

Article

On Being Consumed: The Martyred Body as a Site of Divine—Human Encounter in the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch

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Abstract: The manner in which humans and the divine are brought into communion with each other, a key aspect of many religious traditions, is frequently, if not always, material (or sacramental) in character. Meals and food play an important role in this; such meals can include the consumption of the deity (theophagy), as well as the consumption of the human being by the deity. This paper takes its cue from the discussion of constructions of divine–human communion and explores this subject in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch (early second century CE). It shows how in the literary heritage of this bishop, the body as the physical site of martyrdom is of key importance, in particular due to its consumption in the Roman arena. This martyrdom is the way in which Ignatius hopes to enter into perfect communion with the divine. The body thus becomes, in its annihilation, the instrument through which divine–human communion is established. As this all relates to a case of martyrdom, Ignatius’ ideas about the body are also subversive in character: the punishment of his body is, through his theological imagination, transformed into a means of achieving Ignatius’ goal in life: attaining to God.

Keywords: theophagy; food; Eucharist; martyrdom; Ignatius of Antioch; Christianity; theology; agency

1. Introduction

Divine–human relations can be expressed by means of eating, sometimes taking the shape of theophagy, consuming the deity¹. By contrast, a tradition also exists in which the human being is incorporated into the divine through its consumption. This has received somewhat less attention in scholarship, however. Yet, it is of interest from a material religions perspective (for more on this perspective, see the introduction to this volume), as in such cases, the human body, as a material ‘object’, is a key medium for bringing about divine–human communion—meals and consumption and, therefore, the body and (always embodied) commensality played a key role in ancient religion,

¹ Cf., e.g., the general definition of Seidl (2011): ‘In cultic meals, table fellowship establishes a link with the divinity (convivium) or participation in it (communio, theophagy), and thereby a share in the divine life force’; see also (Verrips 1991). This paper is also indebted to lively discussions on the topic of theophagy involving Jojada Verrips, Birgit Meyer, Mirella Klomp, Katja Rakow, Annalisa Buttici and others at the “Food and Eating in Plural Environments” Workshop at the Royal Dutch Institute in Rome, 8–10 May 2019.

whether at sacrifices, temple meals, or the meals of *collegia*². This paper explores this subject in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch (first century CE) and shows how the body as the physical site of martyrdom plays a role in this Syrian bishop's³ literal and figurative consumption in the Roman arena, which is the way in which he hopes to enter into complete communion with the divine⁴. The consumption of Ignatius does not come about through union with God or by means of divine love, as may be the case with mystics, but is, rather, the work of wild animals: martyrdom, deeply physical as it is, takes on the shape of being eaten and, thus, simultaneously annihilated and united with the divine. In discussing this, particular attention will be given to Ignatius' subversive imagination of the body, which transforms his body from that of a captive to that of a victor and from that of a victim of cruel entertainment in the arena to that of a faithful and victorious hero. First, an introduction to the person of Ignatius of Antioch will be given. This is followed by a discussion of the connection between his work and the material approach to religion and a focus on conflict, as this offers a promising angle for further exploring Ignatius' view (and embodiment) of Christianity⁵. Next, this article considers the importance of the body and suffering in his work in general, using the example of Ignatius' letter to the Trallians. The topic of being consumed is discussed on the basis of this letter, as well as his letter to the church in Rome. The limitations of a single article mean that a full contextualization of Ignatius' approach to the body and its suffering in its ancient context cannot be provided here. The current exploration is thus only a first and a small step⁶. This step, nonetheless, goes beyond extant research by focusing on the material dimension of Ignatius' thought as it is expressed in his letters and thereby invites further exploration of this side of his writings and experiences⁷.

2. Ignatius of Antioch

Ignatius of Antioch, who lived, ministered as a bishop, and likely died around the turn of the first century⁸, is best known not for his work as a bishop (about which virtually nothing is known)⁹, but for the letters that he sent to a series of communities in Asia Minor and to Polycarp of Smyrna. The letters have attracted much attention, especially since the Reformation, as Ignatius places a great deal of stress on the office of the bishop and the Eucharist. Over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Ignatius' work has continued to be important to a number of fields of scholarship such as the study of early Christian martyrdom, as Ignatius wrote his letters en route from Antioch, the city where he served as a bishop, to his execution in a Roman arena. The letters have also been important to the study of early Christian understandings of the church as a community, given that Ignatius outlines an

² The latter are mentioned because of their likely proximity to early Christian groups and their self-organization and meals. Cf. for a heuristic comparison between Greco-Roman associations and early Christian groups on this point: [Kloppenborg \(2019\)](#), pp. 209–44.

