

Lesson 5 The Church is Attacked From Within

The frightful persecutions of the Roman Empire became a source of strength for the Church. The Grace of the Holy Spirit was made manifest in the Holy Martyrs and their struggles. This, however, was not the only outpouring of Grace in the Early Church. Satan not only used persecution in his attempt to destroy the Faith but he also unleashed enemies within the Church. Wherever the Holy Spirit guided the Holy Apostles to establish Churches and reveal the true path that leads to the Kingdom of Heaven, Satan sent his apostles to sow the seeds of error and to separate the members of the Body of Christ from the source of life. Satan used the double-edged sword of persecution and **heresy** in his attempts to destroy the faith of the early Christians.

The word **heresy** comes from a Greek word meaning *choice*, but in the Church it came to mean making a choice different from the teachings of the Church. This can mean either rejecting Church teaching while remaining in the Church or splitting off from the Church. The term **heretic** was used by the Holy Apostles. St. Paul wrote to St. Titus, who was at that time the bishop of the Church in Crete:

Avoid foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and vain. A man that is an heretic after the first and second admonition reject; Knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself (Titus 3:9-11).

St. Paul considered heretics to be as destructive as cancer (2 Timothy 2:17). He warned St. Timothy to be vigilant and to be on his guard in protecting the faithful from this cancer that can *overthrow the faith of some* (2 Timothy 2:18; cf. Ephesians 4:14). The danger of heresy was every bit as real as the danger of persecution. Satan used the double-edged sword of persecution and heresy to destroy the Church but instead it made the Church more glorious.

The history of the Early Church and the lives of the Saints of that period provide us with powerful indications of how the Grace of God transforms a simple human being into an awesome instrument of God. One of many such examples is **St. Ignatius of Antioch**.

St. Ignatius was Bishop of the city of Antioch in Syria around the time of the Emperor Trajan from 98 to 117 A.D.. We learn from the life of St. Ignatius that when St. Matthew records that our Lord spoke the words, *whomever shall humble himself* (Matthew 18:4-5), that he took up into His arms a child. This child was St. Ignatius, who became a disciple of St. John the Evangelist. Later he became the second Bishop of Antioch where he struggled for forty years to keep his flock safe from all the heresies that were attacking the Faith.

At this time the Emperor Trajan embarked upon a vicious persecution of the Church. St. Ignatius now had to strengthen the Faith of his flock so that they could withstand the temptations that persecution brings. The Emperor Trajan went to Antioch where he was making preparations for a war against the Persians. The Emperor wanted to ensure victory and he believed that he would have to do everything in his power to have the

assistance of the gods. He learned that in Antioch there were many Christians and that their leader was St. Ignatius. Trajan believed that the presence of these Christians would displease the gods and become an obstacle to a victory over the Persians. He believed that if he condemned their bishop, St. Ignatius, to death, that the faith of the Christians of Antioch would be weakened and they would be easily led to denounce Christ.

The Emperor ordered St. Ignatius to appear before him in the Colosseum where he accused the Saint of many crimes against the Empire. Specifically, he was accused of inciting the people not to worship the gods of the Empire. St. Ignatius answered: *alas oh Emperor, how do you call those soulless idols, gods. There is only one true God, Jesus Christ.* Trajan told St. Ignatius that if he would only worship Jupiter he would make him a high priest and the Father of the Senate and then everyone would honour him. The saint replied: *your offer is indeed magnanimous but what need have I of it since I am already a priest of the most high God.* This examination continued for some time and when the Emperor realized that nothing was being accomplished, he ordered St. Ignatius to be jailed until further examination.

The next day Trajan ordered the Saint to appear before him and again attempted to persuade him to worship the Roman gods. When the Emperor realized that nothing that he said would win over the Saint, he commanded that the Saint be sent to Rome and there, in the Colosseum, become a spectacle during the public games. The emperor thought that, by sending so venerable a bishop in this way to suffer so fearful and so disgraceful a death (to which only the very lowest wretches were usually sentenced), he should terrify other Christians into forsaking their faith. This he did because he knew how loved and respected St. Ignatius was in Antioch. By sending the Saint to Rome, he hoped to deprive the Christian population of Antioch of their hero and at the same time, frighten them. He also feared that, if St. Ignatius remained in Antioch, he would become an example to the Christians of that city and strengthen their faith in our Lord. The Emperor did not want them to even have his holy relics.

It was a long and toilsome journey over land and sea from Antioch to Rome and an old man, such as St. Ignatius, was ill able to bear it, especially as winter was coming on. He was to be chained, too, and the soldiers who had the charge of him behaved very rudely and cruelly to him.

