

“Being Bishoped by” God: The Theology of the Episcopacy According to St. Ignatius of Antioch

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Introduction

THE EPISTLES of Ignatius of Antioch rightfully maintain a central place in the theology of the nascent Church. His letters are counted among the works of the apostolic fathers and are unique in many respects. This article will focus primarily upon one of those in particular. Throughout the course of his exhortations and admonitions to the various churches to which he writes, Ignatius elucidates a remarkably advanced theology of the episcopacy for his era.¹ This article, therefore, will synthesize these teachings contained in the letters in order to approach the core of Ignatius’s thought: that the human bishops of the particular churches are “being bishoped by” (ἐπισκοπημένῳ) God the Father himself; that obedience to the bishop is true imitation of Christ, who obeyed the Father; and that the obedience of the faithful is a call from the Spirit and brings incarnational union (ἔνωσις). The foregoing theological points naturally led Ignatius to suggest what may be considered “canonical norms” for sacramental celebrations and moral implications for Christian living in harmony with the bishop. Finally, this article will consider what relevance the letters of Ignatius have for ecclesial life today.

¹ While modern scholars have too often accused him of inconsistency and carelessness, Ignatius was truly a deep thinker, a skillful rhetorician, and a careful theologian, as Gregory Vall has shown in his welcome contribution to Ignatian studies, *Learning Christ: Ignatius of Antioch & the Mystery of Redemption*, (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2013), at 52–87.

St. Ignatius of Antioch

His life and the Antiochene Church

St. Ignatius was a bishop in the early Christian community of Antioch, where believers were first called Christians (Acts 11:27). Though not much is known about the life of Ignatius, the church he led was formed from the work of the apostles themselves, particularly St. Paul, who began several missions departing from and returning to Antioch. On the road to martyrdom, Ignatius wrote letters to the churches in Ephesus (*Eph.*), Magnesia (*Magn.*), Tralles (*Trall.*), Rome (*Rom.*), Philadelphia (*Philad.*), and Smyrna (*Smyrn.*), and to Polycarp (*Polyc.*), the bishop of Smyrna.² Other works are attributed to him, but these seven letters, known as the middle recension, which are also mentioned by Eusebius,³ are those generally accepted by scholars as authentic. He wrote the first four letters from Smyrna and the last three from Troas before setting sail for Neapolis on his journey to Rome. He had planned to write a second letter to the Ephesians on the οἰκονομία of Jesus Christ (cf. *Eph.* 20.1), but unfortunately no such letter is known to exist. Ignatius was likely martyred within the first couple decades of the second century, during Emperor Trajan's reign,⁴ and his writing stems from his imprisonment and expectation of martyrdom.

St. Ignatius is famously known for his eucharistic imagery in his exhortation to the Romans on the way to his martyrdom, asking influential Roman Christians that they not intervene to try to save him, but that they allow him to “be food for the wild beasts . . . I am God's wheat, and I am being ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, so that I may prove to be the pure bread” (*Rom.*, 4.1). St. Irenaeus referenced this quote directly from “a certain man of ours,” giving further weight to the authenticity of at least this particular letter.⁵ Ignatius also was the first to use the word “Catholic” in describing the universal Church (cf. *Smyrn.* 8.2).

St. Ignatius's own imprisonment and subsequent martyrdom add a weighty stamp of ethical appeal (*ethos*) to his written words.⁶ St. John

² Unless otherwise noted, I follow the translation in Michael W. Holmes, ed. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

³ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.36.

⁴ John Lawson, *A Theological and Historical Introduction to the Apostolic Fathers* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961), 103.

⁵ St. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* (hereafter, *haer.*) 5.28.4.

⁶ Mikael Isacson, “Follow Your Bishop! Rhetorical Strategies in the Letters of

Chrysostom said Ignatius demonstrated the greatest standard and rule of the episcopal office, that of laying down one's life for the sheep.⁷ Thus, the Ignatian writings are not simply epistles of early Christianity, but true hagiography composed by one whose life radically conformed to his master's.

The hierarchical order at the time of the epistles' composition

At the time of Ignatius, there is already an established hierarchical order, with a bishop (ἐπίσκοπος) in union with a supporting group of presbyters (πρεσβύτεροι, or—referred to as a whole—πρεσβυτέριον) who refresh him (cf. *Trall.*, 12.2) and deacons (διάκονοι) who are subject both to him and to the presbytery (τῷ πρεσβυτερίῳ) (cf. *Magn.* 2.1). Ignatius noted that the Church of Rome presides, or “is seated first” (προκαθημένη), in love (*Rom. Sal.*).⁸ It seems that he even asked Polycarp to call a council, perhaps to select his replacement for the Church of Antioch.⁹ Ignatius did not elucidate a doctrine of apostolic succession, of which St. Clement had already written briefly¹⁰ and which would be further developed by St. Irenaeus.¹¹ Ignatius did, however, show that “the hierarchy is the earthly copy of the government which exists in heaven.”¹² John Lawson explains that, to Ignatius, “the guarantee of orthodoxy and the token of Christian love is the sense of disciplined corporate solidarity uniting all the local congregations in every place, of which solidarity the bishop is the symbol and instrument.”¹³

Might Ignatius have been attempting to shape the churches according to his conception of what ecclesial life should be? Mikael Isacson argues effectively that Ignatius is not introducing a new order in the churches, as the exhortation to follow the bishop is not the primary theme of these letters. Furthermore, if Ignatius were praising the

Ignatius of Antioch,” in *The Formation of the Early Church*, ed. Jostein Ådna (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 321.

