

The Word and the Spirit: St. Irenaeus and Our Blog

When June 28th does not fall on a Sunday, it is celebrated as the feast day of St. Irenaeus of Lyons. The title of our blog is taken from a phrase in his *Against the Heresies*, an early Christian writing that was a milestone in Christian thought. Irenaeus was working against Gnosticism, a system of erroneous beliefs that was growing in his time. In this long work, Irenaeus gives us a very strong and early explanation of what true Christian faith is all about. He is among the earliest figures to attest to the authority of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as the Four canonical Gospels. Irenaeus also laid the foundations for the doctrine we know today as apostolic succession. But above all, Irenaeus offers a beautiful description of faith in the Trinity, namely that the Word of God and the Spirit of God are like “the two hands of God.” His devotion to true faith, and his understanding of the Word and the Spirit as God’s hands so to speak, provide us with a great source of inspiration for our ministry in this blog.

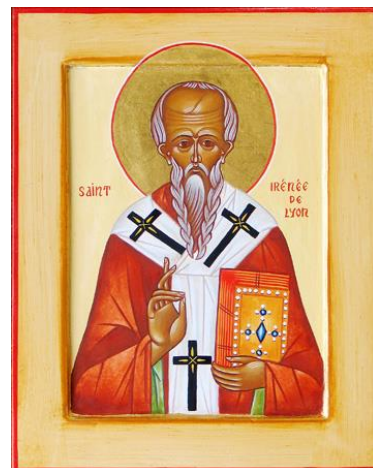
About Irenaeus

Irenaeus (130-202 AD) is a Church Father because of his influence on the Church during the period after the first apostles. He was born in Asia Minor (present day Turkey), but he joined the Church’s missionary movement and moved to Gaul (present day Lyons, France). He would later become Bishop of Gaul. In his youth he encountered the bishop St. Polycarp (80-167 AD) preach, and Polycarp became a hero figure for young Irenaeus. Polycarp was a known disciple of John the Apostle, so this puts Irenaeus very close to the apostolic era. He came to treasure this link with the Apostles. Irenaeus became best known for his writings against Gnosticism.

What did the Gnostics believe? Gnosticism is a complex system, but some of the basics are as follows: they had a “dualist” system of thought with regard to the spiritual and the physical. For example, they tended to think that flesh is bad, spirit is good. Salvation would therefore be all about escaping the body and the flesh. With regard to the “doctrine of God,” some major Gnostic thinkers taught that both a good and a bad “principle” exist. Others saw the creator god (called the “demiurge”) as a divine being that somehow was not the supreme deity (usually called the “pleroma” for fullness). These strange and eccentric ideas were a clear threat to the faith. Gnostics tended to proof-text by focusing on one Gospel or writing, rather than reading “canonically” with the unity of the writings in mind. Above all, the Gnostics claimed to have access to a secret knowledge (in Greek, *gnosis*, hence the name Gnosticism) that most Christians lack because they are not smart or clever enough.

Irenaeus offered an extensive and effective response to Gnosticism in *Against the Heresies*, and underneath the work are three excellent qualities to emulate:

1. Love of the faith that has been handed down by the followers of Jesus and transmitted also in a number of inspired writings
2. A concern for the universal faith, which is for everyone
3. A desire for humanity to realize the plan God has for it



Love of the Faith

It is important to understand a little bit about the situation that Irenaeus faced. Irenaeus was raised in the faith, and encountered leaders like Polycarp with well-known ties with the apostles and other disciples who walked with Jesus. They preached about a Jesus who desired to gather all people to himself, one who did not have “secret” *gnosis* only for a select few, but rather became poor so that we may become rich. Jesus showed this by seeking out the lost, the sinners, the marginalized people. The message was clear: what God reveals in Jesus is for everyone. Therefore, Gnosticism was wrong.

We should note the sources for Irenaeus’s faith: along with the tradition of the apostles, he had a good grasp of the Old Testament, and also showed a remarkable knowledge of most of the texts that would become part of the New Testament; by some counts he knew 21 or 23 of the 27 of books that would comprise the New Testament.¹ Irenaeus also referred to important early Christian writings that are not part of the New Testament, such as the 1st Letter of Clement and the Shepherd of Hermas.

