

4-28-2022

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ISSN: 2472-2596 (print)

ISSN: 2472-260X (online)

Recommended Citation

Koshy, Jayan. 2022. Eucharist, Kenosis & Ignatius of Antioch's Johannine Ecclesiology. *Obsculta* 15, (1) : 28-45. <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta/vol15/iss1/5>.

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Eucharist, Kenosis & Ignatius of Antioch's Johannine Ecclesiology

by Jayan Koshy

ABSTRACT:

An anti-hierarchical ethos has been assumed in John's Gospel by much modern biblical scholarship. The Johannine community functions, especially for non-episcopal communions, as an emblem of "flat" ecclesiology in the early Church, defying the Synoptic emphasis on apostolic ministry. However, recent scholarship destabilizes this consensus, drawing on figures associated with John in early tradition to present alternative Johannine ecclesiologies. Andrew Byers, for instance, seeks to harmonize Ignatius of Antioch's high theology of the episcopacy with the theology of John's Gospel. Building on Byers' work, this essay argues that the Johannine tradition is not only compatible with Ignatius, but even supplies central elements of his ecclesiology, where the bishop embodies liturgically the Church's participation in the kenosis so prominent in John.

SYNOD:

One of the common metaphors for the Synod on Synodality is the inversion of a pyramid, eschewing a monarchical model of ecclesiastical leadership, instead framing the hierarchy as servant leaders attentive to the whole People of God. While the processes being developed and deployed for the Synod are crucial for realizing this vision, it is equally vital that structural considerations not eclipse the theological anchors of this synodal journey. Otherwise we might simply produce new apparatuses operating in conflict with bishops—or de-emphasize episcopal ministry altogether. Ignatius' ecclesiology explored here offers a deeply scriptural understanding of the episcopate, inviting the Church into a non-bureaucratic synodal existence: the People gathered around their bishop for instruction and sacramental enactment of kenotic discipleship.



INTRODUCTION

Of the Apostolic Fathers, Ignatius of Antioch, who died in the early second century, probably displays the “highest” ecclesiology. Across his seven authentic letters, he repeatedly hammers home the importance of obedience to the local bishop. The earliest clear evidence of the monoepiscopate, his work has been a thorn in the side of patristically-engaged Protestants such as John Calvin, who decided to dismiss his writings altogether. Ignatius is so invested in the importance of the local Church gathering around the bishop that he makes the somewhat incendiary declaration that “Wherever the bishop appears, there let the congregation be; just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic Church.”¹

This nosebleed-high view of the episcopate creates something of a conundrum when placed next to the traditions around Ignatius’ life. Traditionally, he has been presented as a disciple of St. John the Evangelist. Even if he was not directly catechized by the Apostle, the tradition points to a longstanding association of some sort between Johannine thought and Ignatius’ writings. But the Johannine corpus of the New Testament, the Gospel and three letters attributed to the apostle, is not typically associated with emphasis on Church hierarchy. On the contrary, the established scholarly opinion sees the Johannine community as notably anti-institutional. They typically frame John as positing a “flat” ecclesiology and de-emphasizing sacraments.

Andrew Byers sums up this conventional wisdom and intervenes to argue against hypotheses of rupture between Johannine theology and Ignatius’ ecclesiology.² Although he does not deny the resonances between John and “low church” ecclesiologies that de-emphasize ecclesiastical hierarchy, Byers argues that such ecclesiologies do not hold sole claim to the Johannine tradition. His argument, summarized below, posits that Ignatius actually draws directly on Johannine themes of participation to frame his episcopal ecclesiology, making the Johannine tradition as much a forebear of the “high church” tradition as it is of the “low church” tradition.

1 Ign. Smyr. 8:2a. All citations of Ignatius of Antioch are taken from Michael Holmes et al., eds., *The Apostolic Fathers*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

2 Andrew J. Byers, “Johannine Bishops?” *Novum Testamentum*, no. 2, (Mar. 2018): 121–39.

Building on Byers' argument that Ignatius' episcopal theology is in harmony with John, I argue here that it is specifically Ignatius' sacramental emphasis on the episcopate that makes him a compelling inheritor of the Johannine tradition. Byers' is correct in noting that Ignatius leans on John's language of participatory mutuality and kenotic presentation of the Beloved Disciple and Peter in constructing his ecclesiology. But a narrative reading of the Farewell Discourse in John further reveals the centrality of the Eucharist in this as an intersection of these themes. This lays the direct groundwork for Ignatius, who sees the bishop celebrating Eucharist as the ritual site on which John's kenotic discipleship is enacted. The bishop, then, becomes a sort of sacrament of visible unity, driving Ignatius' insistence on episcopal obedience.