⁷ St. John Chrysostom, *Panegyricum in Ignatium martyrem* (hereafter, *pan. Ign.*) 1 (Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, 50:588).

⁸ Ignatius also uses this term to refer to the bishop's preeminent place within his particular church (cf. *Magn.* 6.1–2). Cf. also Gregory Vall, “An Ignatian Bishop of Rome,” *Homiletic & Pastoral Review*, May 22, 2013, available at <http://www.hprweb.com/2013/05/an-ignatian-bishop-of-rome>.

⁹ Virginia Corwin, *St. Ignatius and Christianity in Antioch* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), 82–83.

¹⁰ Cf. *1 Clement*, nos. 42 and 44.

¹¹ Cf. *haer.* 3.3.1–2 and 4.33.8.

¹² Lawson, *Apostolic Fathers*, 121.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 141.

behavior of those who do follow the bishop and that praise did not meet with reality, such “false praise” would have greatly diminished the letters’ rhetorical impact. Isacson argues for giving the benefit of the doubt: “Until otherwise proven, it is most reasonable to believe that these letters reflect the sender’s conception of the churches he is addressing.”¹⁴ Similarly, Henry Chadwick states that “the seven letters make it obvious that Ignatius never imagined himself to be creating a new ordering of ministry in the churches he was writing to.”¹⁵

Ἐπισκοπημένῳ: The Ignatian *Theo*-logy of the Episcopacy

What special relation do the ecclesiastical authorities have with God? On the one hand, it seems a rather complex theological question for the nascent Church trying to survive and spread by the power of the Gospel. As a result, some scholars have rejected the authenticity of the letters.¹⁶ On the other hand, careful consideration reveals how it is precisely for that reason that this issue came to the theological fore. The question of authority became a question of the survival of particular churches: those that were united under their bishop were spiritually thriving (e.g., Ephesus), while those that were divided from their bishop risked falling apart (e.g., Magnesia). If the churches were to withstand the threat of persecution and the challenges of the Docetists and the Judaizers, the faithful needed to find themselves in the fold of their bishop. Thus, Ignatius treated the theology of the episcopacy in some manner in most of his letters.

Ignatius’s writings are significant in the history of ecclesiology as “the first example in Christian theology of institutional deification.”¹⁷ The churches Ignatius addressed must have understood that obedience to the bishop was not only an activity that made for optimal order and group unity, but one that both glorified God and marked an encounter with him in the person of the bishop. Thus, one can really speak of a

¹⁴ Isacson, “Follow Your Bishop!,” 336–337.

¹⁵ Henry Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society: From Galilee to Gregory the Great* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 77.

¹⁶ William R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 22–23.

¹⁷ Vladimir Kharlamov, “Emergence of the Deification Theme in the Apostolic Fathers,” in *Theōsis: Deification in Christian Theology*, eds. Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2006), 63. Kharlamov admits that the language of θεώσις is not yet present in the time of the apostolic fathers, but an implicit theology of deification nonetheless is. It is expressed, he writes, “more in terms of ‘economy’ than of ontology” (cf. 51–53).

theo-logy of the episcopacy. In his study of the persuasive methodology of St. Ignatius, Isacson shows how the saint convinced his audiences through an effective use of rhetorical devices. Ignatius did this primarily by associating the bishop with the Father and Christ, praising (*laus*) the bishop and the audience, giving examples for imitation, and demonstrating his own ethical appeal (*ethos*).¹⁸ The rhetorical topic of association will be apparent here. It should be understood, however, that this is no mere rhetorical ploy, but that he is describing theological realities.

The bishop as type (τύπος) of the Father

The common thread in Ignatius's episcopal theology is that the bishop of each church is in the place of God himself and that obeying him is as obeying God himself, while acting apart from him is as separating from God himself. Sometimes Ignatius related the bishop to God the Father analogously: "Therefore, as the Lord did nothing without the Father, either by himself or through the apostles (for he was united with them), so you must not do anything without the bishop and the presbyters" (*Magn.* 7.1). The analogy is as follows:

as the Lord
did nothing
without the Father . . .
so you
must not do anything
without the bishop and the presbyters.¹⁹

Elsewhere, he wrote to the Smyrneans, whose "bishop, so worthy of God," is Polycarp: "You must all follow the bishop as Jesus Christ followed the Father, and follow the council of presbyters as you would the apostles; respect the deacons as the commandment of God" (*Smyrn.* 8.1). Here again the analogous comparison of bishop and the Father is obvious:

¹⁸ Isacson, "Follow Your Bishop!," 321.

