



SAINT IRENAEUS, PRAY FOR US

The parish blesses a new icon this weekend at the 4:00 p.m. Mass on Saturday, February 27, 2021. The icon is of St. Irenaeus of Lyon. His name means peace. Painted by Teresa Satola Coey, and anonymously sponsored, this icon is of the second bishop of Lyon (then called Lugdunum), in France (then known as Gaul). That Gallo-Roman city was sophisticated and cosmopolitan with a population between 50,000 to 100,000 souls. It was pagan, and it was in Celtic lands that had been Romanized about two centuries earlier. Irenaeus lived a long, long time ago, and he died around AD 202. Bishop Irenaeus was himself a Greek, and a disciple of St. Polycarp, who had been in turn a disciple of the Apostle John. Cities were the centers of Christianity at this time, and the Church was growing fast, despite being illegal, and despite periodic persecutions.

Our icon attempts to capture the age of late antiquity. It takes as its inspiration the surviving funerary art and contemporary frescos to imagine what a late second century bishop would have looked like. Irenaeus belonged to his own age. So this father of Catholic theology looks like a classical philosopher or an emperor. Still, we see him vested as a bishop, with his traditional chasuble, which was worn then, and with his pallium, indicating he is the primate of Gaul. Set against a blue field of lapis lazuli, this man is clearly very important in the early Church.

Irenaeus was made bishop after the first bishop of Lyon had been martyred. St. Irenaeus had to worry about his congregation being fed to lions, but he also had to worry about heresies, which were rife in the Church. In his seminal work 'Against Heresies,' Irenaeus fought against the pernicious heresy of Gnosticism, that even popes got dangerously close to at times. The quote on Irenaeus's scroll in this icon is from this work. His was a strong voice in defining authentic Christian faith in confusing times.

What remains of him is buried in the Église St-Irénée (or the Church of St. Irenaeus) in Lyon, France, and that church has an interesting history. It was destroyed and rebuilt numerous times, but it is one of the oldest churches in all of France. There may have been a church here since the first century AD! The original church was dedicated to the Apostle John (Irenaeus was from Smyrna, and the Apostle John had preached there). In its crypt (that was rebuilt in the 9th century) were buried the earliest martyrs of Lyon (including our famed Church Father, St. Irenaeus). The Muslim Saracens destroyed the first church. It was rebuilt in Carolingian times, but later Protestants destroyed the second church, and profaned and desecrated the tomb and relics of St. Irenaeus in 1562. Then two centuries later, during the French Revolution, this same church was impiously used as a barn. Finally, a century thereafter the church was restored and reopened for public worship, and some relics of Irenaeus and the early martyrs were saved and returned to its crypt. Finally France designated it a Historical Monument in 1962 (it was about time!).

Irenaeus, who is a Greek living in the west, is a solid witness to what the early Church was like a century before Constantine (or even before Constantinople). Irenaeus tells us that Peter or Paul are buried in Rome, that the popes in Rome are successors of the Apostle Peter, and (before the New Testament was even a thing) Irenaeus tells us that we should ignore Gnostic gospels and only look to the four authentic ones. So he is the earliest Church Father to assert that there were only four authentic Gospels, and we have read from those four Gospels ever since.

Irenaeus is also the first to tell us that Luke, the companion of St. Paul, was the author of the third Gospel, and that John the Apostle was the author of the fourth Gospel. Moreover, in his writings Irenaeus quotes from virtually all of the other books that eventually end up becoming our New Testament. Irenaeus is important!