PARTICULAR PARTICIPATION

The now dominant interpretive tradition typically portrays John's community as a sort of insular counter-cultural group even within the Jesus Movement. Andrew Byers' review of this literature is both extensive and thorough. But, in brief, his assessment distills the conventional literature into an assembly of arguments that the Johannine Church stood at odds with the models of the Church around it. The Johannine tradition is presented as more individualistic, less sacramental, and anti-authoritarian. The absence of the term *ἀπόστολοι* and the apparent downplaying of the Twelve are cited as examples of this putative anti-hierarchical understanding of the Johannine corpus.

Also central to this portrayal of the Johannine tradition is the "us versus them" tone that pervades much of the corpus. The theme of delineating between in-group and out-group is undeniable. After all, the central Farewell Discourse is peppered with references to the world hating the disciples (Jn. 15:18-19), throwing them out of the synagogues (Jn. 16:2-3), and more. While the theme is incontrovertible, its interpretation is far from clear. Taking it as an indicator of sectarian isolationism, the conventional literature uses this tone as a lens to interpret John as reaching quite different, notably more Protestant-seeming, conclusions than the Synoptic communities in both theology and practice.

Byers troubles the image of the Johannine community as an unambiguously "low church" maverick sect. He does not go so far as to say the low church ecclesiology is an illegitimate, or even subordinate, inheritor to the Johannine

tradition. But he does argue that John's corpus is just as easily compatible with a "high," hierarchical ecclesiology like Ignatius of Antioch. Ignatius is neither literarily dependent on John nor a necessary development from him. But, Byers argues, Ignatius' understanding of hierarchy can be seen as following from John's logic of discipleship as mutual participation and John's portrayal of specific disciples like Peter and the so-called Beloved Disciple.

DISCIPLESHIP AS PARTICIPATION

The Gospel of John is perhaps most famous for its poetic—and often, cryptic—language. From the first verse in which the Word both is God and is with God, the author makes heavy use of imagery that is far more abstract than the narrative parables of the Synoptic Gospels. John's Jesus speaks of being "born again from above,"³ his flesh as "living bread that came down from heaven" and gives eternal life,⁴ and shepherds who are also sheep gates.⁵ Some of the most striking poetic imagery, though, is that of "abiding" or "indwelling" which Jesus uses to describe his relationship with the Father.

The language of the Father being "in" the Son and vice versa is used to indicate a sort of fundamental, metaphysical unity. This is not yet the technically-honed term *ομοούσιος* of later ecumenical councils, but it does reflect a pervasive and—importantly—mutual relationship. Even in the Incarnation, the Son and the Father who sent him are one and the same,⁶ unified in action.⁷ In his High Priestly Prayer of John 17, Jesus makes it clear that the goal of the Father and the Son is for the disciples and "those who will believe ... through their word"⁸ to share in this oneness and mutual indwelling. This mutual abiding is the hallmark of true discipleship in John's gospel. Indeed, the root problem that manifests in denial of Jesus is not having the Father's "word (*λόγος*) abiding in you."⁹

Jesus' mission in John's gospel is one of calling the disciples into participation in this mutual in-dwelling. This relationship that Byers terms "participatory

3 Jn. 3:3, NRSV

4 Jn. 6:51

5 Jn. 10:7

6 Jn. 10:30

7 Jn. 5:19-24

8 Jn. 17:20

9 Jn. 5:38

reciprocity,” or that St. Julian of Norwich terms “one-ing,” is the basis on which Jesus bridges the gap between the Father and humanity. The disciples are “one-ed” to Jesus, dwelling in him and he in them, and because he is also “one-ed” with the Father, the disciples are likewise “one-ed” to the Father. This mutual abiding is both the means and indicator of salvation.

Byers points out a few sets of verses which highlight this process of the disciples participating in Jesus and thus being incorporated into his mutual participation in the Father. For instance, after being accused of blasphemy by the Jews, Jesus retorts:

“If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that *the Father is in me and I am in the Father.*”¹⁰

This is recalled (and its ultimate fulfillment foretold) in his Farewell Discourse:

“In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and *you in me, and I in you.*”¹¹

Through participation in Jesus—by believing him, or his works, and thus the one who sent him, the Father—the disciples become participants in Jesus and the Father.