³ What it entailed to be a bishop and where the notion of episcopacy that Ignatius represents stems from precisely is a matter of ongoing debate and is not the topic of this essay. Cf., however, the thought-provoking piece by [Byers \(2018\)](#).

⁴ I have engaged with Ignatius of Antioch in the following earlier contributions, to which the present papers is indebted: 'Prayer and Participation in the Eucharist in the Work of Ignatius of Antioch' ([Smit 2018a](#)); 'Mystagogy and Martyrdom in Ignatius of Antioch' ([Smit 2016](#)).

⁵ A term that can be applied to Ignatius given his own use of terms belonging to this semantic field, particularly in Eph. 11:2, Magn. 4:2, 10:11, Trall. 6:1, Phil. 6:1, Rom. 3:2–3, Pol. 7:3, cf. ([Downs 2017](#)).

⁶ Cf. for instance, the discussions provoked by contributions such as [Brown \(\[1998\] 2008\)](#) or [Sennett \(1994\)](#).

⁷ In doing so, the main text will focus on the Ignatian epistles themselves, which are quoted in Greek and English translation in order to facilitate the interaction with them; discussions with secondary literature primarily takes place in the notes. Throughout, the edition and translation as provided by [Ehrman \(2003\)](#) is used.

⁸ These dates are disputed. Cf. for an excellent and nuanced discussion of the dating and other introductory matters, such as the authenticity of the letters, in the footnotes of which also most pertinent literature can be found: [Lookadoo \(2018\)](#), see also the extensive review, especially of the various recensions (short, middle, and longer) of the Ignatian letters, of [Vinzent \(2019\)](#).

⁹ The intellectual world that he was part of can, to a certain extent, be deduced from his letters and includes the (emerging) Christian tradition, in particular in its Pauline shape, and Greco-Roman popular philosophy. The contemplation of his imminent end can also be related to other discourses, including that on the noble death; for the latter, see the collection of sources edited by [van Henten and Avemarie \(2020\)](#), as well as the earlier contribution of [Droge and Tabor \(1992\)](#). Comparative research is not, however, the focus of this article.

understanding of the church as a Eucharistic community living in harmony around a bishop¹⁰. Here, the seven writings of the ‘middle recension’ of Ignatius’ letters are taken as a point of departure, with a particular focus on Ignatius’ thinking about the body in relation to communion with the divine through being consumed by wild animals. Ignatius’ reflections on this matter fit, as will be outlined next, a material perspective on religion well, while there is also a clear connection with the topic of conflict in relation to the material dimension of religion (as Ignatius’ body, a material object, is connected with violence throughout his letters).

2.1. *Material Religion, Conflict, and Ignatius*

Material religious perspectives have not been used much, if at all, to research Ignatius of Antioch and his letters. This may have to do with what is the generally contemporary focus of those employing material perspectives or, inversely, with the limited interest in material perspectives among Ignatian scholars. Yet, new insight into Ignatius’ understanding of the Christian tradition can be gained by using this perspective, which, according to Meyer, views religion as ‘a medium of absence that posits and sets out to bridge a gap between the here and now and something “beyond”’¹¹, in which material forms of mediation play a key role. There are a number of themes in the work of Ignatius that are closely related to the physical dimension of religion. Three topics that have been identified as being of particular concern for Ignatius are, for instance, the reality of the body of Jesus (both during his suffering and death and following his resurrection), the church as a physical assembly (i.e., as a Eucharistic community around a bishop with people congregating in the same space and consuming the same sacred meal) and finally Ignatius’ own physical demise, his martyrdom, which he actively longs for, as the culmination and ultimate test of a life of following Jesus, with whom he wishes to be united, both by suffering and by dying. The painful manner of his death provides a gateway to a more perfect communion than Ignatius enjoys now. Even more importantly, it provides a more definitive and eternal communion with God than is available during Ignatius’ life as a follower of Christ on earth: he worries constantly whether he will indeed be steadfast until the end and, thereby, attain eternal communion with God¹². However ‘spiritual’ an author Ignatius may be regarded as, his theology and his vision of the church is deeply physical.