¹⁹ The beautiful parallelism in the Greek can be seen easily:

Ὡςπερ οὖν ὁ κύριος
ἄνευ τοῦ πατρὸς
οὐδέν ἐποίησεν . . .
οὕτως μηδὲ ὑμεῖς
ἄνευ τοῦ ἐπισκόπου καὶ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων
μηδέν πράσσετε.

You all
 must follow
 the bishop
 as Jesus Christ
 followed
 the Father²⁰

In other places, he more directly compared the bishop to the Father. For example, he wrote to the Trallians that respect is owed to the bishop because he is a type of the Father (τὸν ἐπίσκοπον ὄντα τύπον τοῦ πατρὸς) (*Trall.*, 3.1).²¹ Elsewhere he wrote, “It is good to acknowledge God and the bishop. The one who honors the bishop has been honored by God; the one who does anything without the bishop’s knowledge (ὁ λάθρα) serves (λατρεύει) the devil” (*Smyrn.* 9.1). More precisely, he wrote that the Magnesian presbyters who yield to the bishop yield rather “to the Father of Jesus Christ, the bishop of all” (τῷ πατρὶ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, τῷ πάντων ἐπισκόπῳ) (*Magn.* 3.1).

But perhaps the quote that speaks most to the special relationship between the bishop and the Father comes from the letter to Polycarp: “to Polycarp, Bishop of the Church of the Smyrneans, rather to him being bishoped by God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Πολυκάρπῳ ἐπισκόπῳ ἐκκλησίας Σμυρναίων, μᾶλλον ἐπισκοπημένῳ ὑπὸ θεοῦ πατρὸς καὶ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ) (*Polyc. Sal.*, my translation). Ignatius’s calculated self-correction here puts the theological emphasis upon the activity of God as true spiritual *Bishop* shepherding his flock through Polycarp. For, if God the Father himself is the bishop of Polycarp, then, *a fortiori*, the flock must follow Polycarp in trust. This does not seem to be a special status given to Polycarp either, as comparisons of the bishop to the Father abound elsewhere, as has been demonstrated.

Imitation of Christ

Taking as our starting point Ignatius’s observation that Polycarp is “being bishoped by” Christ, what else may be discovered concerning

²⁰ Here again is the Greek:

Πάντες
 τῷ ἐπισκόπῳ
 ἀκολουθεῖτε,
 ὡς Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς
 τῷ πατρὶ,
 καὶ τῷ πρεσβυτερίῳ ὡς τοῖς ἀποστόλοις·

²¹ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (hereafter, CCC), §1549.

Christ's relation to the bishop? Being in harmony with the bishop, Ignatius explained, is at the heart of Christian identity itself. For example, "it is right, therefore, that we not just be called Christians, but that we actually be Christians, unlike some who call a man bishop but do everything without regard for him" (*Magn.* 4.1). In other words, being called "Christian" and acting apart from the bishop are antithetical ideas. Vladimir Kharmalov writes concerning Ignatius, "Believers cannot be in union with Christ if they are not in total harmony and unity with the bishop."²² Why is this? Just as Christ shares the Father's mind, or rather *is* the Father's mind (τοῦ πατρὸς ἡ γνώμη), so the world's bishops share the mind of Christ (οἱ ἐπίσκοποι οἱ κατὰ τὰ πέρατα ὁρισθέντες ἐν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ γνώμη εἰσὶν). Thus, the bishop is the path for believers to "run together in harmony with the mind of God" (συντρέχετε τῇ γνώμῃ τοῦ θεοῦ) (*Eph.* 3.2). It is this harmony that links the bishop with the Father through Jesus Christ that makes the whole arrangement possible. As Gregory Vall points out, "Ignatius is promoting neither blind obedience to the bishop's whims nor submission to the arbitrary will of an inscrutable God."²³

Pope Benedict XVI, during his sequence of general audiences on the Church Fathers, comments on the convergence of two New Testament "currents" in Ignatius, "that of Paul, straining with all his might for *union* with Christ, and that of John, concentrated on *life* in him. In turn, these two currents translate into the *imitation* of Christ, whom Ignatius several times proclaimed as 'my' or 'our God.'"²⁴ Ignatius instructed the Magnesians to subject themselves to the bishop (ὑποτάγητε τῷ ἐπισκόπῳ) in order to imitate Christ, who was subject to the Father; this voluntary submission, Ignatius taught, leads to a union (ἔνωσις) of flesh and spirit (*Magn.* 13.2). This hearkens to his description of Christ in Ephesians as the one healer both of the flesh and of the spirit (εἰς ἰατρὸς ἐστίν, σαρκικός τε καὶ πνευματικός) (*Eph.* 7.2). Thus, obeying the bishop is an incarnational action, sort of an answer in praxis to one of the doctrinal challenges of Ignatius's day, Docetism. Karmalov explains that this imitation "leads to intimate union with the object of imitation, an incorporation into Christ."²⁵ Furthermore, this union of

²² Kharlamov, "Emergence of Deification Theme," 64.

