

LECTURE

## **St. Irenaeus, Pastor and Theologian**

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I am grateful for the opportunity to be a part of the annual Cardinal Bevilacqua Lecture Series here at the seminary in Huntington. The Cardinal was my bishop in Pittsburgh for four years from late 1983 until early 1988. During that time I was sent to work in the Roman Curia. Cardinal Bevilacqua was unceasingly kind to me during the years in Rome and was of great help for my adjusting to the new situation in the Roman Curia. Along with countless others I share a deep gratitude for his pastoral ministry and priestly heart.

The subject of my topic, St. Irenaeus, Pastor and Theologian, arose out of a discussion I had a few months ago with Fr. Jeffrey Steenson, former Episcopal bishop of New Mexico, who a few years ago resigned his position and entered into full communion with the Catholic Church. He was ordained a Roman Catholic Priest in 2009. He currently teaches at the University of St Thomas and St. Mary Seminary, Houston, Texas. He has a Doctorate in Patristics from Oxford. During that discussion, centered upon the creation of an Ordinariate for Anglicans seeking full communion with the Church of Rome, Fr. Steenson and I were expressing various opinions on the necessity of such an Ordinariate being a vehicle for evangelization and not just a reality for liturgical and cultural aspects of Anglican tradition within the Catholic Church. We began speaking about the remarkable character of the Patristic period, so wedded to a particular space and region and yet simultaneously so vividly aware of the universal character of the Christian Faith and the essential requirement to be a “martyr” or witness to the Faith. Somehow the subject turned to Irenaeus, and we both expressed deep admiration for his faith, intelligence and “savvy” in dealing with the challenges and opportunities set before him and his Christian community in Lyons towards the end of the Second Century. That produced the kernel for the development of my presentation.

I hasten to add that, though I specialized in Patristics at the Augustinianum in Rome, that marvelous center of scholarship right in the shadows of St. Peter's Square, I am not giving a particularly scholarly account of Irenaeus, but one that arises from my work as a Shepherd. 'The "*negotium*" of being Bishop of a large archdiocese does not alas allow me the "*otium*" or "leisure" to pursue with needed attention a major scholarly analysis of Irenaeus. I am simply incapable of it now. But that has not diminished my regular reading of the Fathers and thus of St. Irenaeus. He is a splendid and, in Fr. Steenson's words, "delightful" paradigm of a pre-Nicene Christian thinker and shepherd. He still offers us much to ponder, especially on the public character of Christian Faith, the essential role of witness and martyrdom, the centrality of Christ, the Rule of Faith, and the need for peace within the Church. He also favors us with his dry wit and many pithy aphorisms, some of which have made their way onto banners that do not do his words justice. His name means "peaceful one," a sobriquet that finds its way into the Collect for his Feast Day on June 28, the 'Vigil of the Apostles Sts. Peter and Paul, to whose living memory and force he was so devoted and to the Church of Rome, which he cherished with affection and with an occasional expression of frustration.

We know some data about Irenaeus' life, but not a great deal. His birthplace, unknown, most probably occurred around 130 AD, in that dumping ground of early Patristic thinkers and writers—Asia and Syria. As a youth St. Irenaeus saw and heard St. Polycarp of Smyrna, Asia Minor and testifies to the fact. Later he went to Rome for study and then landed in Lyon; if he was from Asia Minor, this was not unusual. Whatever the case, during the great persecution of the Church in Lyons a great number of martyrs like St. Blandina were added to the Church's greats. 'The ninety-year old bishop, Pothinus, died in prison in 177 AD and Irenaeus was elected his successor. Irenaeus' works, the most important of which is "On the Detection and Refutation of the Knowledge Falsely So Called," more commonly known as *Against the Heresies*, were published after his election. The Gallic tradition is that he died as a martyr in 200 AD under Septimius Severus, a fierce persecutor of the Faith in the early Third Century.