Within the Farewell Discourse, Jesus highlights his participatory reciprocity with the disciples by using the famous vine metaphor. In the metaphor, Jesus is the vine, and the disciples are the branches.¹² The branches’ survival depends on abiding in the vine. The vine and the branches are not separate but mutually participate in the same life. Although the vinegrower imagery breaks down at this point, by obeying Christ’s commandments and abiding in his love, the disciples are also promised that they will abide in the Father’s love,¹³ being granted everything they ask “in [Christ’s] name,” that is through

10 Jn. 10:37-38, emphasis added

11 Jn. 14:19-20, emphasis added

12 Jn. 15:5

13 Jn. 15:10

participation in Christ. This is the substance of discipleship for John. The vinegrower will prune away branches that do not bear much fruit, and fruitfulness of the branches depends on their abiding in the vine. So salvation is both worked out and displayed in this mutual in-dwelling.

It is easy to see how this might be construed as anti-hierarchical. There is, after all, no mention of intermediary forces, figures, or structures. No mention of priests (let alone bishops) or sacraments or Church bodies. It appears to concern disciples as an undifferentiated group, each coming to abide in the vine individually. It is not clear that any connection to wider life of the Church, assumed in the Synoptics and Pauline Epistles, is seen as necessary, or even desirable. And with the apostles, as such, completely absent, there seems to be no warrant for the episcopate.

PARALLELS AND AUTHORITY

Against the assertion that the apostles are completely absent and the Twelve nothing special in John, Byers notes that John's Gospel actually gives particular roles in this type of discipleship to both the Beloved Disciple and Peter by paralleling their participation in the Son with the Son's participation in the Father. Byers argues that these parallels provide precedent for Ignatius' move towards locating special authority in the person of the bishop.

The special position of the Beloved Disciple, often understood to be the Evangelist himself, among Jesus' disciples is so well-known as to even provoke wildly spun conspiracy theories about the nature of their relationship. He is portrayed at the Last Supper as reclining next to next Jesus.¹⁴ Byers notes that the Greek noun κόλπος is used to indicate the Disciple's position leaned against Jesus' breast. In itself, this rather ordinary word would be unremarkable, but Byers connects it to the final verse of John's prologue:

"No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart [κόλπος], who has made him known."¹⁵

By using this word to describe the Son's position relative to the Father and then again to describe the Beloved Disciple's position relative to Jesus, the

¹⁴ Jn. 13:23

¹⁵ Jn. 1:18

writer highlights the Disciple's discipleship as an individual. He is shown not only as a disciple among many, nor even as a disciple whom Jesus particularly loved, but as someone whose mutual participation in Christ, and thus the Father, took a particular form.

The other parallel linguistic structure that Byers notes highlights Peter, cutting against the consensus that John's Gospel seeks to undermine the particular status given to Peter in the synoptic tradition. When Jesus speaks of being "lifted up from the earth,"¹⁶ the writer notes:

"He said this to indicate the kind of death [σημαίνων ποίω θανάτω] he was to die"¹⁷

This Greek construction appears again during the Passion, as Jesus' sentence of crucifixion approaches:

"(This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death [σημαίνων ποίω θανάτω] he was to die.)"¹⁸

Now clearly tied to the death Christ willingly submits to, the exact same construction appears after Jesus has commanded Peter to feed his sheep:¹⁹

"(He said this to indicate the kind of death [σημαίνων ποίω θανάτω] by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, 'Follow me.'"²⁰

This exact repetition creates a resonance between Jesus' death on the Cross and Peter's eventual death—which Tradition also presents as a mirrored reflection of Christ's Passion.

Even further, this oracle of Peter's death is placed in conjunction with a demonstration of Peter's love for and participation in Jesus and the command for Peter to feed Jesus' sheep. This juxtaposition deepens the parallel by echoing Jesus' language of the shepherd sacrificing himself. These parallels

16 Jn. 12:32

17 Jn. 12:33

18 Jn. 18:32

19 Jn. 21:17

20 Jn. 21:19

seem to indicate that within the general mutual participation of disciples in Christ, some individuals have a particular sort of participation, which is even connected, in the case of Peter, to a role of pastoral authority.

