

BISHOPS, PRESBYTERS, AND PRIESTS IN IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH

It could well be the case that the Church in the twentieth century will not wish to or will not be able to copy every feature of the church order of the early second century. The precise way in which the thought and order of the early Church is normative for the Church of all time is a difficult question, and one which I do not propose to deal with here. It is, however, not at all helpful to read into early Christian writers later forms and attitudes simply on the grounds that so it must have been because so it now is.

What I wish to consider here is the status of bishops and presbyters in Ignatius of Antioch, and specifically to inquire into the relationship between the Ignatian presbyter and the "priest" of Roman Catholic ecclesiology. It will be my contention that the "priesthood," defined in terms of a Eucharistic ministry, was not a permanent, specific ministry within the Ignatian church order, but that in principle any member of the community could preside over the Eucharist, provided he be appointed (temporarily) for this purpose by the bishop. This was not something which the presbyter *ex officio* could do, or which could be delegated only to a presbyter.

I realize that what Ignatius says on the subject is not detailed or precise enough to allow of complete certitude in the matter, but I would maintain that the interpretation developed here suits the materials better than do the alternatives.

I

The crucial passage occurs in the eighth chapter of Ignatius' *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans*:

See that you all follow the bishop, as Jesus Christ follows the Father, and the presbytery as if it were the Apostles. And reverence the deacons as the command of God. Let no one do any of the things appertaining to the Church without the bishop. Let that be considered a valid Eucharist which is celebrated by the bishop, or by one whom he appoints. Wherever the bishop appears let the congregation be present; just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church. It is not lawful either to baptise or to hold an "agape" without the bishop; but whatever he approve, this is also pleasing to God, that everything which you do may be secure and valid.¹

¹ Throughout I have used the translation in *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. and tr. by Kirsopp Lake (Cambridge, 1912).

This is a fairly typical Ignatian exhortation to unity with and under the bishop, and can be properly understood only within the context of his entire ecclesiology. There is, however, one point here that is not paralleled in the other Ignatian letters. Usually Ignatius is content to speak as though the bishop were always himself present at the Eucharist and could actively function as the presiding minister. Here, however, Ignatius indicates that the bishop was not always present and suggests what was done (or to be done) in this eventuality. The Greek of the relevant passage is as follows: ἐκεῖνη βεβαία εὐχαριστία ἡγεῖσθω, ἢ ὑπὸ τῶν ἐπίσκοπον οὖσα ἢ ᾧ ἂν αὐτὸς ἐπιστρέψῃ.

The translation quoted here is thus somewhat misleading. Ignatius does not speak of the bishop "celebrating" the Eucharist, but rather of the Eucharist taking place under the bishop. Before we consider the specific question of who could so preside, it will be helpful to consider more generally Ignatius' understanding of the ministry of bishops and presbyters. We can reasonably leave out of account his view of the diaconate, since this is neither problematic nor relevant.

We can best understand Ignatius' view of the episcopal ministry from a consideration of his exhortations to submission and obedience to the bishop. It is interesting to note that, whereas the somewhat earlier *1 Clement* argues for obedience to the presbyters on the grounds that they have been appointed, via a continuous succession from the apostles, by Christ Himself, Ignatius argues instead from the very nature of Christianity as a covenant of unity and love. Whereas *1 Clement* parallels certain Pastoral motifs, Ignatius argues along what might be termed more Johannine lines. The Church is characterized by unity and love, and the bishop is both sign and instrument of this unity in charity. Characteristic is the fifth chapter of Ignatius' *Epistle to the Ephesians*.

For if I in a short time gained such fellowship with your bishop as was not human but spiritual, how much more do I count you blessed who are so united with him as the Church is with Jesus Christ, and as Jesus Christ is with the Father, that all things may sound together in unison! Let no man be deceived: unless a man be within the sanctuary he lacks the bread of God, for if the prayer of one or two has such might, how much more has that of the bishop and of the whole Church? So then he who does not join in the common assembly, is already haughty, and has separated himself. For it is written "God resisteth the proud": let us then be careful not to oppose the bishop, that we may be subject to God.

To similar effect is *Magnesians*, the seventh chapter:

As then the Lord was united to the Father and did nothing without Him, neither by Himself nor through the Apostles, so do you do nothing without the

bishop and the presbyters. Do not attempt to make anything appear right for you by yourselves, but let there be in common one prayer, one supplication, one mind, one hope in love, in the joy which is without fault, that is Jesus Christ, than whom there is nothing better. Hasten all to come together as to one temple of God, as to one altar, to one Jesus Christ, who came forth from the one Father, and is with one, and departed to one.