²³ Vall, *Learning Christ*, 179.

²⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience "St. Ignatius of Antioch" (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2007); also available at www.vatican.va. Cf. *Eph.*, 19.2 and *Rom.*, 3.3 and 6.2–3.

²⁵ Kharlamov, "Emergence of Deification Theme," 52.

flesh and spirit has two effects: bringing human nature into the work of salvation and integrating doctrine and practice in Christianity.²⁶

Spirit: bringing unity through the bishop

For Ignatius, submitting to the bishop not only causes one to belong to God and to Christ, but it also fosters unity and prevents division in the Church. “To live ‘according to Jesus Christ’ is to live in obedience to the bishop, and to live ‘according to God,’ is to have no strife in us.”²⁷

The Christian virtue of obedience hinges upon this: there is one authority who is ἐπισκοπημένῳ ὑπὸ θεοῦ; therefore, the many are ὑποτασόμενοι. This word, ὑποτάσσω, occurs multiple times in Ignatius’s writings, and it means, just as in the New Testament,²⁸ submission or ordering oneself under another. Interestingly, as a middle-passive participle, it speaks to both the people and to the bishop. The people both subordinate themselves and are themselves subordinated, and the bishop must see to it. Ignatius wrote to Polycarp, “If you love good disciples, it is no credit to you; rather, with gentleness bring the more troublesome ones into submission” (τοὺς λοιμοτέρους ἐν πραΰτητι ὑπότασσε) (*Polyc.* 2.1). Here, the same verb is active: Polycarp should subject the troublesome ones in gentleness. But since the bishop is “being bishoped by” God, ὑποτάσσω must also be God’s activity. While Ignatius did not say as much about the role of the Holy Spirit in this activity, he did reveal what he believed to be the Spirit’s role:

For even though certain people wanted to deceive me, humanly speaking (κατὰ σάρκα), nevertheless the Spirit is not deceived . . . I called out when I was with you; I was speaking

²⁶ Ibid., 62. In a way, Ignatius himself by his own name, Theophorus, or “God-bearer,” demonstrates this union of flesh and spirit.

²⁷ Cyril Richardson, *The Christianity of Ignatius of Antioch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935), 38. Cf. *Eph.*, 8.1; *Trall.*, 2.1; and *Philad.*, 3.2.

²⁸ Typically in the New Testament, ὑποτάσσω is used in a positive context, whereas οὐχ ὑποτάσσω or ἀνυπότακτος finds a negative context. Cf. positive uses in Lk 2:53; Rom 8:20; 13:1–5; 1 Cor 14:32, 15:21ff., 16:16; 2 Cor 9:13; Eph 1:22; 5:21ff.; Phil 3:21; Col 3:18; Heb 2:5ff.; 12:9; Jas 4:7; 1 Pet 2:13; 3:22; and 5:5; and negative ones in Rom 8:7; 10:3; Gal 2:5 (no obedience to false brethren); 1 Tim 1:9; and Tit 1:6, 10. Even verses that tend to offend Western cultural sensibilities—e.g., 1 Cor 14:34; Tit 2:5, 9; 3:1; 1 Pet 2:18, and 3:1ff.—shed light upon the understanding of the term in its relation to virtue and goodness if interpreted carefully according to New Testament understandings of order (τάξις), particularly with regard to early Church life, worship, and liturgy.

with a loud voice, God's voice: "Pay attention to the bishop, the council of presbyters, and the deacons." To be sure, there were those who suspected that I said these things because I knew in advance about the division caused by certain people. But the one for whose sake I am in chains is my witness that I did not learn this from any human being. No, the Spirit itself was preaching, saying these words: "Do nothing without the bishop. Guard your bodies as the temple of God. Love unity. Flee from divisions. Become imitators of Jesus Christ, just as he is of his Father." I was doing my part, therefore, as a man set on unity. (*Philad.* 7.1–8.1)

From this, one sees that, for Ignatius, the exhortation to unity under the bishop is the Spirit's work, and part of his proof is that he himself knew not of the divisions when he spoke to them. Therefore, he was not speaking with his own voice, but with God's (θεοῦ φωνῇ), and his preaching was the Spirit's (τὸ δὲ πνεῦμα ἐκήρυσσε), and his reason was because he was seeking unity (ἐνωσιν), implicitly the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the faithful.²⁹

Ignatius's Moral Exhortations and Canonical Norms

Moral life with the bishop

Because of his explicit theology of the episcopacy, Ignatius inferred the moral implications for the bishop's coworkers and flock. In other words, he did not leave his beloved audiences to answer for themselves what it meant to live under the authority of one who is "being bishoped by" God. And though he urged his audiences to do or not do, he wrote in a collegial tone, self-deprecatory at times, emphasizing his unworthiness. Through his humility, it is quite clear that he was speaking authoritatively,³⁰ even, Chadwick says, with *fortissimo*.