Certainly this Johannine “peculiar participation” and commission articulate authority differently from the synoptic tradition. Pastoral authority for John seems to be based primarily on participation in the kenosis of the Son. For the Beloved Disciple, peculiar participation is linked with the kenosis of the Word becoming flesh. And Peter’s pastoral authority is knit together with Christ’s kenotic sacrifice on the Cross. Meanwhile the Synoptic tradition seems to place relatively more emphasis on the concept of mandate in articulating pastoral authority. Matthew’s gospel contains the famous declaration of the rock of the church and the presentation of the keys of heaven.²¹ Both Matthew and the Luke-Acts tradition emphasize Jesus commissioning the apostles.²² In contrast to John’s emphasis on authority in kenosis, the Synoptics emphasize authority in mandate.

But this contrast does not necessitate total divergence or incompatibility between the two traditions. The Great Commission that Jesus gives the Apostles in Matthew is prefaced by Jesus declaring that all authority has been given to him:

“And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth *has been given to me*. Go therefore...”²³

If the Father’s authority is located in Jesus, then for the apostles to exercise that authority in the Great Commission, they must share in Christ in some way, partaking in the authority that has been given to him. If the Synoptic tradition provides the basis for practices of the institutional Church, it leaves open a theological question of how those processes, namely the exercise of authority, operate. If we set aside the assumption of sectarian isolation, it is conceivable to read John’s Gospel as the product of a community reflecting on the theological significance of these practices they either shared or were aware of.

21 Mt. 16:18-19

22 Mt. 28:19-20, Acts 1:8

23 Mt. 28:18-19a, emphasis added

JOHN AS LITURGICAL THEOLOGY

The dominant reading of John also gives the impression that the Johannine tradition is somehow less sacramental. Despite the striking language about bread and flesh in John 6, John's apparent lack of the Institution Narrative of the synoptic tradition is construed as evidence that the Johannine tradition de-emphasizes the wider Christian world's ritual practice along with its attendant institutional hierarchy. Sacramental practice and sacerdotal priesthood are orthogonal to the narrative of discipleship as individualistic participation.

But arguments from silence are dangerously unreliable hermeneutic foundations. While it is true that John is divergent from the synoptics from a source criticism perspective, we must carefully circumscribe the scope of what that tells us. Lack of literary dependence does not, as a matter of course, imply a lack of knowledge or even common practice. Nor does a theme of in-group and out-group distinction with respect to "the Jews" necessarily, or even easily, translate to isolation from other Christian communities. The existing hypotheses of sectarian fracture within the Jesus Movement that these conclusions lean on are just that: hypotheses.

To be sure, swinging to the opposite extreme is equally unhelpful. We should not, as some have done in the past, assume a proto-catholic Church that is unified and uniform from the outset. But there is a middle way that allows for the distinctiveness of the Johannine community but assumes some shared practice at least in basic form. Adopting this middle assumption of connection but not uniformity, it is possible to read John's theological narrative as hinging on what is fundamentally a ritual moment.

The typical structural division of John splits the Gospel into two major sections.²⁴ The first twelve chapters comprise the Book of Signs, in which Jesus's identity and role is unpacked. The second part, the Book of Glory, consists of Chapters 13 through 20 or 21. This is demarcated by the arrival of Jesus' "hour":

²⁴ Gail O'Day, "The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections" in *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary: Volume VIII*, ed. Leander Keck et al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), 433.

“Now before the festival of the Passover, *Jesus knew that his hour had come* to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.”²⁵

Whether the Book of Signs and Book of Glory should be parsed as monolithic units, this moment at the beginning John 13 is clearly a hinge point in the entire narrative. From that point forward, everything points to Christ’s Passion.

Within the Book of Glory, is the Farewell Discourse.²⁶ This lengthy discussion, largely consisting of a monologue assigned to Jesus, sets out the heart of Jesus’ teaching. This is where the Holy Spirit is promised, the participatory theology noted above is most poignantly expressed, and the unity of Son and Father and Son and disciples is emphasized. If Chapters 14 through 17 are read as a singular unit and divorced from the synoptic tradition and synoptic practice, they could easily be understood as a spirituality that sweeps institutionalize aside.

But picking those four chapters out as the farewell discourse is misleading. The narrative is not punctuated or interrupted by the discourse like a parenthetical exposition of theology. It is better read as part of the narrative, part of a scene that runs from the beginning of John 13 through the end of John 18. Understanding Chapter 13, rather than 14, as the beginning of the literary unit stages the discourse on a stage with strong liturgical resonances.

