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Ignatius to Gregory: Saints Who Made History - The First Five Centuries

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IGNATIUS TO GREGORY

SAINTS WHO MADE HISTORY—THE FIRST FIVE CENTURIES.

By Maisie Ward. New York: Sheed and Ward, Inc., 1959.
xiv, 377p.

The history of the Early Church has long suffered from a type of exclusiveness. Since the historical problems are complex and the sources, in many instances, jejune, this crucial period in the Church's history has largely been reserved for those chosen few who can pay the steep price of being an expert or specialist. For most of us, then, the early years of the Church have remained a fuzzy mass of vague impressions accumulated perhaps from a college course or two.

In recent years it has been refreshing to find an encouraging increase of books designed to eliminate the exclusiveness of the Church's early days and to present the riches of its message to the wider audience of the well-informed. And it is to such a fund that Maisie Ward has contributed *Saints Who Made History*.

In sketching the epoch of the first five centuries, the author has rightly concentrated on the persons rather than the events. The format of the volume consists of short biographies of the leading saints who influenced the course of the history of the Church, and interlaced are chapters to fill in the pertinent background. St. Ignatius, that charming, zealous martyr and first bishop of Antioch, is the object of the first sketch, and the book ends with the mention of Gregory the Great, the first medieval pope. In between are brief biographies of St. Polycarp, St. Justin, Origen, St. Irenaeus, St. Anthony, St. Athanasius, St. Basil, St. John Chrysostom, St. Ambrose, St. Jerome, St. Augustine, St. Patrick, St. Leo and others. It is understandable, in fact almost inevitable, that certain sections of the book make better reading than others. And the ones who come out best are St. Athanasius, St. Basil and their times because Mrs. Sheed, an avowed New-man enthusiast, leans heavily on the Cardinal's profound studies of St. Athanasius and the Arianism of the fourth century.

It might come as a surprise to some, upon reading this book, that the first five centuries of the life of the Church were far from being idyllic and blissful. The Church suffered, labored and grew under the two-pronged attack of direct persecution by the State from without and of insidious heresy and schism from within. Even when she was granted her freedom from State persecution under Constantine, peace did not automatically follow. The meddling of the Catholic emperors and the re-opening of persecution under the apostate, Julian, and the Arians, Constans and Valens, were constant reminders that the city of God did not coincide with the city of the Caesars.

The temper of the times and the havoc and confusion wreaked by heresy can be seen in the case of Antioch in the second half of the fourth century. Heresies especially arose and flourished in the unsettled climate of the early Church because it took time for the speculative and positive theologians, struggling with terminology, to express in a coherent way the mysteries of the deposit of Faith and because the Church councils had not yet formulated dogmatic definitions. Almost every dogma of the Church was called into question and the champions of orthodoxy were taxed to the full in defending revealed truth. But one of the most dangerous of the heretical doctrines that plagued this epoch was that of the Alexandrian priest, Arius. Arius taught that Christ was merely a creature, not divine. As a natural consequence of the denial of Christ's divinity, the dogma of the Trinity was rejected. The Church defended the truth at the Council of Nicea, but the heresy continued to have great influence because of the conversion of the barbarians to it and its prominence at court under certain emperors.

The Arians, during their ascendancy under the Arian emperor Valens, elected and consecrated to the see of Antioch Meletius, whom they mistakenly thought was a member of their heresy. But at his installation in 361 he preached a strong sermon affirming the traditional position of the Church on the Trinity. The Catholic congregation applauded, but "his Arian deacon rushed up and clapped a hand over his mouth. Meletius, unable to make himself heard, held up alternately three fingers and one to signify his belief" (p. 112). Meletius, of course, was sent into exile and an Arian bishop appointed. The Catholics complicated matters by distrusting Meletius because of his contacts with the Arians and so consecrated Paulinus as *their* bishop of Antioch. The situation was even a bit more complicated than Mrs. Sheed suggests because the soon-to-be-condemned heretic Apollinaris consecrated Vitalis bishop of Antioch too. This resulted in four bishops claiming the see of Antioch at one time: one who followed Arius; two who followed the orthodox doctrine of Nicea; and one consecrated by the heretic bishop Apollinaris. To make matters worse St. Athanasius endorsed the claims of Paulinus and St. Basil those of Meletius. St. Jerome was not clear who had the rightful claim. This resulted in considerable puzzlement at Rome. The air was not cleared until 393 when the synod of Caesarea, commissioned by Rome to settle the case, backed Flavian, the bishop who succeeded Meletius.

Although the book is made up of many parts it does give a unity of impression, a single message. It is not "a Church history, but a handful of portraits to illuminate it." And this volume tells us that whether it be in the first five centuries or today or in the five cen-

turies to come "in the development of doctrine, in the service of sick humanity, in heroic suffering or even in splendor of speech and the drama of human greatness, it is above all through the saints that the work of Christ in the Church is accomplished" (p. ix).

We earnestly hope that this book will be the first of a series and that Mrs. Sheed with her engaging style will continue where she has left off and paint for us in word portraits the great servants of God and his Church in the Middle Ages.

WILLIAM J. MALLEY