Furthermore, the stress Ignatius places on the physical dimension of Christian faith is closely bound up with the notion of suffering as a result of conflict¹³. In fact, he resists a particular early Christian ‘tactic’ for solving the problem of a suffering deity—suffering was oftentimes regarded as being incompatible with the dignity of a deity—by arguing that Jesus did have a physical body and died violently. Ignatius thus founds his own hope for a physical resurrection (preceded by his own physical death) on Jesus’ fate. Beyond this, he also stresses the importance of his own physical suffering, led to Rome in chains, accompanied by a group of Roman soldiers, and, in particular, the significance of his upcoming gruesome death in the arena, where he will be killed by wild animals. Ignatius’ longing for this fate have, in the past, led to suggestions that he may be less than mentally sane¹⁴. Yet, a rediscovery of the logic of early Christian martyrdom, in which an embrace of suffering rendered the executioners powerless, given that what was intended as punishment was received as a reward¹⁵, has also led to the acknowledgment that there is indeed method to this Syrian bishop’s apparent madness and that his desire to suffer is also a way of coping spiritually with the situation in which he finds himself.

¹⁰ Influentially: Zizioulas (1985).

¹¹ Meyer (2015, p. 336).

¹² As stressed in Smit (2016).

¹³ Cf. van Henten and Avemarie (2020) and Droge and Tabor (1992); further comparative explorations would be inviting, but cannot be undertaken within the scope of this contribution.

¹⁴ Cf. for a survey of appertaining opinion, e.g., Still (2017).

¹⁵ Cf. also for an exploration of the same in the Apocalypse of Smit (2018b).

Violent conflict and the material, physical dimensions of the Christian tradition are, in Ignatius' letters, closely connected, and it is this connection that will be explored further in this paper.

2.2. Ignatius' Love of Physical Suffering and Its Logic: The Example of Trallians

As Ignatius' ideas about the body and conflict pervade his seven letters, even focusing on one letter offers a good entry point into his thoughts on this subject. Here, his letters to the church in the city of Tralles are focused on; their contents are representative for the corpus of letters as a whole. Ignatius assumes or knows that the Christians in this city suffer, and he exhorts them, or seeks to comfort them, by means of a reflection on his own suffering. He writes to them in *Trall.* 4 that

1. Πολλὰ φρονῶ ἐν θεῷ, ἀλλ' ἑμαυτὸν μετρῶ, ἵνα μὴ ἐν καυχῇσει ἀπόλωμαι. νῦν γὰρ με δεῖ πλέον φοβεῖσθαι καὶ μὴ προσέχειν τοῖς φυσιοῦσίν με. οἱ γὰρ λέγοντές μοι μαστιγοῦσίν με. 2. ἀγαπῶ μὲν γὰρ τὸ παθεῖν, ἀλλ' οὐκ οἶδα, εἰ ἄξιός εἰμι. τὸ γὰρ ζῆλος πολλοῖς μὲν οὐ φαίνεται, ἐμὲ δὲ πλέον πολεμεῖ. χριζῶ οὖν πρᾶότητος, ἐν ἣ καταλύεται ὁ ἄρχων τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου

1. I am thinking many things in God, but I take measure of myself so as not to be destroyed by my boasting. For now I must fear all the more and pay no attention to those who make me self-important. For those who speak to me flog me. 2. For indeed I love to suffer; but I do not know if I am worthy. For envy is not obvious to many, but it is escalating its war against me. And so I need humility, by which the ruler of this age is destroyed.

