of the Superdome, was the ancient place for the most popular of all sporting events. It was called the Colosseum because it was built next to a Colossus, a giant statue of the Emperor Nero. It took only 11 years to build it. It featured all three types of columns, Doric, Ionic and Corinthian. It had ventilation all around it. It had the finest travertine marble on its facing. The floor could be flooded for naval demonstrations. The top could be covered with a huge awning to protect the spectators from the sun. On a big day, 50,000 spectators could be seated.

Outside the amphitheater and throughout Rome the ticket sellers would be hawking, "Come to the fights. Come see the gladiators duel to the death." For a few denarii the

Roman could see great warriors fight their last battle. "Come to the fight." Perhaps, though, even this got boring to the blood thirsty Romans. The Emperor Trajan put some new enthusiasm into the shows. He condemned Christians to do battle with the wild animals. "Come to the show. Come and see if the Christian God, Jesus Christus, will appear and do battle for his radical followers."

On one particular occasion the show promised to be particularly special. "Today," the ticket sellers announce, "there will be a special show. Ignatius of Antioch, the most powerful follower of Christus of the East, perhaps the most powerful in the entire empire has finally arrived in Rome. It took years to get him here. Thousands of his companions greeted him at every port trying to convince him to stay with them. He refused to let them bribe the guards. He must think he's powerful enough himself to take on the lions. Come and see this show. Maybe Christus himself will appear."

Fifty thousand people gathered. The crowd was warmed up with a number of duels. After a while they called for this Ignatius, "Come out and do battle." The trumpets blared, the crowd hushed, and out came these Christian warriors. They were dressed in white robes. They wore roses in the hair. An old man with a long beard walked with them. He was identified as Ignatius. This frail man, who had written so much about Jesus, who had led the heretical Christian sect in Antioch, Ignatius, was going to do battle with lions. What a joke.

And it was a joke. And it wasn't much of a show. Ignatius repeated to himself what he had written to his followers. "I am the wheat of God. I must be ground by the teeth of the lions into flour. I must become the pure bread of Christ." Ignatius knelt down and was quickly killed. Christ never did appear to do battle with the beasts. Or did he? After the other Christians died, after the beasts had their fill and were returned to their pens, after the crowds filed out of the stadium, Christians came and picked up the martyrs' roses, strewn throughout the floor of the arena. They recited a psalm for each rose they picked up, the beginning of the prayer later generations would call the Rosary. Perhaps, some of the departing Romans looked back and saw this scene. Perhaps then, they recognized in Ignatius of Antioch, in the Christians who came to gather up the bodies and pray the prayers of roses, perhaps these Romans glancing at this compassionate scene could understand the Power of the Gospel.

"Our preaching of the gospel proved not a mere matter of words for you, but one of power." These words from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, apply particularly to Ignatius of Antioch. Belief in the Lord gave him the power to withstand his own fears of wild animals, of death, and even of abandonment by God. He had spoken a great deal about the Lord. Now it was his time to stand for him. The courage he needed to die for his convictions demonstrated the power of the Gospel.

"We need more people of courage," a young lady said to me this week. Where are the Joan of Arc's in our faith willing to do battle for the Lord. Where are the Ignatius of Antioch's of our day willing to stare down a lion? Where are we when we know we must demand that our faith and morals be followed even though that is going to lead to

ridicule and rejection even by members of our own family. Where are we when we know we are morally bound to make certain demands that are going to be unpopular.

We can do it! We can tell our kids that certain forms of behavior are unacceptable in our Christian home. We can tell members of our family that we disagree with their lifestyle. And we can tell ourselves that we can conquer the demons raging within us leading us to destroy our own lives for the sake of momentary pleasures.