The predominant theme to which his admonitions concerning the episcopacy can be adjoined is: "do nothing without the bishop" (ἄνευ τοῦ ἐπισκόπου μηδὲν πράσσειν ὑμᾶς) (*Trall.*, 2.2).³¹ This "nothing"

²⁹ Cf. Hermut Löhr, "The Epistles of Ignatius of Antioch," in *The Apostolic Fathers: An Introduction*, ed. Wilhelm Pratscher (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 109–110.

³⁰ Matthew W. Mitchell, "In the Footsteps of Paul: Scriptural and Apostolic Authority in Ignatius of Antioch," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 14, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 42–43.

³¹ Cf. also *Magn.* 4.1 and 7.1, *Trall.*, 7.2, and *Philad.* 7.2. Frequently, Ignatius also stresses similar obedience to the presbytery.

(μηδέν) would seem to refer to the typical actions of an early church community—evangelization, catechesis, and sacramental ministry (see below). Ignatius wrote that opposing the bishop and excluding oneself from the congregation is arrogant and finds God’s opposition; such a one passes judgment on himself (*Eph.* 5.3). Ignatius considered that the age of a bishop has no bearing upon his legitimacy, as illustrated by his support for the Bishop Damas (*Magn.* 3.1–2). One who opposes the bishop does not act in good conscience (*Magn.* 4.1 and *Trall.*, 7.2).

Ignatius also encouraged his audience to be of the same mind as the bishop: “it is proper for you to run together in harmony with the mind of the bishop” (πρέπει ὑμῖν συντρέχειν τῇ τοῦ ἐπισκόπου γνώμῃ). He praised the Ephesian presbytery for its harmony with the bishop as strings on a harp (*Eph.* 4.1–2). In the hierarchical order, the presbyters deferred to the bishop (*Magn.* 3.1). Furthermore, Ignatius consistently exhorted his audiences to strive for unity, pointing out that unity with the bishop prevents division (*Magn.* 6.2) and helps one avoid corrupt men (*Trall.*, 7.2). This reference to corrupt men in his letter to the Trallians is specifically related to the Docetists. Thus, the figure of the bishop may be understood as the safeguard against heresy (cf. *Trall.*, 7–10).

The dignity of the office also has ramifications for the bishop’s own conduct, as Ignatius illustrated by his collegial words to his fellow bishop, Polycarp. Ignatius devoted most of his letter to exhortations (*Polyc.* 1–5). Here is a brief excerpt:

Do justice to your office with constant care for both physical and spiritual concerns. Focus on unity, for there is nothing better. Bear with all people, even as the Lord bears with you; endure all in love, just as you now do. Devote yourself to unceasing prayers; ask for greater understanding than you have. Keep alert with an unresting spirit. Speak to the people individually, in accordance with God’s example. Bear the diseases of all, as a perfect athlete. Where there is more work, there is much gain. (*Polyc.*, 1.2–3)

In the letter, Ignatius gave several images for the episcopacy. He likened Polycarp to an athlete, to an anvil that is struck, and to one who is sought by the season (ὁ καιρός) as sailors seek wind in good conditions and harbor from stormy seas. All of this served his purpose in an exhortation of his fellow bishop to steadfastness through difficult times and for the sake of the flock.

A step toward canon law: sacraments and the bishop

In several places in Ignatius's writings, he seems to have laid down what could be considered "canonical norms" for the sacramental celebrations. For example, he wrote that a valid Eucharist is celebrated by a bishop or one whom he appoints (*Smyrn.* 8.1). The congregation is to be wherever the bishop is.³² There is to be no baptism or "love feast" apart from him (*Smyrn.*, 8.2). William Schoedel points out that the "love feast" referenced here likely includes the Eucharist because of its juxtaposition with baptism. He also adds that parallels between this letter and Matthew 18 indicate a common body of church regulations.³³

In Ignatius's view, the unity of sacramental celebrations and ecclesiastical unity coinhere in the figure of the bishop.³⁴ For Ignatius, the bishop is in the Eucharistic mystery itself (one Eucharist, one flesh, one chalice, oneness of blood, one altar, one bishop). He wrote:

Take care, therefore, to participate in one Eucharist (for there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup that leads to unity through his blood; there is one altar, just as there is one bishop, together with the council of presbyters and the deacons, my fellow servants), in order that whatever you do, you do in accordance with God. (*Philad.* 4.1)³⁵

In addition to the participation in the eucharistic mystery, there is even a sacramental quality of the bishop himself, who, in his office, seems to point to a divine reality. Ignatius, for example, described Onesimus as "your bishop in the flesh" (ὁμῶν δὲ ἐν σαρκὶ ἐπισκόπῳ) (*Eph.* 1.3). Since Ignatius consistently pairs flesh (σὰρξ) and spirit (πνεῦμα), the association with σὰρξ here implies another Bishop who is not in the flesh. Elsewhere, in an exhortation to obedience, he said, "for it is not so much a matter of deceiving this bishop who is seen

³² This is the oft-cited first reference to the phrase "Catholic Church" (ὅπου ἂν φανῇ ὁ ἐπίσκοπος, ἐκεῖ τὸ πλῆθος ἔστω, ὥσπερ ὅπου ἂν ᾗ Χριστός Ἰησοῦς, ἐκεῖ ἡ καθολικὴ ἐκκλησία).