With this, we enter one of the more controversial parts of Ignatius' witness: his somewhat paradoxical emphasis on suffering. The emphasis is paradoxical because, on the one hand, he desires it, as it brings him closer to Christ, but, on the other hand, he is wary of it, given that he constantly doubts whether he is worthy of it. What interests me is how Ignatius perceives the relationship between his body and those of his guards—those who are inflicting suffering upon him, in this section in the form of flogging. Flogging obviously implies physical proximity—Ignatius' journey in chains together with his guards is also an instance of assembled bodies. Yet, as in the case of the community in Tralles, this fellowship established by assembled bodies and the manner in which they relate to each other is also subject to interpretation. The perspective of Ignatius' guards is not made explicit in the text, but it is not difficult to make an educated guess: they will have seen their bodies as dominant, exercising control over Ignatius' in the name of the emperor. The flogging is an expression of such dominance. Ignatius, however, subversively reverses the interpretative gaze, creating in his letters an 'off stage' hidden discourse that reveals the true meaning of his predicament. True, from Ignatius' perspective, in which he makes his epistolary audience complicit, the guards' treatment of him brings him closer to Christ. In fact, it may be the case that 'those who make me self-important' are the very guards that flog him. If I understand him correctly, Ignatius needs to learn humility vis-à-vis his flogging, not by means of his flogging; he needs to learn humility in order to be or remain worthy of the flogging (*Trall.* 4.2, cf. 12.3)¹⁶. For Ignatius, the flogging is—as other kinds of suffering are—an expression of belonging to Christ, experiencing fellowship with Christ by means of sharing in suffering similar to that of Christ and on behalf of Christ¹⁷. All of this is set against the backdrop of his belief that Jesus Christ 'was truly crucified and died' (*Trall.* 9.1) and his abhorrence of 'Docetism'¹⁸. He explains the latter as follows in

¹⁶ Cf. in general the argument of Vall (2013, p. 155), who notes that it is all about the sanctification of the flesh, i.e., of the concrete enfleshed existence that needs to be oriented in a particular way in order to remain on the road towards salvation. Smith (2011), does discuss martyrdom, but bodiliness to a much lesser extent. This is rather different in Clancy (2009), who shows the broad relation between incarnation, sacramental physicality and the physicality of the martyrs' witness.

¹⁷ See also the general outline in Smit (2016).

¹⁸ For a brief treatment of which, in the context of Ignatius' emphasis on following the way of the cross, see: Nicklas (2010, pp. 280–83).

Trall. 10: ‘if . . . he only appeared to suffer, . . . why am I in bondage, and why also do I pray to fight the wild beasts? I am then dying in vain and am, even worse, lying about the Lord’. He also applies this view of suffering, which amounts to being incorporated into Christ, to the Trallians: ‘through the cross, by his suffering he calls you who are the parts of his body’. (*Trall.* 11). Suffering, understood and interpreted in this way, is quasi-sacramental: Christ’s own suffering is his means of calling the faithful (in this case, the Trallians and Ignatius), and experiencing suffering in a faithful and humble manner is a means of experiencing communion with Christ¹⁹. All of this rests on the bold reinterpretation of the otherwise unpleasant physical proximity of those who torture Ignatius and, in the case of the Trallians, the presence of those who cause them to suffer. Yet, bodiliness is a precondition for this reinterpretation. By arguing that he both loves to suffer and needs to do so humbly, Ignatius turns the tables of what ought to be an unpleasant physical experience on his torturers. In doing so, he reclaims agency and thereby reorders the social space that comes into being through his being assembled with his guards²⁰. In doing so, Ignatius does more than pursue ‘the most excessive form of imitation of the gods’²¹. Rather, he gains the upper hand over those that seem to control him by envisioning his ordeal as martyrdom rather than punishment²².

2.3. From Salvific Suffering to Being Consumed

Having introduced the general topic of physical suffering in Ignatius’ work in this manner, it is now possible to turn to the topic of being consumed as a further specification of such suffering. In order to do that, Ignatius’ letter to the Roman church is the best focal point, given that Ignatius uses this terminology the most in this letter. Here, a presentation of pertinent extracts of this letter will be given, followed by a discussion of them in a subsequent section.

