



St. Ignatius Validates the Catholic Church

Introduction

There are many arguments against the Catholic Church and her doctrine. Many times, those making the arguments say they will not believe anything unless it is written in Scripture. They want to deny the tradition of the Church. But the Apostle John tells us *“There are also many other things that Jesus did, but if these were to be described individually, I do not think the whole world would contain the books that would be written.”* (John 21:25) And Paul tells us *“Therefore, brothers, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught, either by an oral statement or by a letter of ours.”* (2 Thessalonians 2:15) So there are obviously things not written in Scripture that are true. How can we validate these? Let’s turn to St. Ignatius of Antioch.

Who was Saint Ignatius of Antioch?

Saint Ignatius of Antioch was born in Syria around the year 35. Ignatius was a disciple of the Apostle John and was personally chosen by the Apostle Peter to become the third Bishop of Antioch in the year 67. Ignatius served as bishop until his martyrdom around the year 107. His great contribution to our faith is from seven letters he wrote to various churches while being escorted to Rome for execution.

To put things into perspective, everything Ignatius knew and taught about the Christian faith came directly from two Apostles. The Gospels were written somewhere between the years 50-60. The New Testament did not exist at the time so there was nothing to read and interpret. Ignatius had to have embraced and taught the entire faith that Peter and John taught him. Otherwise, the Apostle Peter would not have personally chosen Ignatius to be the next Bishop of Antioch. So, let’s explore the faith of Ignatius through his letters.

Should we believe only what is written in Scripture?

Ignatius wrote, *“When I heard some saying, If I do not find it in the ancient Scriptures, I will not believe the Gospel; on my saying to them, it is written, they answered me, that remains to be proved.”* (Philadelphians).

I started with this quote because it was the one most interesting to me. It shows that the Sola Scriptura argument (meaning faith by scripture alone) is not new. Some Jews used this same argument to deny the Gospel of Jesus thousands of years ago. Evidently, the Jews would not believe in Jesus because there was not a clear verse in the Torah saying something like “A man named Jesus will come, proclaiming He and the Father are one. He will be the Messiah.” Consider the possible outcome had the Jews successfully put down the Gospel of Jesus because it was not clearly written in their Scripture. If that had happened, there would be no argument today because the New Testament would not even exist as a basis for this argument.

Ignatius did not have a New Testament on which to base his faith. He only had the oral and written traditions of the Apostle Peter and the Apostle John. Two Gospel writers taught Ignatius. It would not be likely that Ignatius would ignore what two Apostles taught him and begin to teach heresy and lead the Church astray less than 100 years after Jesus promised *“the gates of the netherworld will not prevail”*.

When was the Catholic Church started?

Ignatius wrote *“wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church”* (Smyrnaeans).

This is the first written occurrence of the term Catholic Church. Some argue the Catholic Church of today is not the same church started by Jesus and the Apostles. They believe that our Church is a Roman Catholic Church



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formed by Emperor Constantine around the year 313 when he converted to Christianity. Ignatius refutes this concept.

In reality, the term Roman Catholic Church was never used until the Protestant Reformation. The term came into use only to differentiate Catholics who were in full communion with the Pope in Rome (thus Roman Catholic) from Eastern (Orthodox) Catholics. There is no distinct Roman Catholic Church and the Church does not refer to itself as the Roman Catholic Church. The Church only speaks of the “Roman Rites”, again to distinguish from “Orthodox Rites”.

Is it a sin to miss Mass?

Ignatius wrote *“Let no man deceive himself: if anyone be not within the altar, he is deprived of the bread of God...He, therefore, that does not assemble with the Church, has even by this manifested his pride, and condemned himself.”* (Ephesians).

I’ve heard some people say “God is in my heart, so I don’t need to attend Mass.” Some also say the Church only recently invented a mortal sin, since the obligation to attend mass was not included in the Code of Canon Law until 1917.

Ignatius confirms it was always the Church’s belief that attending Mass was important and those willfully missing Mass “condemn themselves” out of pride. That sounds pretty mortal. St. John Paul II explains why the obligation to attend Mass was not included in Canon Law until 1917 in *Dies Domini*, an Apostolic Letter he published in 1998. St. John Paul II wrote *“Even if in the earliest times it was not judged necessary to be prescriptive, the Church has not ceased to confirm this obligation of conscience, which rises from the inner need felt so strongly by the Christians of the first centuries. It was only later, faced with the half-heartedness or negligence of some, that the Church had to make explicit the duty to attend Sunday Mass.”* In 1917, the Church simply clarified the matter.

Is it wrong to worship on Sunday instead of the Sabbath?

Ignatius wrote, *“those who were brought up in the ancient order of things have come to the possession of a new hope, no longer observing the Sabbath, but living in the observance of the Lord's Day.”* (Magnesians).