What is key is that Irenaeus saw that reliable sacred writings needed to be connected with the apostles and the faith that they handed down, and he had an excellent sense of which texts are trustworthy. Among Irenaeus’ key arguments here is that we need all four Gospels, not one in isolation. Furthermore, there are only four Gospels, all with clear ties to the apostles and first disciples. Any other text calling itself a Gospel (such as the Gnostic “Gospel of Truth”) cannot be trusted.

The Universal Faith For Everyone

We may recall that Gnosticism suggested that only an elite and intelligent few possessed true faith, true “gnosis.” Irenaeus recognized an issue with this claim. He received his faith from the preaching of Polycarp, who learned the faith from John, who was evangelizing according to a clear commission to make disciples *of all nations*, baptizing in the name of the Trinity, and teaching them to obey *everything* that Jesus commanded (Matt 28:19). Irenaeus had moved from Asia Minor to Gaul, and he knew and encountered many Christians who shared the same faith as what he received in Asia Minor. Could the apostles and their successors have kept secret knowledge to themselves?

There was a universal faith shared among believers in many locations, and a unity in diversity in the texts of the apostles and evangelists. Moreover, each church knew that their leaders were handpicked by prior leaders with ties to the apostles. They could trace the lineage, and at each stage, from apostle to the current leader, each community could confirm that they faithfully received everything that the apostle handed down. Irenaeus refutes the Gnostics on those grounds. How could apostles claim to faithfully fulfill a mandate that concerns all people and keep the key knowledge to themselves? Why wouldn’t they hand it down? And furthermore, why would the teaching of the Gnostics be so different from the tradition of the apostles?

¹ It would be a little incorrect to say that Irenaeus knew the New Testament as such since the canon of the New Testament took many years to define. He did regard the books he knew as authoritative and inspired, but he was operating shortly before the Church spoke of the “New Testament.” By the 5th century, some councils under the authority of St. Augustine identified the 27 books of the New Testament, and St. Athanasius also names all 27 books as canonical.

Irenaeus' argument would go on to become a milestone in the development of apostolic succession and the doctrine of sacred tradition. It was important then to ensure that there was a clear line from original apostle to current leader, both in terms of handing on of authority and in terms of continuity in the bishop's teaching.

God's Plan

Irenaeus had a wonderful understanding of the purpose of creation. For Irenaeus, God is not up in the clouds and only found in clever ideas as the Gnostics believed. Rather, this God created the world and redeemed it with a desire of bringing true life. God wants to save. He talks about this in the context of God's glory, and he notes, "The glory of God is the person fully alive, and the life of humanity consists of beholding God." God came to give us life in abundance, which is only possible if we believe in Jesus and the one who sends him. In retrospect, we can see how true this is. We see glimpses of God's glory in the saints, living and dead.

We often desire to be "fully alive." Today, people often try to uphold what is "life-giving." But some people understand "life-giving" things too simply. Something is not "life-giving" because it makes you feel good. Indeed, the truly life-giving thing is seeing God, being near God, being filled with all the fullness of God. Paul put it this way: "the kingdom of God is not food and drink, but justice, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit." Irenaeus wants us to enjoy that which is truly life-giving: God himself. And this God is near us, desiring to save us.

Irenaeus-Style Ministry: Our Blog

St. Irenaeus remains a figure of unity: with a heart for mission, he moved geographically from East to West in the Church, and sought to protect and spread the one faith that all shared. With a love for the Lord, he treasured his connections to the apostles of Jesus and the faith that they handed down. He treasured the writings that would become the New Testament, and rejected anything that preached a different gospel. But he refuted the Gnostics generously. He held together body and spirit in the face of Gnostics who viewed the body negatively. He served and preserved the unity of the faith. For all of these reasons, Irenaeus is a worthy patron of our blog and our ministry in it.

Like Irenaeus, we too should continually turn to scripture and to the tradition of the Church as sure sources of revelation. We must also desire to testify to others that the glory of God is the person fully alive. A person is only fully alive when one sees God. We know that the pure of heart are blessed and will see God. We can see glimpses of God in this world, and of course we long to see God face to face in the world to come. But already, the saints and the holy ones are fully alive. Jesus came that all might have life in abundance. We pray that our blog, which seeks to serve the Word, the Spirit, and the one God who is Father of all, can serve the one faith for everyone, rooted in scripture and tradition, and with an eye to bringing others to full and abundant life.

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