The attention to being consumed is occasioned by a specific characteristic of Ignatius’ situation while writing this letter: Rome is his final destination, literally and figuratively, and he wants to ensure that he will indeed meet his end there as envisaged. Accordingly, he sends the Roman Christians requests to this end, trying to prevent the Roman church from intervening and saving him from his execution. He expresses this from the very start of his letter, as in 1:2:

ἡ μὲν γὰρ ἀρχὴ εὐοικονόμητός ἐστιν, ἐάνπερ χάριτος ἐπιτύχω εἰς τὸν κληρὸν μου ἀνεμποδίστως ἀπολαβεῖν. φοβοῦμαι γὰρ τὴν ὑμῶν ἀγάπην, μὴ αὐτὴ με ἀδικήσῃ. ὑμῖν γὰρ εὐχερές ἐστιν, ὃ θέλετε ποιῆσαι· ἐμοὶ δὲ δύσκολόν ἐστιν τοῦ θεοῦ ἐπιτυχεῖν, ἐάνπερ ὑμεῖς μὴ⁶¹ φείσησθέ μου.

For the beginning is auspicious, if I can indeed obtain the gracious gift I need to receive my lot without any impediment. For I am afraid of your love, that it may do me harm. For it is easy for you to do what you want, but it is difficult for me to attain to God, if you do not spare me.

Immediately afterwards, in 2:1, he already refers to himself using imagery drawn from the field of food and drink, specifically as a libation:

2. πλέον δέ μοι μὴ παράσχησθε τοῦ σπονδισθῆναι θεῷ, ὡς ἔτι θυσιαστήριον ἔτοιμόν ἐστιν, ἵνα ἐν ἀγάπῃ χορὸς γενόμενοι ἄσητε τῷ πατρὶ ἐν Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ, ὅτι τὸν ἐπίσκοπον Συρίας κατηξίωσεν ὁ θεὸς εὐρεθῆναι εἰς δύσιν ἀπὸ ἀνατολῆς μεταπεμψάμενος. καλὸν τὸ δῦναι ἀπὸ κόσμου πρὸς θεόν, ἵνα εἰς αὐτὸν ἀνατείλω.

¹⁹ Cf. also this emphasis Stefanut (2013).

²⁰ Cf., e.g., Bakker (2013, pp. 172–73).

²¹ As Klostergaard Petersen (2013, p. 35) has it.

²² Cf. also the emphasis placed by McDonnell (2010), on the urgency of the question as to how he would die for Ignatius.

2. But grant me nothing more than to be poured out as a libation to God while there is still an altar at hand, that by becoming a chorus in love, you may sing forth to the Father in Jesus Christ, saying that God has deemed the bishop of Syria worthy to be found at the setting of the sun, after sending him from where it rises. For it is good for me to set from the world to God, that I may rise up to him.

The emphasis here, however, is not so much on being consumed by a deity, as the image of libation could suggest, but rather on being 'poured out' for God. This changes, however, when Ignatius returns to the topic of physical annihilation in ch. 4 of the letter:

1. Ἐγὼ γράφω πάσαις ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις καὶ ἐντέλλομαι πᾶσιν, ὅτι ἐγὼ ἐκὼν ὑπὲρ θεοῦ ἀποθνήσκω, ἐάνπερ ὑμεῖς μὴ κωλύσητε. παρακαλῶ ὑμᾶς, μὴ εὐνοια ἄκαιρος γένησθέ μοι. ἄφετέ με θηρίων εἶναι βορᾶν, δι' ὧν ἔνεστιν θεοῦ ἐπιτυχεῖν. σῖτός εἰμι θεοῦ καὶ δι' ὀδόντων θηρίων ἀλήθομαι, ἵνα καθαρὸς ἄρτος εὐρεθῶ τοῦ Χριστοῦ.

2. μᾶλλον κολακεύσατε τὰ θηρία, ἵνα μοι τάφος γένωνται καὶ μηθὲν καταλίπωσι τῶν τοῦ σώματός μου, ἵνα μὴ κοιμηθεῖς βαρὺς τι γένωμαι. τότε ἔσομαι μαθητὴς ἀληθῶς Ἰησοῦ χριστοῦ, ὅτε οὐδὲ τὸ σῶμά μου ὁ κόσμος ὄψεται. λιτανεύσατε τὸν Χριστὸν ὑπὲρ ἐμοῦ, ἵνα διὰ τῶν ὀργάνων τούτων θεοῦ θυσία εὐρεθῶ.

