The Early Church on Apostolic Ministry and the Holy Spirit

OCIA Session VIII | Selected texts from Clement, Ignatius, and Irenaeus

These early witnesses describe a visible Church whose ministers hand on the apostolic faith, gather the faithful in worship, and serve a communion given life by the Holy Spirit.

Saint Clement of Rome

Pope & Bishop of Rome in the late first century, Clement is traditionally counted as the third successor of Saint Peter, after Linus and Anacletus. Around A.D. 96, he wrote in the name of the Church of Rome to the Church at Corinth after faithful ministers had been deposed. His letter appeals to the order established by the apostles and calls the community to humility, charity, and peace.

The apostles appoint ministers

> "Christ therefore was sent forth by God, and the apostles by Christ. Both these appointments, then, were made in an orderly way, according to the will of God. ... And thus preaching through countries and cities, they appointed the first fruits [of their labours], having first proved them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons of those who should afterwards believe."

First Letter to the Corinthians 42

Provision for successors

> "Our apostles also knew, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that there would be strife on account of the office of the episcopate. For this reason, therefore, inasmuch as they had obtained a perfect fore-knowledge of this, they appointed those [ministers] already mentioned, and afterwards gave instructions, that when these should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed them in their ministry."

First Letter to the Corinthians 44

Saint Ignatius of Antioch

Bishop of Antioch and a martyr of the early second century, Ignatius wrote seven surviving letters while being taken under guard to Rome. He encouraged Christian communities to remain faithful to Christ and united with their bishops, presbyters, and deacons. His letters connect the reality of the Incarnation, the Eucharist, and ecclesial unity. They contain the earliest surviving designation of the Church as Catholic.

The bishop the Eucharist and the Catholic Church

> "See that you all follow the bishop, even as Jesus Christ does the Father, and the presbytery as you would the apostles; and reverence the deacons, as being the institution of God. Let no man do anything connected with the Church without the bishop. Let that be deemed a proper Eucharist, which is [administered] either by the bishop, or by one to whom he has entrusted it. Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude [of the people] also be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church."

Letter to the Smyrnaeans 8

Context: In the preceding chapter, Ignatius identifies opponents who refuse to confess the Eucharist as the flesh of Jesus Christ. His concern for the bishop belongs within his concern for the Church's faith, worship, and unity.

Saint Irenaeus of Lyons

Approximately A.D. 130–202 | Bishop of Lugdunum in Gaul, then part of the Roman Empire, now Lyon, France.

While still very young, Irenaeus had seen and heard the holy Bishop Polycarp (d. 155) at Smyrna, who in turn had conversed with the Apostles. During the persecution of Marcus Aurelius, Irenaeus was a priest of the Church of Lyons. The clergy of that city, many of whom were suffering imprisonment for the Faith, sent him (177 or 178) to Rome with a letter to Pope Eleutherius concerning Montanism, and on that occasion bore emphatic testimony to his merits. Returning to Gaul, Irenaeus succeeded the martyr Saint Pothinus as Bishop of Lyons.

In Against Heresies, Irenaeus answers claims to secret or superior religious knowledge by appealing to the public faith handed down in the apostolic churches.

The public tradition and succession of bishops

> "It is within the power of all, therefore, in every Church, who may wish to see the truth, to contemplate clearly the tradition of the apostles manifested throughout the whole world; and we are in a position to reckon up those who were by the apostles instituted bishops in the Churches, and [to demonstrate] the succession of these men to our own times ..."

Against Heresies III.3.1

The Church at Rome

> "... by indicating that tradition derived from the apostles, of the very great, the very ancient, and universally known Church founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul; as also [by pointing out] the faith preached to men, which comes down to our time by means of the successions of the bishops. For it is a matter of necessity that every Church should agree with this Church, on account of its preeminent authority ..."

Against Heresies III.3.2

From the apostles through their successors

> "The blessed apostles, then, having founded and built up the Church, committed into the hands of Linus the office of the episcopate. Of this Linus, Paul makes mention in the Epistles to Timothy. To him succeeded Anacletus; and after him, in the third place from the apostles, Clement was allotted the bishopric. This man, as he had seen the blessed apostles, and had been conversant with them, might be said to have the preaching of the apostles still echoing [in his ears], and their traditions before his eyes. ... In this order, and by this succession, the ecclesiastical tradition from the apostles, and the preaching of the truth, have come down to us."

Against Heresies III.3.3

Between these selections Irenaeus recounts Rome's intervention at Corinth under Clement and continues the list of Roman bishops to Eleutherius, bishop of Rome in his own day.

Polycarp as a living link with the apostles

> "But Polycarp also was not only instructed by apostles, and conversed with many who had seen Christ, but was also, by apostles in Asia, appointed bishop of the Church in Smyrna, whom I also saw in my early youth ... having always taught the things which he had learned from the apostles, and which the Church has handed down, and which alone are true."

Against Heresies III.3.4

The Holy Spirit gives life to the Church

> "For this gift of God has been entrusted to the Church, as breath was to the first created man, for this purpose, that all the members receiving it may be vivified; and the [means of] communion with Christ has been distributed throughout it, that is, the Holy Spirit, the earnest of incorruption, the means of confirming our faith, and the ladder of ascent to God. ... For where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church, and every kind of grace; but the Spirit is truth."

Against Heresies III.24.1

Connection with the Catechism

CCC 768: The Holy Spirit equips and directs the Church through both hierarchical and charismatic gifts. CCC 771: Her visible and spiritual dimensions belong to one Church. CCC 797–801: The Spirit gives life to the Body of Christ; his diverse gifts build it up in charity and require discernment in communion with the Church's shepherds.

Sources and reading notes

Patristic selections follow the public-domain translations in Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 1 (1885), reproduced by New Advent at the linked references. Ellipses indicate omissions; square brackets belong to the translation. "Presbytery" means the body of presbyters; "episcopate" means the office of bishop. Translations of Irenaeus III.3.2 vary. Biographical sources: the original Irenaeus handout, drawing on the Catholic Encyclopedia; Benedict XVI's general audiences of 7 March 2007 (Clement), 14 March 2007 (Ignatius), and 28 March 2007 (Irenaeus).

Clement biography

Ignatius biography

Irenaeus biography

Catechism of the Catholic Church