Within a hundred years of the birth of Christ, a movement of thought, action, worship and eschatology arose in the ancient Graeco-Roman World and beyond. It is called by the name "Gnosticism" from the Greek word, "*gnosis*" which means "knowledge." It is a rather peculiar philosophy or religion or soteriology and sounds almost incomprehensible to many modern ears. Whether it is a separate religion but a kind of kissing cousin to Christianity as some

scholars write of a Christian Heresy, as St. Irenaeus believed, it did grow up and spring to life right during the infancy days of post-New Testament Christianity and represented a very great threat to the fledgling Christian Church. Amongst its many characteristics, some bizarre, some distortions of Christian and Jewish themes, some reinterpretations of Greek thought, some outright borrowings from pagan and ancient Eastern religions, Gnosticism is really a kind of cosmic salvation narrative: salvation is self-salvation. "You" save yourself. In this soteriology, there is an unrelenting dualism of light and darkness, a dualism of spirit versus matter, and thus, a disparagement of creation, and hostility to the God of the Old Testament and an understanding of the divine realm as one of disturbance and rebellion, a realm imagined in the world below here. The discovery of a kind of "knowledge" frees the now "Gnostic" person in true identity and allows a return to the "*Pleroma*," the Fullness of the Divine World, overarched by the highest Unknown God, who lacks any foreign affairs with anything else, maybe even the *Pleroma*! All forms of Gnosticism rely on an originating myth or narrative of the divine world, the meaning of creation or making of this world, the identity of human beings in the world, deliverance or salvation from this world, and a lush vegetation of cosmic and anthropological imagery. Whether in its sophisticated or crude forms, Gnosticism represents a yearning for final salvation, a yearning accomplished by a kind of self-knowledge, aided and abetted by a divine like seed planted in some, but ultimately accomplished by the self itself! Gnosticism also delights in elaborate allegorical interpretations of sacred texts, frequently texts of the Bible and texts of its own making; it also comments excessively on the meaning of various numbers in sacred texts. It is not easy for us today to even tread water in this turbulent sea, yet alone to swim in it.

St. Irenaeus is the sworn enemy of the thinking of the Gnostics and his writing is occasioned by the appearance and mischief making of Gnosticism against which he sets out to disprove and refute by his writing. He also wants to do something positive, to bring to light the truth and beauty of the Gospel, the Rule of Faith, for the members of the Great Church. St. Irenaeus is most known for his use of the rhetorical concept "recapitulation" and giving it a theological turn because of his love for St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians where the term occurs. He is also widely remembered for his insistence, with the Rule of Faith, on the salvation of the flesh—"salus carnis"—a most important theme of the New Testament. Though I will speak about these major themes of the thinking of St. Irenaeus, I want to spend the bulk of my time with you reflecting on some important texts of Irenaeus, his words, which reveal a shape of thinking that

emphasizes the divine economy of salvation and the beauty and fittingness of God's generous love, most revealed in the Incarnation, the Cross and the Resurrection of His Son, an event in which each Christian shares, becoming made anew in the image and likeness of God. These show a genuine pastor, dedicated to the truth but simultaneously pastorally inviting his hearers and readers far and wide to appreciate and love Who it is that the Rule of Faith proclaims.

I must also introduce a caution. Irenaeus is a pre-Nicene writer and pastor and obviously does not display the development, refinement and terminology of the great theologians of the Fourth Century and afterwards, though he manifests some genuine shrewdness about what will become orthodox Trinitarian and Christological language. He beats with the heart of a theologian nurtured in the environment of Asia Minor and early Christian Syria. He loves Melito of Sardis and the beloved Polycarp. He also admires and quotes the great Apologist of the Second Century, St. Justin. He is very much a Biblical Theologian though he is not averse to use some arguments from Greek philosophy as they suit his purposes, a Greek philosophy most aligned with a kind of middle-Platonism. He also has some acquaintance with schools of rhetoric and their manner of demonstration and reasoning.

A further note of caution concerns a fact. Irenaeus wrote in Greek. But only fragments of his texts remain in Greek. We have a complete Latin translation of *Against the Heresies* dated about 380 AD. That is the basis for our knowledge. (No less a Renaissance figure than Erasmus prepared a "critical" edition of Irenaeus' *Against the Heresies* and showed intense enthusiasm for him and his writings.) The fact that we do not possess the original Greek text must be taken into account when dealing with his thinking.