1. I am writing all the churches and giving instruction to all, that I am willingly dying for God, unless you hinder me. I urge you, do not become an untimely kindness to me. Allow me to be bread for the wild beasts; through them I am able to attain to God. I am the wheat of God and am ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found to be the pure bread of Christ.

2. Rather, coax the wild beasts, that they may become a tomb for me and leave no part of my body behind, that I may burden no one once I have died. Then I will truly be a disciple of Jesus Christ, when the world does not see even my body. Petition Christ on my behalf, that I may be found a sacrifice through these instruments of God.

Ignatius not only reiterates his desire to die here (4:1), but also becomes rather explicit as to the manner of his death: by being eaten by the wild animals, as if he were bread. He varies this unusual imagery—bread is not common food for wild animals—by also comparing himself to wheat that is being ground by the teeth of these animals in order to become the pure bread of Christ. It is hard not to see allusions to Eucharistic imagery here, even if those allusions are derived by loose association rather than stringent logic. The point is made clear: earthly annihilation, the disappearance of the body, leads to unification with Christ.

Subsequently, Ignatius also restates the rationale behind his desire in terms of the paradox of becoming truly free and completely belonging to Christ by means of his suffering, while comparing his fate and standing with the apostles Peter and Paul:

3. οὐχ ὡς Πέτρος καὶ Παῦλος διατάσσομαι ὑμῖν. ἐκεῖνοι ἀπόστολοι, ἐγὼ κατάκριτος· ἐκεῖνοι ἐλεύθεροι, ἐγὼ δὲ μέχρι νῦν δούλος. ἀλλ' ἐὰν πάθω, ἀπελευθερὸς γενήσομαι Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ ἀναστήσομαι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐλεύθερος. καὶ νῦν μανθάνω δεδεμένος μηδὲν ἐπιθυμεῖν.

3. I am not enjoining you as Peter and Paul did. They were apostles, I am condemned; they were free, until now I have been a slave. But if I suffer, I will become a freed person who belongs to Jesus Christ, and I will rise up, free, in him. In the meantime I am learning to desire nothing while in chains.

Ignatius does not easily tire of stating his purpose in coming to Rome. In fact, he casts it as coming freely to Rome and desiring death, rather than as being dragged unwillingly to a humiliating execution for the entertainment of the Roman populace. He returns to this even more vividly in ch. 5 of his letter to the Romans:

2. ὀναίμην τῶν θηρίων τῶν ἐμοὶ ἡτοιμασμένων καὶ εὐχομαι σύντομά μοι εὐρεθῆναι ἅ καὶ κολακεύσω, συντόμως με καταφαγεῖν, οὐχ ὡσπερ τινῶν δειλαινόμενα οὐχ ἦσαντο. καὶν αὐτὰ δὲ ἐκόντα μὴ θέλη, ἐγὼ προσβιάσομαι.

3. συγγνώμην μοι ἔχετε· τί μοι συμφέρει, ἐγὼ γινώσκω. νῦν ἄρχομαι μαθητῆς εἶναι. μηθέν με ζηλώσαι τῶν ὀρατῶν καὶ ἀοράτων, ἵνα Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐπιτύχω. πῦρ καὶ σταυρὸς θηρίων τε συστάσεις, ἀνατομαί, διαιρέσεις, σκορπισμοὶ ὀστέων, συγκοπὴ μελῶν, ἀλεσμοὶ ὄλου τοῦ σώματος, κακαὶ κολάσεις τοῦ διαβόλου ἐπ' ἐμὲ ἐρχέσθωσαν, μόνον ἵνα Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐπιτύχω.

2. May I have the full pleasure of the wild beasts prepared for me; I pray they will be found ready for me. Indeed, I will coax them to devour me quickly—not as happens with some, whom they are afraid to touch. And even if they do not wish to do so willingly, I will force them.

3. Grant this to me; I know what benefits me. Now I am beginning to be a disciple. May nothing visible or invisible show any envy toward me, that I may attain to Jesus Christ. Fire and cross and packs of wild beasts, cuttings and being torn apart, the scattering of bones, the mangling of limbs, the grinding of the whole body, the evil torments of the devil—let them come upon me, only that I may attain to Jesus Christ.