At the seaport of Seleucia, they boarded a ship that made many stops along the shores of Asia Minor instead of proceeding directly to Rome. Some of the Saint's disciples took the direct route west and, reaching Rome before him, awaited his arrival. For a great part of the journey he had as companions a deacon, Philo, and a friend, Agathopus. Later they authored an account of his martyrdom. On shipboard St. Ignatius was guarded by ten soldiers so brutal that he speaks of them as *ten leopards* and adds that they only grew worse when kindly treated.

Wherever the ship put in, the local Christians sent bishops and priests to meet the venerable bishop and crowds gathered to receive the blessings of the Saint. The Faith,

courage and patience with which St. Ignatius bore his sufferings gave the Christians fresh spirit to endure whatever might come on them.

At Smyrna, he met his former fellow disciple, St. Polycarp and delegations came from Ephesus, Magnesia, and Tralles, three ancient cities of Asia Minor which had Churches. St. Ignatius wrote letters to be carried back to these various churches, exhorting the faithful to keep in harmony with their bishops and other clergy, to assemble often in prayer, to be meek and humble, and to suffer injuries without protest. He praises them for their zeal against heresy and particularly warns them against the heresy of *Docetism*.

One of his seven existing letters was addressed to the Christians of Rome, whom he passionately entreats to do nothing to prevent his martyrdom. At this time the Church had a number of influential converts and some of these highly-placed persons wanted to have his sentence mitigated or even to allow his escape. St. Ignatius pleaded with them not to do anything which would stand in the way of his martyrdom: *I am the wheat of God, let me be ground by the teeth of beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ. Rather do ye encourage the beasts, that they may become my tomb.*

The guards were anxious to reach Rome with their prisoner before the great public games were over, for victims of venerable appearance were always an attraction. At Troas, where the boat stopped, Ignatius wrote letters to the Philadelphians, to the Smyrneans, and to St. Polycarp. From Troas, the ship sailed on to the Macedonian port of Neapolis, thence, we are told, to Philippi. The little party crossed Macedonia and Epirus on foot, and took ship for the trip around Italy. As the Saint approached Rome, the faithful came out to meet him, rejoicing in his presence, but grieving that they were to lose him so soon. He prevented them from taking steps to obtain his release. He reached Rome on December 20, the last day of the games, and was brought at once before the prefect.

For many years St. Ignatius led his flock and many others away from the heresies and temptations which threatened to separate them from the Body of Christ. He was chosen by our Saviour when He carried St. Ignatius, as a child, in His arms. The love that the Saint had for our Lord led him to carry the Saviour in his heart and become St. Ignatius, *the God-bearer*. Now the *God-bearer* became *the Wheat of Christ*.

The *Epistles* of St. Ignatius and the writings of the many other holy fathers that struggled to protect the faithful from being torn from the Church testify to the enormous threat the heretics posed. Along with St. Ignatius, St. Clement of Rome, St. Polycarp, St. Justin Martyr, St. Irenaeus, St. Epiphanius and many others fought off a multitude of heretics. The Church was not only persecuted but was being attacked by heretics such as Gnostics, Montanists, Novatianists and Donatists.

The *Gnostics* were the greatest threat that the Early Church faced. This heresy combined ideas deriving from Judaism, Christianity and Greek philosophy. The distinctive element of Gnosticism in antiquity was the idea of an inferior *Creator-God*, (Greek *demiurgos*).

The **demiurge** was thought to have come indirectly from the world of the true God, which Gnostics often referred to as the *fullness*. This *fullness* was the abode of the true God, the Father of the Universe, as well as a host of eternal beings who lived in perfect harmony with each other. However, this harmony was shattered by one of the eternal beings, Wisdom (Greek *sophia*), which was not content with its own position but wanted to imitate the Father of the Universe in creating for itself. Wisdom's creation failed. This unsuccessful creation by Wisdom was the demiurge, who, expelled from God's world, created the material world and his assistant powers. According to the Gnostic viewpoint, the demiurge created the world without knowing the highest God, falsely believing himself to be the only God. Since the demiurge was seen as acting in ignorance, his creation was also considered imperfect. In Gnosticism therefore there is a strict divide between the world of the true God and the visible world.

Humanity has a special role in the creation by the demiurge. The body was created by the demiurge, but it contains a divine spirit which thereby establishes a connection with the highest God. In this way, the human being is superior to its creator, the demiurge. The aim of the body created by the demiurge is to get the human to forget the divine spirit inside. The dormant divine spark within the person can enter human consciousness when a messenger figure wakes the person from its dream of forgetfulness and reminds the human of its divine origin.

