



Apostolic Fathers and Succession (Option 2)

Grade 9 - Patristics - Unit 2, Option 2

OBJECTIVE

The objective of this unit is to help the students understand the concept of Apostolic Succession, and to learn about some of the fathers we call “Apostolic Fathers.”

The church as a whole, is built on the foundations of traditions and Biblical understanding. We know the Bible and have had access to it for centuries. The fathers on the other hand, i.e patristics, is a continually evolving study of understanding who the fathers were and what it was they have taught.

INTRODUCTION & HOOK

To get the youths’ attention, present them with this quote without telling them who wrote it or giving context: (Note to servant, it is from St Ignatius’s Letter to the Romans. The servant can distribute handouts or put the quote up on a powerpoint).

“I am writing to all the churches and am insisting to everyone that I die for God of my own free will—unless you hinder me. I beg you: do not be unseasonably kind to me! Let me be food for the wild beasts, through whom I can reach God. I am God’s wheat, and I am being ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, so that I may prove to be pure bread. You would do better to coax the wild beasts, so that they may become my tomb and leave nothing of my body behind, lest I become a burden to anyone once I have fallen asleep [i.e. died]. Then I will truly be a disciple of Jesus Christ, when the world will no longer see my body. Pray to the Lord on my behalf, so that through these instruments I may prove to be a sacrifice to God. I do not give you orders like Peter and Paul: they were apostles, I am a convict; they were free, but I am even now still a slave. But if I suffer, I will be a freedman of Jesus Christ and will rise up free in him. In the meantime, as a prisoner I am learning to desire nothing.”

Ask the following Discussion questions:

- What is the passage talking about? What do you think it means?
- What person could write words like these? It says, “ Let me be food for the wild beasts, through whom I can reach God!!” This is very strong.
- What touched you most in this passage? (This question is meant to help the youth reflect on the passage itself and what it means for the relationship with God).
- Who could have written such words? And when do you think it was written? There is a hint in the passage to help you! (Note to servant: the author lives after Sts. Peter and Paul).

CONTENT & DISCUSSION

The person who wrote this is called St. Ignatius of Antioch, and he is one of the Apostolic Fathers. Did



you ever wonder how our church got its faith handed down through the centuries and until today? We call our Coptic church an “apostolic church,” right, which means we trace our church back to one of the apostles (St. Mark). But what happened after all the disciples and apostles died? Who carried on the faith through the centuries?

Well, the apostles taught others, and those others continued handing down the faith through the ages, and a lot of it was passed down orally during those early centuries before they were written down. So the first generations the apostles taught are called the “Apostolic Fathers” and St. Ignatius belongs to this group. He was handed down the tradition from St Polycarp and St John the Evangelist who wrote the Gospel, epistles and revelation. Imagine!

You need to remember, this is super early, we’re still talking about the first century! Try to imagine this:

- Jesus Christ has died, risen and ascended, the apostles have preached the gospel in many lands and most have been martyred by now.
- There are many local churches now ... there is the church in Egypt with a bishop, in Antioch with its bishop, in Rome with its bishop, and so on. So perhaps now each church will just split from the others! This can be a problem. Also, inside these churches some people want to split from their bishop.
- Persecution is still going on for Christians as long as they don’t sacrifice to the Roman gods.
- The Christians have very few writings to teach them the faith except the Bible. Actually, either not all the New Testament has been written or has just been finished (remember, St John was writing in the very end of the 1st century). And certainly, not all the churches even had the Bible! They would have some epistles of St Paul, maybe a gospel or two. You might think that’s not a serious issue, but that’s wrong! When you need to know something or have a question about God or the Bible, what do you do? You look it up online and in old-fashioned days you’d look it up in some books. Or you’d ask your family or Abouna or your servant at church ... & they need to get that information from somewhere! And what about the people who want to be Christian? How do you teach them what the Christian faith is all about?
- We have to remember that Christianity was still a very new religion at that time. So people, even Christians, understood it differently. There were no creeds yet like the Nicene creed we pray in the liturgy.

So if all this is going on, what should the apostolic fathers do? What should they focus on? And when they write letters to churches, what should they say? (**discussion ... the youth should come up with these or similar points rather than being told**).