The actual monologue, only briefly punctuated at points, runs from John 14:1 through John 16:33. It is flanked on either side by what I would argue are more narrative events. Chapter 13 identifies the setting as Jesus’ final meal with his disciples before the Passover. Importantly, for John this is not the Passover meal but a prelude to the actual Passover of Christ’s death. After the meal, Jesus washes the feet of the disciples, an act which is often held up as a counterpoint or foil to the Synoptic gospels’ institution of the Eucharist. But after he has washed the disciples’ feet, Jesus returns to the table, and they share bread, dipped into a dish:

25 Jn. 13:1, emphasis added

26 Jn. 14-17

“Jesus answered, ‘[The one who will betray me] is the one to whom I give this piece of *bread when I have dipped it in the dish.*’ So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot.”²⁷

If we read it with an understanding of the Johannine penchant for subtle allusion, this moment of sharing the intincted bread heartens back to the discussion of eating his flesh which is the bread of life. It stands between Jesus’ act of and exhortation to humility on the one hand, and on the other a command about participating in his kenotic love. Approached with an openness to some level of shared practice with the Synoptic communities, Chapter 13 sets out a stage for the Farewell Discourse with striking Eucharistic resonances.

The other bookend of the Farewell Discourse is John 17, sometimes called Jesus’ “High Priestly Prayer.” Although this could be parsed as a continuation of the monologue of Chapters 14 through 16, it is set apart by a small but important narrative detail:

“After Jesus had spoken these words, *he looked up to heaven and said, ‘Father, the hour has come...’*”²⁸

This clause marks two important aspects of this chapter that set it apart from the discourse proper. First, Jesus shifts from speaking to the disciples to addressing the Father. From a literary standpoint, this makes it difficult to present Chapter 17 as a seamless continuation of the Farewell Discourse. Secondly, the posture Jesus adopts and the form of his address is liturgical. Raising his eyes to heaven and praying *on behalf of* the disciples places Jesus in the priestly role of intercessor. This is not a continuation of his conversation with the disciples but a coda that mirrors the dipping of bread after the meal in evoking liturgical resonances.

So, if some level of continuity with synoptic practice is not rejected *a priori*, these two chapters place the actual discourse within a liturgical framework. The meal and intercession are not incidental but should rather be seen as a lens for understanding the theological content of the discourse. It provides a

27 Jn. 13:26, emphasis added

28 Jn. 17:1, emphasis added

liturgical reference point for the theology of mutual participation in Jesus that unfolds in Chapters 14 through 16. And the discourse itself follows a loosely chiasmic structure beginning and ending with reassurances of comfort. But in the center of this chiasmus is Jesus' great commandment:

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”²⁹

The rhetorical high point of this discussion of mutual participation is an exhortation to the kind of kenosis exhibited in the Incarnation and fulfilled in the Passion. John places the epitome of his theology of mutual participation in the center of a scene that plays out on a liturgically-tinged stage. The Farewell Discourse, then, not only anchors both John and Peter’s particular participation in Jesus’ kenotic love. It also places that participation in a setting which, if we permit a level of shared knowledge and practice with the Synoptic communities, resonate powerfully with the ritual life of the Eucharist.

IGNATIUS THE HIGH-CHURCH JOHANNINE

Against the backdrop of this approach to John, Ignatius of Antioch’s ecclesiology does not seem so strange. John bases his understanding of discipleship on a mutual participation between the disciple and Jesus and, through Jesus, the Father. John even sets individual figures apart as engaged in distinctive modes of this participation, yielding an image of pastoral authority through kenosis in the case of Peter. And the discourse where the theology of mutual participation is most clearly laid out suggests a liturgical, even eucharistic, setting as central to understanding the mutuality.

Again, through a lens that assumes separation or even opposition between the Johannine community and the rest of the Church, Ignatius’ strong emphasis on the episcopate, especially a monoepiscopate, would seem like an innovation bizarrely out of step with the Johannine community he supposedly came out of. But through a lens that understands John’s gospel as a theological exposition on discipleship that *assumes* connections of some sort in thought and practice with other Christian communities, Ignatius’ move merely makes explicit the connections that are implicit in the Johannine corpus itself.