When Gnosticism first attacked the Church it did so in a veiled way. The Gnostics hid their teachings from most of the members of the Church and selectively approached weaker Christians who were vulnerable. They claimed that they had *secret revelations* and they wrote documents (gospel, acts, epistles, etc.) and attributed them to the Apostles. Some Gnostic false writings such as, *The Gospel of Thomas*, *The Gospel of Judas*, *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, *The Apocryphon of John* and *The Acts of John* are known until today.

The Church was attacked by a variety of forms of Gnosticism. Docetism was the earliest form of Gnosticism to threaten the faithful. It claimed that Christ was not truly human and did not really die on the Cross. Docetism denied the true and full humanity of our Saviour. The word *Docetism* is derived from the Greek word *dokeo* which means *to appear or seem*. Proponents of this heresy taught that the Lord only *seemed* to be human.

St. John the Evangelist trumpets explicit warnings against this early heresy: *Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world (1 John 4: 1-3)*. Elsewhere he says: *For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist (2 John 1:7)*.

St. Ignatius proclaims the same when he speaks about the Docetists: *For some are in the habit of carrying about the name [of Jesus Christ] in wicked guile, while yet they practise things unworthy of God, whom ye must flee as ye would wild beasts. For they are ravening dogs, who bite secretly, against whom ye must be on your guard, inasmuch as they are men who can scarcely be cured. There is one Physician who is possessed both of flesh and spirit; both made and not made; God existing in flesh; true life in death; both of Mary and of God; first possible and then impossible, even Jesus Christ our Lord (To the Ephesians 7).*

And elsewhere: *If it be true, as these godless unbelievers affirm, that Christ did not really die, then why am I a prisoner? Why do I desire to fight with wild beasts? In this case I die for nothing; and I lie against the Lord (To the Trallians 10).*

Valentinus (100 – 153 A.D.) was the best known early Gnostic teacher. Valentinus was a candidate for bishop of Rome but, when the choice fell instead on one who had been a confessor for the faith, Valentinus broke with the Church and openly developed and preached his Gnostic heresy. Valentinian Gnosticism is the clearest example of a Gnostic school which stresses Christian elements.

The Christian element in the Valentinians can be seen in the fact that they searched the New Testament to find supporting arguments. The earliest known commentary on the *Gospel of John* in fact comes from a member of this school, *Heracleon*. The Valentinians thought of themselves as representing a deeper, *spiritual* version of Christianity. In their view, the majority of Christians belonged to a lower group of *psychic* (worldly) Christians who, unlike them, needed faith and good deeds to be saved.

This division of Christians into two levels does not mean that Valentinians separated themselves into their own communities. It is told how they participated in normal church services in Rome, and at least one Valentinian is known to have been a close advisor to the bishop of Rome as late as the end of the second century. One of the distinctive features of the Valentinian school is that its followers did not hold the demiurge to be a completely negative figure. They stressed that the demiurge was the mediator for Wisdom in the creation of the world. In addition, they believed that in coming to the world, Christ had also turned the demiurge to his side. For this reason, the demiurge was believed to take special care of Valentinian Christians.

Shortly after Montanus' conversion to Christianity, he began traveling and preaching in Asia Minor. Montanus was accompanied by two women, Prisca, sometimes called Priscilla, and Maximilla, who also purported to be the embodiments of the Holy Spirit that moved and inspired them. He claimed to have received a series of direct revelations from the Holy Spirit and to be the *paraclete* of the Gospel of *John* 14:16. As they went, *the Three* as they were called, spoke in ecstatic visions and urged their followers to fast and pray, so that they might share these personal revelations. Montanus proclaimed his village in Asia Minor, Pepuza, the site of the *New Jerusalem*. His preachings spread from there, across the contemporary Christian world, to Africa and Gaul. His disciple Prisca claimed that Christ had appeared to her in female form.

When she was excommunicated, she exclaimed *I am driven away like the wolf from the sheep. I am no wolf: I am word and spirit and power.*

The Montanists believed that their prophecies superseded and fulfilled the doctrines proclaimed by the Apostles. They encouraged ecstatic prophesying and speaking in tongues, which contrasted with the more sober and disciplined worship of the Church. They held the belief that Christians who fell from grace could not be saved. The prophets of Montanism did not speak as messengers of God: *Thus saith the Lord*, but rather described themselves as possessed by God, and spoke in his person. *I am the Father, the Word, and the Paraclete*, said Montanus (Didymus, *De Trinitate*, 3, 51). Although the Church prevailed against Montanism within a few generations, this heresy persisted into the eighth century, and some of its emphasis on direct, ecstatic personal presence of the Holy Spirit bears resemblance to all forms of Pentecostalism.