There is a significant passage in *Adversus Haereses* that epitomizes Irenaeus' thinking. It occurs in Book IV, Chapter, 20, 8.

For the prophets used not to prophesy in word alone, but in visions also, and in their mode of life, and in the actions they performed, according to the suggestions of the Spirit. After this invisible manner, therefore, did they see God, as also Isaiah says, "I have seen with my eyes the Most High..." In this manner did they also see the Son of God as a man conversant with men, while they prophesied what was to happen, saying that He who was not come as yet was present. Moreover with regard to the other arrangements concerning the summing up that He should make, some of these they beheld through visions, others they proclaimed by

word, while others they indicated typically by means of outward action, seeing visibly those things to be seen...announcing all prophetically.

Irenaeus inherited from St. Justin the types of the patriarchs and the dictator words of the prophets as prefiguring the Word and a way in which the Future Word is made present. His biblical thinking recognized anticipations of Christ in the Pentateuch, Historical Books of the Old Testament and the writings of the Prophets, and in passages from the Wisdom writings. But this thinking and writing tends to minimize the distinctions and emphasize the unity of "types" and "words." They are all made co-equal in his analysis. He also enlarges the type of the Patriarchs to include more figures like Lot, the Ethiopian wife of Moses, Rebecca etc., and the types prefigure some dimension of the coming of Christ. Simultaneously he shows them not just as types but as prophetic words. "*Per typical ad vera, et per temporalia ad aeterna et per carnalia ad spiritalia, et per terrene ad caelestia ...*" Vision, word and deed coalesce in an intense unity.

Why is this? There are two dimensions to Irenaeus' cry for unity. One is corrective, the other a positive declaration. The corrective is an assault on two Gnostic disjunctions and separations, the breach of heavenly and mundane. The heavenly realm, the *Pleroma*, is itself in combat, and the fall of the divine principal, Sophia, into the world is the result of conflict and creates discontinuity here. Reclaiming divinity and return to *Pleroma* is a rupture and a disjunction. The world is evil, at least full of ignorance. Suave hidden knowledge against the world and the weak Demiurge, Yahweh, removal from matter and contamination with the earthly: this provides genuine salvation. Irenaeus, using not cosmos or aeons, but the historicity of creation, patriarchs, law and prophets manifests a unity and a plan to everything. From the Creator and Father all leads to Christ and then through Christ back to the Father. There is an ordering and arrangement of nature and history all under the plan of the Good Creator. There is an immediacy of such a plan and disposition of God, not a need of thousands of intermediaries to come between God and creation.

The type and the true fulfillment belong together, as do earthly and heavenly, carnal and spiritual: all are ordered by the wise divine arrangement. The plan is to bring to visibility what is hidden and to lead to eternal vision what is still enigmatic now. Against Gnostics and the intermediaries that kept the true God hidden away from things mundane, Irenaeus sees the world and the history, the story within it—the paradigm being the patriarchs, law and prophets—as revealing gradually who the Father is, though he will remain always invisible, by revealing his Word, His Son. In an odd way, the horizontal figures that meet or

prefigure Christ in type and parable and vision act as kinds of Platonic forms that reveal intelligibility. Irenaeus was not opposed to the knowledge that Gnostics sought but tried to show that what they looked for in error needed to be unmasked and shown to be ignorance. True knowledge in the course of the economy, the divine plan of salvation, revealed enough. In fact, it manifested gradually and in symbol what the truth was and is in the Incarnation of the Word.

The economy is not a manner of the falling away and the disjunction of God and the world and human beings, but a realization of the Infinite King, Sovereign Lord, in creation and over creation and a bringing to integrity all of creation through the Word Made Flesh.