³³ Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch*, 244.

³⁴ Kharlamov, "Emergence of Deification Theme," 64.

³⁵ Σπουδάσατε οὖν μὴ εὐχαριστίᾳ χρῆσθαι· μία γὰρ σὰρξ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, καὶ ἐν ποτήριον εἰς ἔνωσιν τοῦ αἵματος αὐτοῦ· ἐν θυσιαστήριον, ὡς εἷς ἐπίσκοπος, ἅμα τῷ πρεσβυτερίῳ καὶ διακόνοις, τοῖς συνδούλοις μου· ἵνα ὃν ἐὰν πράσσητε, κατὰ θεὸν πράσσητε. Cf. *Eph.* 20.2 and *Mag.* 7.1–2.

(τὸν ἐπίσκοπον τοῦτον τὸν βλέπόμενον) but of cheating the one who is unseen (τὸν ἀόρατον). In such a case he must reckon not with the flesh, but with God, who knows our secrets” (*Magn.* 3.2). Here the action is transferred from the seen bishop to the unseen God.

Excursus: Apostolic Succession

Before concluding thoughts, the topic merits a few words on apostolic succession. The theology of the episcopacy of St. Ignatius extended what St. Paul had developed in New Testament epistles. By Ignatius’s time, the “monepiscopacy”—that is, the organization of individual churches under one bishop—had been well-established within the Church.³⁶ Carl Smith writes that “Ignatius goes far beyond what is advocated in the canonical writings with their conceptions of leadership by a plurality of elders under the supervision of apostles or their designees.”³⁷ It must be said, however, that the Ignatian writings on the episcopacy do not constitute a breach of continuity away from St. Paul’s writings, rather the development of the episcopacy in the subsequent era, an era that faced new difficulties, as well as old difficulties intensified. While St. Paul, an apostle, had oversight of the bishops Timothy and Titus, the bishop Ignatius showed collegiality with regard to his fellow bishops. He wrote to them and exhorted them, but recognized their own authority under heaven.³⁸ Also, he does not seem to command authority over any of the churches he addresses. This is to be expected, as the time of the apostles had drawn to a close. Thus, the monepiscopacy reflected that the apostolic structure of the Church had transitioned into a bishop-led structure.

As mentioned above, the letters of Ignatius did not elucidate a theology of apostolic succession. One can say, however, that the letters presuppose the doctrine’s incubation and growth in the life of the Church prior to his writing. It is difficult to conceive how Ignatius’s theologically rich expositions above could be accepted by the particular churches without an understanding of apostolic succession. Catehetically, Ignatius would have needed to establish first the succession of the bishops from the apostles in order to develop his theology—that is, unless the teaching were already known in some manner by both

³⁶ On the discussion of the terms “monepiscopacy” and “monarchical episcopacy,” see Isacson, “Follow Your Bishop!,” 318n4.

³⁷ Carl B. Smith, “Ministry, Martyrdom, and Other Mysteries: Pauline Influence on Ignatius of Antioch,” in *Paul and the Second Century*, ed. Michael F. Bird and Joseph R. Dodson (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 49.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 50. Cf. *Polyc.* Sal.

bishop and faithful. It could be suggested that Ignatius himself did not yet know of this doctrine. However, is quite possible that he did, as St. Clement had already given it form in writing about a decade earlier:

Our apostles likewise knew, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that there would be strife over the bishop's office. For this reason, therefore, having received complete foreknowledge, they appointed the leaders mentioned earlier and afterwards they gave the offices a permanent character; that is, if they should die, other approved men should succeed to their ministry (διαδέξωνται ἕτεροι δεδοκιμασμένοι ἄνδρες τὴν λειτουργίαν αὐτῶν) (*I Clement* 44.1–2).³⁹

It is likely that, by Ignatius's, time this at least was already understood in the early Church. What would be unexpected would be that, by the early second century, the Church authorities had *not* thought this over yet! And indeed, Ignatius's writings seem to presuppose Clement's thought here. For example, the Magnesian church had not been honoring Bishop Damas because of his youth. But there is no talk of removing him, as had previously been addressed by Clement.⁴⁰ Rather, those who are content to do things apart from Damas "do not appear to me to act in good conscience" (*Magn.* 4.1). Ignatius did not conciliate or offer alternative solutions; he urged them back to Damas. Also, Smith observes that, while Ignatius did not address apostolic succession, he did say that the bishop, presbyters, and deacons "have been appointed by the mind of Jesus Christ" (ἀποδοδειγμένοις ἐν γνώμῃ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ) (*Philad.* Sal.).⁴¹ James McCue writes that "Ignatius quite clearly considers the bishop to be appointed by God."⁴² This shows an element of divine election, which is congruous with the thought of Clement. Thus, one can say that, while Ignatius did not develop the doctrine of apostolic succession, he nonetheless wrote within the lived context of the burgeoning mystery that is apostolic succession. The doctrine would be further elucidated by Irenaeus within the century.