- What it means to be faithful Christians and face persecutions.
- How the members of the church should live as one body, and how to live the church mysteries like baptism and the Eucharist.
- What the Christian faith is as they learned it from the apostles, in contrast to heresies that were developing at the time like Gnostic thought.
- And most of all, how to love and rejoice in the Lord and await His coming



And we actually find all these themes in the 3 apostolic fathers we are discussing today! These are: St. Polycarp, St. Ignatius and St. Clement of Rome. We have some letters that each one of them wrote. Most of these letters are addressed to groups and churches, and they teach the people how to overcome conflict within the church. The letters show how much the apostolic fathers cared about the church. It was never just a job for them but they really loved God and the church, and they wanted everyone to live as faithful Christians and enjoy God's presence here and in eternity.

St. Ignatius, for example, was the second bishop of Antioch and he was martyred in the very early 2nd century for his faith, by being thrown to the beasts at the Roman colosseum. He had a long trip as a prisoner from Antioch to Rome and when he was traveling, he wrote 7 letters. In these letters he wrote a lot of the points we discussed earlier. One of these epistles, in fact the only personal letter, was addressed to St. Polycarp, who is another apostolic father. **St. Polycarp** was a disciple of St. John, and appointed a bishop of Smyrna by the apostles. When he was arrested and asked to deny the faith, he said: "86 years have I served Christ, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?" Before he was burned to death, he prayed a very powerful prayer that gives us a hint about how Christians at that time used to pray.

St. Clement of Rome is another well-known apostolic father. He was a disciple of the apostles Paul and Peter and was appointed as the bishop of Rome. St. Clement wrote an epistle addressing those who rebelled against the church and clergy in Corinth. The epistle is full of wisdom, modesty and love that some churches considered it worthy to be taught as part of the New Testament.

Let's come back to St Ignatius. When he wrote his letters, he was going to be tried and martyred for his faith. Now, if you knew a bishop was passing by as a prisoner and he will be martyred, what would you do? Perhaps you will try to convince him not to be martyred right? You might want to bribe the soldiers to let him escape, because you don't want him to suffer!! But what does St Ignatius say about this?! Let's see a part of the quote we read in the beginning which comes from his letter to the Romans. (Show the youth the quote again).

"I am writing to all the churches and am insisting to everyone that I die for God of my own free will—unless you hinder me. I beg you: do not be unseasonably kind to me! ... Pray to the Lord on my behalf, so that through these instruments I may prove to be a sacrifice to God."

He wants to be martyred for God's sake, and does not want to deny his love for God at all! Such strength! He is telling them: you will not be kind if you release me! please, let me go to the beasts so I can sacrifice myself to God." But he does not just want to die nor is he committing suicide! He wants his death to express something important in our faith. Look again at the quote. Can you spot it?! (*give them 1 minute to think*)

He says, "Let me be food for the wild beasts, through whom I can reach God. I am God's wheat, and I am being ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, so that I may prove to be pure bread."

What does this look like? What wheat is ground into bread that then becomes the source of life for us? The Eucharist! Without the death of Jesus Christ we would never have the Eucharist. It gives us eternal life. And how do we make the bread/orban for the Divine Liturgy? We grind and crush the wheat and



bake the orban! Christ said: “Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds” (John 12: 24).

For St Ignatius, everything is connected together! His life is connected to the Eucharist and to Christ’s love and sacrifice. The Eucharist is everything for St Ignatius, and as he wants to teach us, for us too.

- It gives us life because it unites us with Christ! How close can you ever get to someone? When we partake of the Eucharist, we have Christ inside us and He fills us! God’s love overflows in the Eucharist and engulfs us in it. Can you imagine that we are really that close to Him?!
- And it unites all the Christians with their bishop and with the rest of the other Christian churches. Because we are all partaking of the same Eucharist, God is inside each of us, and makes us able to love one another, bear one another. This love is the mark of being Christian. Remember, Christ said: “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13: 35). And we love each other when we all partake of the Eucharist together. St Ignatius calls this “the symphony of love.”
- And when we partake of the Eucharist, we are united with God and have the promise of heaven. St Ignatius calls the Eucharist “the medicine of immortality” because it gives us eternal life!

This is why we call St Ignatius the Theophorus meaning the God-bearer. Everything is about God for him, and nothing is about him apart from God. He is glad to become a martyr because he is going towards true life: eternal life with God.

CONCLUSION

The apostles and apostolic fathers gave their lives to the church, to spreading the love of God, and to helping the Christians understand the faith and yearning towards heaven. And the Christian church still exists almost 2000 years later! We can still learn a lot from the apostolic fathers today. What will you remember from the apostolic fathers or St Ignatius today? (final discussion).