Irenaeus spends two whole books outlining the thinking and gnosis of the Gnostics. Many thought and some still think that his descriptions are too tendentious and do not give credit to various forms of Gnostic thought. But the Nag Hammadi documents should make us rethink that; his descriptions may be incomplete but they are not wrong-headed. He also reveals his humor and parody of what Gnostics thought about the upper world and the need to escape this one. In a parody at the middle of Book One of the *Adversus Haereses*, Irenaeus describes a fictional possible Gnostic system.

There exists a certain royal Pre-Principle, pre-unintelligible, pre-insubstantial and pre-prerogative, which I call Gourd. With this Gourd there co-exists a power which I call Super Vacuity. This Gourd and this Super Vacuity, being one, emitted without emitting a Fruit visible in all its parts, edible and sweet, which language calls Cucumber. With this Cucumber there is a Power of the same substance, which I call Melon. These powers, Gourd and Super Vacuity and Cucumber and Melon, emitted the whole multitude of Valentinus' delirious Melons. (I, I 1 1.4)

Against apostrophed mental constructs, Irenaeus is flat footed in insisting on the public character of the knowledge God gives even as he respects the mystery of the Godhead. God did not remain silent but entered into the human conversation by a harmonious plan: the plan reveals his Son and the Holy Spirit. The teaching of the Rule of Faith manifests a knowledge and vision, not of escape, but of love and the road to heavenly love. I repeat what I said earlier. Irenaeus corrects and then positively elucidates the Faith as public and discernible. The economy and disposition of things by the One God is not ever fully explained by creatures, by reasonable creatures like us, but even now in the world not even all earthly things can be exhaustively understood. How much the more when dealing with our salvation. While ambiguities remain, some of

the Old Testament visions and actions are now more clear; but even there some dimensions of the divine plan, which is always about the Incarnation, may still be difficult. The same is true with some matters in the New Covenant. Irenaeus at times even replaces type and prophecy with the word "parabolic." The emphasis is on the true clarity of the life of God and our gradual participation by vision and life in that life through the salvific word and deed of Jesus Christ, centerpiece of the divine economy. May I add here the inestimable worth of the work of Paul and John the Apostle are very clearly manifest in Irenaeus' synthetic judgments on God's plan. Irenaeus' judgments, against pure speculation, are present to teach and catechize the members of the Church, not just to expose the falsity of the enemy. Correction always leads to catechesis, which is why Irenaeus is a polemicist and a catechist-teacher more than an apologist. He is, in the best sense, a Churchman!

The divine economy has a presupposition, one that has been adumbrated so far, but one I want to speak about it directly. If God is the Creator, the architect of time and disposition of things, if God creates from nothing, a hammered theme in Irenaeus, then there is one God. Irenaeus' treatment of the one God is to constantly put together Infinite Mind and Infinite Love in the one true God. A classic place for Irenaeus' exposition on one infinitely transcendent God is in Book III, 6, 3-4. Irenaeus imagines himself in the place of Elijah in 1 Kings 18 on Mount Carmel. There before the prophets of Baal, he prays to the Lord. Irenaeus also makes his declaration in the form of a prayer, not, at least at this point, in discursive reason. He is the priest. He says: "Therefore I also call upon you, Lord God of Abraham, and God of Isaac and God of Jacob and Israel, you who are the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God who, through the greatness of your mercy have shown favor to us, that we should know you, who have made heaven and earth, who exercise rule over all, who are the only and true God, above whom there is no other God."

God is the transcendent cause of all things, but is intimate to creation and to history, thus to providence. Irenaeus relates the theological biblical transcendence to the piety and devotion of God's people and is unafraid to bring in classical thought that is purified by the same biblical tradition, both Old Testament and New Testament. The divine economy is apparent. God is absolute freedom and needs nothing. There is no sense of Gnostic emanation or God as part of the world. The freedom and omniscience of God allows him to suffuse all while remaining Creator, free and not necessitated by anyone else. But this is a richness! There is a goodness and truth that shines forth from the One God, and the creation is good. The setting in prayer and devotion of