In view of these passages, what can we say of the bishop's Eucharistic function? His function at the Eucharist would seem to be precisely the same as his function in the life of the Church in general. It is through him that the Church is one and entire. Anything done with the bishop is done in union with the entire community, and is thus the work or prayer of the entire Church. The bishop presides at the Eucharist in order that it may be the united prayer of all the assembled faithful; and beyond that, that it might be the prayer of the entire community, present and absent. The bishop's primary function here is thus that of epitomizing the community.

It would seem to be foreign to Ignatius' whole approach to think of the episcopal Eucharistic ministry in terms of "potestatem aliquam consecrandi et offerendi" (Denz. 1771 [961]). Until such time as the physical presence of the body and blood of Christ in the bread and wine would be spelled out and be deemed a matter of primary importance,² a *potestas consecrandi* would have to be suspended in midair; the bishop's function is described with reference to the community rather than with reference to the elements. Is it possible that Ignatius thought of the episcopal ministry in this latter sense as well? It is a possibility, but one suggested by the later development rather than by anything in Ignatius' own writings. The Eucharist is something that all do, and it is the function of the bishop to include all, the entire community, in this communal act. The bishop's ministry is to enable the community to act as a community.

The bishop's ministry, of course, extends beyond the celebration of the liturgy. He has both a disciplinary and a teaching responsibility. We must inquire whether these aspects of his ministry allow or force us to modify or amplify what we have said about his role in the liturgy. There is no question but that Ignatius thinks of the bishop as having real authority from God. To the Philadelphians he writes (Intr.): "I greet her [the Church in Philadelphia] in the blood of Jesus Christ, which is eternal and abiding joy, especially if men be at one with the bishop, and with the presbyters and deacons, who together with him have been appointed according to the mind of Jesus Christ, and He established them in security according to His own will

² See J. Betz, *Die Aktualpräsenz der Person und des Heilswerkes Jesu im Abendmahl nach der vorephesinischen griechischen Patristik* (Freiburg, 1955).

by His Holy Spirit." And to the Ephesians (6): "And the more anyone sees that the bishop is silent, the more let him fear him. For everyone whom the master of the house sends to do His business ought we to receive as Him who sent him. Therefore it is clear that we must regard the bishop as the Lord Himself." The contrast which we initially made between Ignatius and *1 Clement* should not obscure the fact that for Ignatius, too, the bishop wields authority in God's name. And though there is no reference to apostolic succession, Ignatius quite clearly considers the bishop to be appointed by God. No doubt this disciplinary and teaching authority would have consequences for the celebration of the Eucharist. We may suppose that the bishop would have something decisive to say about the general order of the Eucharist. We may further suppose that it would be principally in connection with the Eucharistic celebration that he would teach. But it is difficult to see that either of these factors would have any relevance whatsoever to the matter of the bishop's function in the Eucharistic prayer itself. There is nothing here to lead us to suppose that Ignatius' other ideas on the episcopal ministry would have forced him to go beyond the view which we have already attributed to him.

Having said this much about the bishop, let us turn briefly to the question of the presbyters. Their function, their ministry, is more difficult to define than that of the bishop, since the presbytery is not central to Ignatius' letters. The presbyters remain in the shadow of the bishops. "The bishop and the presbyters" is so frequent a conjunction that one wonders whether the presbytery had any specific function of its own. It is tempting to suppose that even at Antioch the monoepiscopacy was preceded by a ruling presbytery, and that some of Ignatius' still fairly recent predecessors had been leading or presiding presbyters rather than members of an order distinguished from that of the presbyters.³ In this case the presbyters would now be a kind of advisory body with which the bishop would naturally and properly consult. It would not have functions in addition to those of the bishop, but rather would assist him in the proper execution of his responsibilities. They act primarily as a body—a *synedrion*.

What of the role of the presbyters in the Eucharist? I should imagine that presbyters would have had *some* role to play in the Eucharistic celebration; but Ignatius' thought seems to leave room for only one really vital ministry, the episcopal-unifying one.⁴

We return, then, to the question of whether or not we should suppose that

³ See J. Colson, *Les fonctions ecclésiastiques aux deux premiers siècles* (Paris, 1956) pp. 237-39.

⁴ Again I would note that we are here not concerned with the deacons.

the reference in the eighth chapter of the *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* presupposes that it must be a presbyter who functions in the bishop's place. First, I should say that I imagine that ordinarily it would be a presbyter who would take the place of the absent bishop at the Eucharist. The presbytery is always spoken of second whenever mention is made of the threefold ministry, and doubtless the presbyters were second to the bishop in dignity. However, if Ignatius thought that it had to be a presbyter who performed this task, it is strange that he does not say as much. Ignatius speaks of only one qualification necessary if one is to take the bishop's place in the Eucharist: appointment by the bishop. Because, as we have seen, Ignatius does not think of the bishop's Eucharistic role in terms of *potestatem consecrandi et offerendi*, it is difficult to imagine why Ignatius would have required anything more than authorization by the bishop; for the essential thing was harmony with the bishop in the one communal act of worship, and this could be achieved simply by episcopal delegation.