³⁹ Holmes proposes the date of the composition of *1 Clement* to be "during the last two decades of the first century" (*The Apostolic Fathers*, 35–36).

⁴⁰ Cf. *I Clem.*, 44.4: "For it will be no small sin for us if we depose from the bishop's office those who have offered the gifts blamelessly and in holiness."

⁴¹ Smith, "Pauline Influence on Ignatius," 50. See also Löhr, "Epistles of Ignatius," 106.

⁴² James F. McCue, "Bishops, Presbyters, and Priests in Ignatius of Antioch," in *Readings in the Theology of the Church*, ed. Edward J. Dirks-wager, Jr. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 137.

Relevance for Today

Are the writings of Ignatius trapped in their own time, so to speak, relevant to the life of the early Church only, or are they filled with a sort of enduring relevance for the Church of every age? At this point, the answer should be clear that, because of Ignatius's profound teachings on the episcopate in the life of the Church, his writings have profound relevance for all Christians whose churches are organized under one bishop.⁴³

Eucharistic ecclesiology

The letters of Ignatius have much to offer the field of ecclesiology and, inasmuch as they describe a primitive Church model, provide a meeting point for ecumenical dialogue. At the same time, ἔνωσις was the goal of Christian life for Ignatius, who painted an image in the early Church of *ecclesia in ecclesiis*, its “most important characteristic,” according to then-Cardinal Ratzinger—who makes clear that this does not refer to some sort of Christian pluralism, but rather to particular churches existing together as Church. Out of this Church-in-churches structure came the idea of “office,” which has the Ignatian description as its classical model.⁴⁴ Believers are a community only by being so in reference to the bishop, who himself is bishop inasmuch as he is in communion with the other bishops, who, as a “collegium,” are in communion with the bishop of Rome.⁴⁵ Ratzinger says that the “oldest ecclesiology” is the Eucharistic gathering: “If the Church *is* Eucharist, then the ecclesial office of overseer (*episkopos*) is essentially responsible for the coming together that is identical with the Church—but this process of coming together encompasses all of life.”⁴⁶

Ratzinger further relates the eucharistic oneness to Ignatius's ecclesiology, at the same time conveying the enduring significance for the Church:

The “monarchical episcopate” taught by Ignatius of Antioch irrevocably remains an essential structure of the Church, being as it is a precise exegesis of a crucially important reality: the Eucharist

⁴³ The CCC, for example, references his writings far more than any other Apostolic Father, citing him eighteen times.

⁴⁴ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, trans. Sr. Mary Frances McCarthy, S.N.D. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 252–253. Cf. Chadwick, *Church in Ancient Society*, 78.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 253–254.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 254.

is public; it is the Eucharist of the whole Church, of the one Christ. Therefore no one may rightfully pick out “his own” Eucharist. . . . A Church understood eucharistically is a Church constituted episcopally.⁴⁷

The enduring consequence is that those who wish to be a Eucharistic people must also foster a greater love for office as a sign and symbol of the very oneness of Christianity.

Pastoral implications in the life of the faithful

Thus, an Ignatian understanding of the particular church “order” has great pastoral potential for restoring unity. It is difficult at times to read the epistles of Ignatius outside of Western culture’s anti-authoritarian suspicion that is its inheritance from Kant. That is the task, however, in grasping the true meaning and understanding the relevance of Ignatius for our time. Returning to the *ἔνωσις* that Ignatius desires will require a reunification and an overcoming of division—both pastorally and doctrinally.⁴⁸ In order to be cooperators in the *ἔνωσις* of the Church, the members of the lay faithful face an enormous challenge over the coming years: heroically entering into the spiritual work of mercy by forgiving past wrongs by members of the episcopacy. It is, however, utterly necessary as an ecclesial movement in order to once again find the harmony and single-mindedness that the apostolic fathers proclaim. It is contrary to the Ignatian ecclesial model—whose *raison d’être* is *ἔνωσις*, a fruit enjoyed by the work of obedience—that its members should be satisfied to subsist in division. And again, this need for union and obedience, which are “synonyms for Ignatius,”⁴⁹ is not so much because of who bishops are, but because of *by whom* they are “being bishoped.” The bishop presides in the place (τόπον) of God (*Magn.* 6.1).