Irenaeus' thought can occur right in the middle of a theological-philosophical excursus, especially when treating the incoherence of the Gnostic "*Pro-Pater*." What is frustrating in Irenaeus' procedure here is the interruption by prayer and other rhetorical tropes that seem to "get in the way" of the argument. The prose can be diffuse and prolix. In fact some have complained that Irenaeus is too much a cipher and unoriginal and filled with sidelights. This is why I have emphasized the "pastor" level in Irenaeus' mode of procedure, his catechetical and doctrinal instincts. He knows enough to offer a sustained argument in certain places but also likes to ornament his arguments with prayerful biblical quotation and reference seemingly unrelated, at least at first, to his argument. This is done for edification and to be "seemly" (fitting, the Greek word is "*prepon*.")

Still, I hasten to emphasize that Irenaeus does indeed offer philosophical arguments from what we would call classical mind in reasoned sequence to show what the intuition of all about a divine mind means in syllogism. The Gnostics had distorted scriptures and the atheists reject the scriptures. Irenaeus argues to an universal intelligent mind of complete transcendence with immediate sovereignty over creation. Once that is established he reveals the sovereignty as love. God's mind manifests itself to human minds; providence must be defended. Though ineffable God communicates; unlike pagan and even the Gnostic Father, God does have foreign affairs, namely creation as the economy of harmony and love.

In all this there is one other crux: whatever is said must be coherent with the rule of truth, the Rule of Faith, the grammar of the baptismal profession. Even in his more philosophical ornaments, the *regula fidei* is never far away and operates as a heuristic device and a vector of control in his exposition. The unity that drives the exposition in St. Irenaeus is the rule of truth; with it not like attached pieces but integral moments and dimensions are the biblical exegesis, devotion, catechesis and philosophical argument. Yes there is always a pastor speaking when Irenaeus speaks.

I have spoken of the economy, the divine plan, and I have briefly outlined the presupposition of that plan, one true God Creator and Lord of all, as manifested in Irenaeus' thought. I would like to outline briefly two concepts in Irenaeus that are two realities: (1) The recapitulation of all things in Christ; (2) the *salus carnis* or "salvation of the flesh."

To recapitulate means to repeat, but to repeat with a difference. It means to summarize and put in a more proper order. When one recapitulates one is summarizing by selecting, by distinguishing. It is to make sense of a vast array



by focusing the lens on what is essential. It is all still there but in some way abridged, the syntax tightened. It is to allow a vast plurality to make sense. In Irenaeus the reality of recapitulation, which always means recapitulation in Christ, involves a correction and a perfection. Perhaps the word “unification” might be used to bring this reality to a synthesis.

St. Irenaeus is not alone in recognizing this reality. St. Justin spoke about it, so does Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian. But Irenaeus is relentless and builds up image upon image to make the reality clear.

What is corrected by recapitulation? Something went wrong at the beginning. Adam is a reality and a type for Irenaeus as he draws upon St. Paul. In a wonderful passage he writes of the voice of God calling in the evening to the Adam who has hid himself. God keeps repeating the call and in Christ undoes the alienation. Hiding human beings are rediscovered in the Incarnation of Christ. God through Christ returns to the point of error and changes it into truth, saving Adam and all others in the work of Christ’s reconciliation.

Still another theme of correction in recapitulation is the obedience of the Son who corrects initial disobedience. Here Irenaeus brings to bear a large number of passages about the Cross, a tree planted in Paradise to undo the damage of the damage of the original tree. There is reconciliation and redemption. Irenaeus spends much time on the writings of St. Paul in elucidating this recapitulation of correction by the Cross.

What is perfected by the recapitulation of all in Christ? Union of God with human beings, the “making visible” of the Father through the face of his Son. Since the Word shares in humanity and divinity, he “comes unto his own,” not as foreign but as loving seal of the Father to bring men and women to participation in the life of God. In recapitulating all, even as foreshadowed earlier in the economy, the Word gradually grew habituated to dwelling with his creation and then entered it fully by becoming man. For Irenaeus this is appropriate, harmonious, even beautiful.