Nor can it be maintained that this episcopal delegation would constitute a priestly ordination, at least not in the later sense of a permanent ordination; for in the nature of the case there would be nothing permanent about such delegation. Only to the extent that the bishop here and now wants and so designates an individual to take his place could that individual fulfil the hierarchical function. Consequently, to speak here of a permanent ordination or of a "character . . . qui nec deleri nec auferri potest" (Denz. 1767 [960]), would run counter to Ignatius' entire way of thinking. And it is not merely that this would represent a form of conceptualization that would be foreign to Ignatius. A difference of this sort would hardly be worth reporting. Rather, Ignatius' views of the nature of the episcopal Eucharistic ministry would seem to preclude the possibility of a priestly character and power that would be independent of the will of the bishop. The Eucharist is the worship of the community with and under the bishop, not because the bishop has a unique power of rendering Christ present in the bread and wine, but because Christian charity requires that the community be united in its prayer.

II

Suppose this to be the case; what follows? It would seem to follow that for Ignatius a Eucharist is valid and licit (though he would not put it that way) at which the bishop or someone whom he delegates for this purpose presides; and one who presides in place of the bishop is not *ipso facto* permanently set aside as a member of the hierarchical priestly order. To speak a more anachronistic language, a layman could offer Mass.

As we have already indicated, if this *is* Ignatius' position, then he seems

to be rather seriously at odds with Trent. While it seems reasonable to suppose that Ignatius considered the episcopate and the presbyterate to be permanent or lifetime ministries, there seems to be no historical evidence or even likelihood that he thought that there was a permanent, subepiscopal, priestly (Eucharistic) ministry.

There are three ways of dealing with this at least apparent contradiction between Ignatius and Trent: (1) We can modify our interpretation of Ignatius. (2) We can modify our interpretation of Trent. (3) We can suppose that no amount of reinterpretation of Ignatius and Trent can get rid of the contradiction, and then ask what follows.

The first alternative is the most immediately inviting. After all, the interpretation of Ignatius advanced here depends upon a single phrase in *Smyrnaeans*. One could simply assume that Ignatius understood the presbyters to be priests in the later sense of the word. My argument has been, in part, an argument *ex silentio*, and an argument of this type based on early-second-century materials cannot afford to be overly dogmatic. However, I have argued not only *ex silentio*, and for the reasons already given I think that the interpretation of Ignatius advanced here is the most plausible one.

The second alternative is inviting too, but is so complex a matter that it cannot be entered upon here. If it is the case, as is not infrequently alleged, that the doctrine of the Church and the ministry is the principal and apparently insurmountable obstacle to Church unity, then it is of the utmost importance that Catholics consider and attempt to spell out just what it is that they take to be irrevocably and irreformably asserted by the Tridentine chapters and canons *de sacramento ordinis*. However, as already indicated, this is too complicated a matter to be developed here; and in any event it is difficult to see how any amount of interpretation of Trent could bring Trent into agreement with Ignatius.

At first sight the third alternative is also attractive. After all, why not (a) grant that Ignatius and Trent contradict each other, and (b) suppose that therefore Ignatius was in error? After all, no one has ever maintained that a bishop could not be in error, even a saintly bishop. But the difficulty is that Ignatius at least seems to suppose that the churches in Asia Minor with which he had at least some contact were in general agreement with him. Since his views on the priesthood and the *character indelebilis* of priestly ordination would seem to follow from his understanding of the nature of Christianity, the Eucharist, and the episcopacy, if the Asia Minor churches agreed with him on these more basic issues it would seem legitimate to conclude that they would agree with him on the *character indelebilis*. Thus we would have a substantial portion of the early Church in opposition to Trent.

Whether or not Roman Catholic orthodoxy can accommodate serious disagreement between a substantial portion of the early Church and Trent (or conceivably between the entire Church at a certain moment in its history and Trent) will depend upon our solution to the problems of change, development, and error in the Church. In view of the fact (or at least what I take to be the fact) that we are only at the beginning with these problems, it would seem especially important at present that in our studies of the actual course of the Church's doctrinal and institutional development we do not suppose that in every case we know in advance what must and what cannot be the case.

III

To summarize: I have advanced an interpretation of Ignatius that is either difficult or impossible to bring into agreement with Trent. I have suggested three possible subsequent lines of study. Since the first part of the paper argues against the first of these three proposals, I really suggest only two alternatives: a re-evaluation of the relevant statements of Trent and a reconsideration of the problem of change in the Church. These two are not, of course, mutually exclusive.

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