29 Jn. 15:12-13

Ignatius' conception of the episcopate picks up on all of these Johannine themes and ties them together by putting them explicitly in the context of the visible, institutional life of the Church that follows naturally from the synoptic tradition. What results is an image of the bishop as the focal point of ongoing participatory discipleship. Through a relationship of mutual participation with the bishop, the people of the local Church participate in Christ's kenotic love and thus are brought into mutual abiding with the Father. In keeping with the eucharistic inflection of this kenotic participation in John, Ignatius sets out the Eucharist as the ritual site where this participation is worked out on a continuing basis.

Ignatius' discussion of bishops and his justifications for urging obedience to them are shot through with language that echoes the mutual abiding. The bishops are described as being "in the mind" of the Son just as he is in the mind of the Father.³⁰ And the Church is presented as participating in the Father-Son mutual indwelling via their relationship with the bishop:

"For if I in a short time experienced such fellowship with your bishop, which was not merely human but spiritual, how much more do I congratulate *you who are united with him, as the church is with Jesus Christ and as Jesus Christ is with the Father*, so that all things may be harmonious in unity."³¹

The bishop's unity with his congregants stands in here as the means of the Church's unity with Jesus and the image of Jesus's unity with the Father. For Ignatius, the Son's unity of action with the Father is reflected in the Church's unity of action with the bishop and his presbyters. This is the basis for Ignatius' injunction that "you must not do anything without the bishop and the presbyters."³²

Following the Johannine highlighting of particular disciples as having specific modes of mutual participation with Jesus, Ignatius frames representation of God as the bishop's role in this collective participation. He links obedience to the bishop with obedience to God, warning, "Let us, therefore, be careful not to oppose the bishop, in order that we may be obedient to God."³³ He

30 Ign.Eph. 3:2b

31 Ign.Eph. 5:1, emphasis added

32 Ign.Mag. 7:1a

33 Ign.Eph. 5:3

presents honoring the bishop as a means to honor, and be honored by, God, rather than the devil, who is served in disobedience to the bishop.³⁴ And the council of the bishop is placed parallel to the unity of God:

“The Lord, however, forgives all who repent, if in repenting they return to the unity of God and the council of the bishop.”³⁵

The bishop—or more precisely, communion with the bishop—seems to be the iconic representation of communion with God in a similar way to Peter’s iconic representation of the Suffering Shepherd.

Such strong parallels between the person of the bishop and God might startle even those modern readers of Ignatius who have a high ecclesiology. But it is important also to note that the parallel is not about authority that the bishop possesses in and of himself. Following the Johannine emphasis on leadership through participation in Christ’s kenosis, the bishop is a focal point of this communion, by virtue of his lowliness, not his elevated status. Ignatius refers to himself as merely a spiritual beginner,³⁶ not the sort of language one would expect from someone who likens the bishop’s position with that of God—unless, that is, the parallel between the bishop and God is located in the bishop’s lowliness, not his power. Ignatius also frequently refers to himself as lower than his flock:

“Remember in your prayers the church in Syria [Ignatius’ church], of which I am not worthy to be considered a member, being as *I am the very least of them*.”³⁷

A cynical reading might argue this is rhetorical self-abasement. But it is a consistent theme in his letters, across his various audiences. He calls himself the last, in place, of the Syrian Christians again in his letter to the Romans, saying he will only “be someone” if he reaches God.³⁸

34 Ign.Smyr. 9:1b

35 Ign.Phil. 8:1c, emphasis added

36 Ign.Rom. 5:3

37 Ign.Tral. 13:1b, emphasis added

38 Ign.Rom. 9:2

This last statement of humility alludes to the stakes of the kenosis that Ignatius sees at the heart of the episcopate. He is on his way to Rome where he knows he is likely to be martyred. His zeal for martyrdom is a subject worthy of tomes in its own right, but it springs out of his conviction that martyrdom is the zenith (or nadir, as it were) of participation in Christ's kenotic self-sacrifice:

"And when [our Lord] came to Peter and those with him, he said to them: 'Take hold of me; handle me and see that I am not a disembodied demon.' And immediately they *touched him* and believed, *being closely united* with his flesh and blood. For this reason they too *despised death*; indeed, they proved to be greater than death."³⁹

Despising death, to the point of going gladly to martyrdom, is Ignatius' ideal indicator of participation in the sacrifice of Christ. He even frames it in sacrificial terms in his letter to Polycarp.⁴⁰ Ignatius' position of authority as bishop, and that of all bishops, is a centrality in the ongoing participation of the Church in Jesus. But it is a centrality that is tied intimately with Christ's complete self-sacrifice. The bishop has no glory in himself but is fundamentally the focal point of the Church's participation in Christ's kenosis.