The recapitulation goes on in the life of the Church until the full consummation is reached in the heavenly banquet. The dynamic quality of Irenaeus’ thought about the beginning and the end meeting in Christ and then moved to the Father is a striking testimony of his positive evaluation of the world, of the world in Christ, and the overcoming of sin and alienation. Christ is the Head of all things and all persons, the Victor, and the principle of unity for all. (A further point here which I cannot elaborate is that the recapitulation of all in Christ is the basis for the growth in spiritual freedom of all the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve.)

This little transition leads me to one of Irenaeus' other major themes and contributions: *salus carnis*—that is, the salvation of the entirety of man, soul and body. Can you see now why, given what the Gnostics said, and then given what the Christian *regula fidei* is, why St. Irenaeus so hammers the point that it is the “whole man,” as he calls it, that is saved? It is all the flesh. Human beings are meant to be saved in their integrity.

Irenaeus loves creation. He uses a huge number of images from nature and history that shows his delight in it. Why does he do this? The point is that matter is good—it may be wounded, but it is *good*. And human beings are *good*. St. Irenaeus emphasizes the principle of unity for all in Christ the Victor, who is the Victor by saving all flesh. Remember it is Christ's risen body that the apostles see. He makes a great deal about the One who was invisible in some fashion to Moses and the prophets allows himself, the Word made flesh, to be handled and touched, by the apostles and the sick. This touching will receive its spiritualization when we all reach the glory of the Kingdom.

I would like, in my coda here, to make some comments that I hope will be my recapitulation. I want to use a theme of Irenaeus that has been dear to one particular 20<sup>th</sup> century Roman Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar. Von Balthasar treasured St. Irenaeus, and we should not be surprised why. What action is it that St. Irenaeus never tires of using? – manifestation, the drama of uncovering and making more clear, epiphany, vision. For Irenaeus, what is true becomes public. What's true may be hidden—God's mystery—but through His Son, He is made real for us. The variety of creation is harmony and beauty; the variety of human beings is beautiful. The recapitulation of all in Christ is a balance of what happened first and was corrected, and then necessarily declared beautiful. Or as I mentioned earlier, on the face of Jesus you get a glimpse of the invisible Father.

In the very first quotation I gave towards the beginning of my paper, Book Four of *Against the Heresies*, in the chapter following the 20<sup>th</sup>, Irenaeus spends a whole chapter building up the various ways the ancient patriarchs and prophets began to *see* God. It is what we want to do, because seeing for Irenaeus is life. And then he summarizes everything by saying, “When the apostles went up the mountain of the Transfiguration, everything was fulfilled. They saw the face of the Father in the transfigured face of Jesus Christ. And from then on, everything will come through him.” Now sisters and brothers I mention this not only because it is so beautiful in speaking of the beautiful, but this is an Eastern theme that Irenaeus has probably from Polycarp and others, one which remained prominent in the East. But the Transfiguration never obtained that prominence

in the West. The Transfiguration is beautifully described later by Popes Leo the Great and Gregory the Great as the preparation for the Passion—which is true, no question. What does the East and Irenaeus along with it emphasize in the Transfiguration? “That’s my Son” says the Father. “You want the beautiful? Look at him, and see yourself.” It is this magnificent sense of the beautiful, and the drama of the beautiful, that moved Hans Urs von Balthasar to say so many beautiful things about St. Irenaeus.

Now sisters and brothers, my synthesis, therefore, is Irenaeus believed in the unification all in Christ Jesus and the beauty of all in him. And in St. Irenaeus we can get a glimpse of a thinker who is perhaps less refined than the technicalities of a later Augustine or a Cyril of Alexandria, who are marvelous thinkers. What do you get with Irenaeus? This dynamic sense of drama, where we have come from and where we are moving—moving with the good Father through Christ Jesus to the heavenly Jerusalem. To my mind, that is a good pastor. He corrects. He knows the truth and speaks it. He is willing to use a lot of imagery and a lot of other ways to get the people to move and act. Irenaeus of Lyon, remarkable figure of truth and beauty. Thank you very much.