Arguments that the Sabbath should still be on Saturday include the fact that Jesus was a Jew and celebrated the Sabbath according to the Jewish law. The claim is also made that the Apostles would never have changed the Sabbath because they would have lost many Jewish converts. And there are those who state that Emperor Constantine changed the Sabbath to Sunday when he converted to Christianity. Ignatius confirms it was the Apostles who changed the Sabbath to Sunday. He also proves that “those who were brought up in the ancient order of things” (meaning converted Jews) were willing to conform to Sunday worship.

Is salvation by faith alone?

Ignatius wrote *“For there is not now a demand for mere profession, but that a man be found continuing in the power of faith to the end.”* (Ephesians) and *“so that He [The Father] may both hear you, and perceive by your works that you are indeed the members of His Son.”* (Magnesians).



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Ignatius begins by saying we must have faith, but continues by saying we also need works to prove our profession of faith is real. Ignatius confirms and agrees with the Apostle James, who said *“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?”* (James 2:14).

The two verses used to support *Sola Fide* (salvation by faith alone) are *“man is justified by faith apart from works of the law”* (Romans 3:28) and *“a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith”* (Galatians 2:16). We can see that both verses are saying that adhering to Jewish law is not necessary for salvation. The good works referred to by Ignatius are not the same as works of the law.

Does the Church teach we are saved by works?

Ignatius wrote *“Let us not, therefore, be insensible to His kindness. For were He to reward us according to our works, we should cease to be.”* (Magnesians) and *“For I trust that, through grace, you are prepared for every good work pertaining to God.”* (Polycarp).

Ignatius confirms that, from the beginning, the Church taught we are saved by grace and there is no way anybody can earn their salvation through works. God’s grace lays out good works before us and faith helps us respond to God’s grace.

The Catholic Church today still teaches that we are saved by grace, as proven by Chapter 3 of the Catholic Catechism titled *“God’s Salvation: Law and Grace”*. Specifically, paragraph 2025 states *“We can have merit in God’s sight only because of God’s free plan to associate man with the work of His grace. Merit is to be ascribed in the first place to the grace of God, and secondly to man’s collaboration. Man’s merit is due to God.”* It is easy to understand how some would believe Catholics teach salvation by works. Our faith does place value on prayers, intercessions, works, indulgences, etc. And some Catholics can go overboard. However, to believe the Church teaches salvation by works is to not have read either Ignatius or the Catholic Catechism.

Just for Catholics

Even within the Catholic Church there is not always unity concerning certain teachings and social issues. Here are some quotes from Ignatius for prayer and meditation concerning things just for Catholics.

Ignatius wrote, *“Let that be deemed a proper Eucharist, which is administered either by the bishop, or by one to whom he has entrusted it.”* (Smyrnaeans). The Church permits priests to certify lay distributors. Receiving the Eucharist from a priest may be a personal preference, but there should be no argument that receiving the Eucharist from a lay distributor makes the Eucharist invalid. The Eucharist is not more special when received from a priest. The Eucharist is Jesus, Himself. That is enough.

Ignatius wrote *“See that you all follow the bishop, even as Jesus Christ does the Father, and the presbytery as you would the apostles.”* (Smyrnaeans) and *“obey your bishop in honor of Him who has willed us so to do”* (Magnesians).

When the Church’s synod of bishops make a decision on something, then we should embrace it and follow it. Some Catholics prefer receiving the Eucharist on the tongue while kneeling, and some prefer Masses in Latin. However, as being approved by the bishops, no Catholic should discredit or condemn receiving the Eucharist in the hands while standing nor declare Masses must be said in Latin. We do, however, need to be careful of any



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bishop who is merely giving his own personal opinion about something. If anything a particular bishop says goes against the Church, we do not obey.

Ignatius wrote *“by a unanimous obedience you may be perfectly joined together...and may all speak the same thing concerning the same thing.”* (Ephesians)

All Christians, and especially Catholics, are called to be one in the Spirit. We as Catholics are not perfectly joined together in the Holy Spirit when we disagree on abortion, same sex marriage and other social issues where there is a direct teaching by the Church.

I began with my favorite quote from Ignatius and end with another. *“Neither endeavor anything that appear reasonable and proper to yourselves”* (Ephesians). Consider...Our enemy, the Devil, seeks to devour souls by separating us from God. Is there no better way to separate us from Him, Who is truth, than to place doubts and false teachings into our mind, as he did with Adam and Eve? Is something truth simply because it came into our mind and we sort of think it sounds good? If God’s people stopped applying self-interpretation to His Word, stopped proclaiming personal beliefs, and simply trusted and obeyed the Church...would there be 40,000 Protestant denominations and many variations of a la carte Catholics? If God’s people were truly united as one, could we have a more believable and powerful impact on the world? I think St. Ignatius of Antioch would say “Yes!”.