In keeping with the liturgical reading of the Farewell Discourse presented above, Ignatius grounds this episcopal role in the Eucharist. The connection of the Eucharist with this kenotic ministry of the bishop is so close as to be almost identical:

"Only that *Eucharist which is under the authority of the bishop* (or whomever he himself designates) is to be considered *valid*."⁴¹

The centrality of the bishop—or his designated representative in cases of necessity—to the celebration of the Eucharist indicates that in the liturgy, the Church's relationship of mutual participation with the bishop reflects their mutual participation with God. Ignatius makes this even more explicit elsewhere:

39 Ign.Smyr. 3:2, emphasis added

40 Ign.Pol. 2:3c and 6:1b

41 Ign.Smyr. 8:1d, emphasis added

“Be eager to do everything in godly harmony, *the bishop presiding in the place of God* and the presbyters in the place of the council of the apostles...”⁴²

The bishop embodies the participation in Christ’s total outpouring. And the Eucharist of the local Church, presided over by the bishop is the ritual site where the Church participates in this kenotic love on an ongoing basis.

Ignatius ties together all these themes and orients them towards the telos which Jesus highlights in his High Priestly Prayer: unity. Everything Ignatius lays out is for the purpose of promoting the visible unity of the Church in truth:

“Do not attempt to convince yourselves that anything done apart from the others is right, but, gathering together, let there be *one* prayer, *one* petition, *one* mind, *one* hope, with love and blameless joy, which is Jesus Christ, than whom nothing is better. Let all of you run together as to *one* temple of God, as to *one* altar, to *one* Jesus Christ, who came forth from *one* Father and remained with the *One* and returned to the *One*.”⁴³

The bishop is not a *higher* participant in Christ. *All* Christians are “stones of a temple.”⁴⁴ But the one Eucharist presided over by the one bishop provides a locus of visible communion by which the participation of every disciple in the life of the Father occurs—not individually or outside institutions, but all together in the Sacrament of unity.

CONCLUSION

At this point, it makes no sense to claim Ignatius of Antioch as the sole legitimate heir to the Johannine tradition. The interpretation of the Johannine corpus is far too fraught to make any definite pronouncements about John’s ecclesiology. But precisely this point is demonstrated here to destabilize the received reading of John as an anti-hierarchical sect at odds with the rest of the Jesus Movement. Against such a reading of John, Ignatius’ high theology of the episcopate would seem strange and even counter to Scripture.

42 Ign.Mag. 6:1b, emphasis added

43 Ign.Mag. 7:1b-2, emphasis added

44 Ign.Eph. 9:1

But I have attempted to show here an alternative approach to the Johannine tradition: one which assumes neither total uniformity with nor complete disjuncture from the synoptic traditions. John can just as easily be read as a tradition of theological reflection by a distinctive community nonetheless connected with other early Christian communities to a certain extent by shared practice and thought. This yields a Johannine theology of discipleship which may not clearly *paralleled* in synoptic traditions, but nevertheless does not stand against it. Instead, the Johannine theology infuses the institutional elements more clearly Synoptic in provenance with a new theological depth.

Ignatius of Antioch's theology of the episcopate reflects a synthesis of this theological depth with the hierarchy and sacraments of the institutional Church. Grounded in Johannine theology, he stresses the bishop as a constitutive focal point of the Church, on the basis of the bishop's particular participation in the kenotic sacrifice of Christ. Far from propping up prince-bishops, Ignatius presents the episcopate as a vocation that subverts secular notions of hierarchy. The bishop leads as a visible manifestation of the depths of the Word's self-emptying, gathering the Church in Eucharist to participate more fully in the resurrection and exaltation that God works out through that abasement. Or as Ignatius puts it:

"All of you, individually and collectively, gather together in grace, by name, in *one faith and one Jesus Christ*, who physically was a descendant of David, who is Son of Man and Son of god, in order that you may *obey the bishop* and the council of presbyters with an undisturbed mind, *breaking one bread*, which is the medicine of immortality, the antidote we take *in order not to die but to live forever in Jesus Christ*."⁴⁵



⁴⁵ Ign.Eph. 20:2, emphasis added

Works Cited

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