⁴⁷ Ratzinger, *Called to Communion: Understanding the Church Today*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 78–79.

⁴⁸ How that would come about is beyond the scope of this article. There are two principal areas of division within the Church itself: between priests and the bishop and between the laity and their bishop. Based on an Ignatian perspective on the modern crisis, catecheses on *ὑποταγή* (subordination) and *ὑπακοή* (obedience) are greatly needed. Such catecheses, of course, are not without their challenges. A catechesis on faith in ecclesiastical authorities would have to be both preliminary and effective. Only exemplary bishops, priests, and religious, through their life within this “order” and their conforming to Christ-crucified, can provide the preliminary catechesis.

⁴⁹ Richardson, *Christianity of Ignatius*, 34.

For this reason, bishops should resist the temptation to abscond from liturgical ministry and catechetical activities or to delegate unnecessarily these responsibilities to others. After all, obedience and reverence toward the bishop are acts of worship for the faithful, an act that relates them to God.

Since the Second Vatican Council, Catholics have devoted much reflection toward the role of the laity in the life of the Church. The letters of Ignatius have much to add to this reflection, particularly as relates to the bishop and his particular church. Theologically, in the life of the laity, the bishop is the example of the love (ἐξεμπλάριον τῆς ἀγάπης ὑμῶν) of his people (*Trall.*, 3.2). To other particular churches, the bishop embodies the ecclesial charism of his own people and conducts their love to his fellow bishops.⁵⁰ All throughout the world, Christians observe traditions that honor their bishops—blessing the lambs' wool on the feast of St. Agnes, giving the bishops elaborate vestments and rightly treating them as royalty, increasing the churches' missionary efforts through their appeals, and not only that, but joining in the sacramental celebrations themselves. In St. Ignatius's theological system, these are not inconsequential activities, but true Christian works that reveal the laity's love to the rest of the particular churches and to the world.

Conclusion

In his imprisonment and en route to his martyrdom, Ignatius indirectly invited his audience to be among those for whom he is offering his martyrdom. He said, "Pay attention to the bishop (τῷ ἐπισκόπῳ προσέχετε), in order that God may pay attention to you. I am a ransom on behalf of those who are obedient to the bishop, presbyters, and deacons (ἀντίψυχον ἐγὼ τῶν ὑποτασσομένων τῷ ἐπισκόπῳ, πρεσβυτέροις, διακόνους) (*Polyc.* 6.1). Ignatius has made himself a *propitiation* for the Christian community who subordinate themselves to the bishop. In his martyrdom, according to Chrysostom, he won five crowns.⁵¹ For the early Church, in which martyrdom was union with Christ and the pinnacle of Christian witness, entering into Ignatius's self-offering would have been a very compelling reason to submit to the bishop. It is, therefore, likely that his exhortations would have achieved on many levels the end toward which he directed them: ἔνωσις. Pope Benedict XVI synthesizes Ignatius's influential theology and points to his continued significance:

⁵⁰ Cf. *Eph.* 1.3 and *Trall.*, 1.1–2.

⁵¹ St. John Chrysostom, *pan. Ign.* 4.

Overall, it is possible to grasp in the letters of Ignatius a sort of constant and fruitful dialectic between two characteristic aspects of Christian life: on the one hand, the hierarchical structure of the ecclesial community, and on the other, the fundamental unity that binds all the faithful in Christ. Consequently, their roles cannot be opposed to one another. On the contrary, the insistence on communion among believers and of believers with their pastors was constantly reformulated in eloquent images and analogies: the harp, strings, intonation, the concert, the symphony. The special responsibility of bishops, priests and deacons in building the community is clear. . . . Ultimately, Ignatius's realism invites the faithful of yesterday and today, invites us all, to make a gradual synthesis between *configuration to Christ* (union with him, life in him) and *dedication to his Church* (unity with the Bishop, generous service to the community and to the world).⁵²

Ignatius's epistles leave a true example of collegiality among bishops, as well as a lucid theo-logy of the episcopacy and a vivid description of hierarchical order in the Church. Their power to effect *ἔνωσις* endures nearly two millennia after their composition. One could say that Ignatius himself, despite his penchant for self-deprecatory remarks, was "being bishoped by" God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ on his final journey and, in his person, achieved the union of episcopal office and eucharistic sacrifice.

While the Church has certainly outgrown the organizational model of the second century, she has not outgrown the ecclesiology. On the contrary, she needs an ecclesiological *ressourcement* if the harp is to be well-tuned. The bishop is not a political figurehead or some chairman and CEO of a geographically united group of believers. Theologically, a bishop's relation to God the Father and to the Lord Jesus Christ is the same in the third millennium as in the second century. He is not the adversary of anyone under him. Thus, Ignatius's understanding that the bishop is "being bishoped," being led by God, has continuing ramifications today for a theological ecclesiology that recognizes God at the heart of Church liturgy and guidance. N V

⁵² Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience "St. Ignatius of Antioch."