October 17th: Memorial of Saint Ignatius of Antioch, Bishop and Martyr

Gospel text (*Jn* 12:24-26): Jesus said to his disciples: “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be. The Father will honor whoever serves me.”

“Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit”

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Today we contemplate the image of the grain of wheat that dies bearing much fruit (cf. Jn 12,24): it is Christ himself, not only metaphorically or symbolically, but literally. It's not about simple pretty words. Indeed, Jesus gave us his sacrifice of the Cross beforehand, becoming “bread” for us. Here are the textual words he spoke in the Cenacle: "Take and eat all of it, because this is my body crushed by you." Christ has become wheat so we can eat it and bear fruit!

Saint Ignatius of Antioch, bishop and contemporary martyr of the apostolic era (35-108), lived a martyrdom of striking resemblance to that of Christ. In the first place, because, like the Master, he did not find death in the blink of an eye. Jesus revealed from the beginning of his public ministry what his destiny was going to be: he knew where he was going and looked forward to his hour (cf. Lk 12,50).

The martyr bishop of Antioch, for his part, traveled as a prisoner on a long journey from Syria to imperial Rome, where he was to be executed. The journey to martyrdom lasted several weeks. During this journey, Ignatius wrote 7 beautiful letters to various Christian communities (Ephesus, Philadelphia, Smyrna ...). These writings are a privileged testimony of the faith and life of the first Christian generations. Ignatius, like Christ, knew very well where he was going. The enthusiasm, belief and love with which he expected martyrdom are impressive.

There is also a second aspect of the martyrdom of Saint Ignatius of Antioch that recalls especially the surrender of Jesus. In his letter "Ad Romanos" he affirms that he wanted to “be the wheat of God, may I be ground by the teeth of wild beasts, so as to be made pure bread." What a beautiful fruit! identified with Jesus-Crucified and similar to Jesus-Eucharist. Centuries have passed and we have never lacked the fruit of the Eucharist: God has made it much easier for us than for Saint Ignatius! Hopefully we do not lack the purity and enthusiasm of Saint Ignatius of Antioch!