The **Novatianists** were followers of Novatius who was a priest in Rome around 250 A.D.. Novatian, held a strict view that refused readmission to communion of **lapsed** Christians. Those Christians, under the pressures of the persecution, had denied their faith or performed the formalities of a ritual sacrifice to the pagan gods or even bribed some one to give them a certificate (*Libellus*) that stated that they had sacrificed, even though they did not. Novatius first opposed the election of Pope Cornelius on the grounds that he was too lax in accepting the lapsed Christians. He was made a rival pope. He and his followers were excommunicated by a synod held at Rome. He wrote extensively and his heresy grew.

After his death, the Novationist sect spread rapidly. Those who allied themselves with the doctrines of Novatian were called *Novatianists*; their own name for themselves was the **Katharoi** or the *pure*, reflecting their claim not to be participants in the lax practices of the Church by which they believed the Church to have been corrupted. They went so far as to re-baptize their converts.

The problem centred upon whether or not the bishop had the right to remit sins, in this case apostasy. St. Cyprian held a council of bishops at Carthage in 251A.D. where it was decided that the *libellatici* - Christians who held a *libellus* but had not sacrificed - upon prescribed penance could be re-admitted into the Church. The *sacrificati* - those who had sacrificed - would only be re-admitted by confession upon their death-beds. Cyprian later forbade the re-admission of lapsed clergy. The Novationist heresy gradually lessened; though it was to leave the Church somewhat marred by the division. Later, after the *Great Persecution*, a similar heresy, *Donatism*, appeared.

It was during the second and third centuries that there arose many Saints to defend our Faith. The defense of the Christian Faith was not only to defend the Church in the face of persecution, but also to counteract the problems caused by heresies. St. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, along with St. Ignatius, St. Justin and St. Cyprian, was tireless in defending the Faith. Among his many works we can find a five-book defense against Gnosticism entitled, **Against Heresies** (the full title is the *Refutation and Overthrow of Knowledge falsely so-called*). As a boy, St. Irenaeus, delighted to listen to the sermons of the great bishop and martyr, St. Polycarp of Smyrna, who was a disciple of the

Apostles themselves. From the mouth of St. Polycarp he came to know the Faith of the Church, to which he remained faithful throughout his life. Later he went as a missionary to southern Gaul, where he became a presbyter at Lyons.

He countered the Gnostic claims of having secret gospels in a powerful and eloquent manner:

The Gospels could not possibly be either more or less in number than they are. Since there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds, while the Church is spread over all the earth, and the pillar and foundation of the Church is the gospel, and the Spirit of life, it fittingly has four pillars, everywhere breathing out incorruption and revivifying men. From this it is clear that the Word, the artificer of all things, being manifested to men gave us the gospel, fourfold in form but held together by one Spirit (3,11,8). ... But the followers of Valentinus, putting away all fear, bring forward their own compositions and boast that they have more Gospels than really exist. Indeed their audacity has gone so far that they entitle their recent composition the Gospel of Truth, though it agrees in nothing with the Gospels of the apostles, and so no Gospel of theirs is free from blasphemy. For if what they produce is the Gospel of Truth, and is different from those which the apostles handed down to us, those who care to can learn how it can be shown from the Scriptures themselves that [then] what is handed down from the apostles is not the Gospel of Truth (3,11, 9).

It was during these first years of the life of the Church that the Saints used the word **Catholic** to distinguish the Church from all the different groups of heretics. With such great Saints the Church emerged victorious. St. Ignatius wrote, *Where the bishop is present, there is the Catholic Church (To the Smyrnaeans, 8:2)*. All Christians knew what he meant. The word *Catholic* comes from the Greek *katholikós* - *katà hólou* which means **according to the whole**. The Church is called *Catholic* because it lives **according to the whole truth of the teachings of our Lord**. Heresies seek to destroy this wholeness by distorting the whole. St. Irenaeus points out that what the heretics do to the Faith is the same as taking a mosaic icon of our Saviour, rearranging the cubes and making it into a mosaic of a dog.

The Church endured close to 300 years of savage persecution that sought the annihilation of the Faith. It also overcame Satan's attempts to destroy the Faith by planting heretics within the Church. The Church, though battle-scarred and bloodstained, triumphed over both the pagan and the heretic. It was nourished by the blood of the Martyrs and the tears of those Saints who lamented over the distortion of the Catholic Faith. It was purified by fire, and came forth more bright and glorious from it