Being devoured is here, once again, the pathway for attaining perfect communion with Christ. In fact, Ignatius even contemplates coaxing the animals to deal with him quickly, or even forcing them to do so. In his desire to be annihilated and, thus, to become one with Christ, he even adds destruction by fire to the mix in his description of such demolition in 5:3.

Further substantiation of this desire to suffer is found again in 6:3:

3. ἐπιτρέψατέ μοι μιμητὴν εἶναι τοῦ πάθους τοῦ θεοῦ μου. εἴ τις αὐτὸν ἐν ἑαυτῷ ἔχει, νοησάτω, ὃ θέλω, καὶ συμπαθεῖτω μοι, εἰδῶς τὰ συνέχοντά με.

3. Allow me to be an imitator of the suffering of my God. If anyone has him within himself, let him both understand what I want and sympathize with me, realizing the things that constrain me.

Ignatius' desire to be consumed has, therefore, three functions when it comes to communion with Jesus: (a) functioning as a means of identification with his suffering; (b) offering proof of his faithful discipleship until the very end; (c) enabling Ignatius to disappear from this life to become completely and safely ensconced with Christ in Christ's realm (the nature of which Ignatius does not dwell upon).

In a final occurrence of food imagery, the roles are slightly changed again, as now Ignatius himself desires food on the one hand while on the other he seems to be filled with 'living water':

2. βασκανία ἐν ὑμῖν μὴ κατοικεῖτω. μηδ' ἂν ἐγὼ παρῶν παρακαλῶ ὑμᾶς, πείσθητέ μοι· τοῦτοις δὲ μᾶλλον πείσθητε, οἷς γράφω ὑμῖν. ζῶν γὰρ γράφω ὑμῖν, ἐρῶν τοῦ ἀποθανεῖν. ὃ ἐμὸς ἔρωσ ἐσταύρωται, καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν ἐμοὶ πῦρ φιλόυλον· ὕδωρ δὲ ζῶν καὶ λαλοῦν ἐν ἐμοί, ἔσωθέν μοι λέγον· δεῦρο πρὸς τὸν πατέρα.

3. οὐχ ἡδομαι τροφῇ φθορᾶς οὐδὲ ἡδοναῖς τοῦ βίου τούτου. ἄρτον θεοῦ θέλω, ὃ ἐστιν σὰρξ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, τοῦ ἐκ σπέρματος Δαυίδ, καὶ πόμα θέλω τὸ αἷμα αὐτοῦ, ὃ ἐστιν ἀγάπη ἀφθαρτος.

2. Let no envy dwell among you. Even if I urge you otherwise when I arrive, do not be persuaded; instead be persuaded by what I am writing you now. For I write to you while living, desiring to die. My passion has been crucified and there is no burning love within me for material things; instead there is living water, which also is speaking in me, saying to me from within: 'Come to the Father'.

3. I have no pleasure in the food that perishes nor in the pleasures of this life. I desire the bread of God, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, from the seed of David; and for drink I desire his blood, which is imperishable love.

The image of the living water may be related to the Holy Spirit, which was, at least in the Johannine tradition, associated with such water (cf. John 7: 37–38, a text usually interpreted along these lines). And although water can be a drink, it does not function as such. By contrast, Ignatius desires to drink Christ's blood, here identified as love, and to taste the bread of God, which is the flesh of Christ. From being eaten in order to be with Christ, here communion with Christ is expressed in terms of a form of theophagy, as mentioned at the beginning of this contribution.

2.4. Observations on Being Consumed

The above presentation of sources allows for a number of analytical observations on 'being consumed' in Ignatius' letter to the Romans.

First, there is the matter of agency: by expressing his desire to be consumed, Ignatius interprets his upcoming and gruesome execution from his own perspective, rather than from the perspective of the Roman authorities who have captured him and intend to execute him. Bakker puts it well in this respect: '[N]either the executioner nor the beasts have the initiative, but Ignatius himself. He gives the impression that he alone is orchestrating [the] bizarre spectacle'²³. Bizarre it may be, yet Ignatius' desire, which translates into a complete reinterpretation of his situation, culminating in his passionate request to the Roman church not to intervene on his behalf, does have consequences as to who is (imagined to be) in charge of the course of events. In fact, according to Ignatius' letter, the Roman authorities are now actors in a script that Ignatius has written, rather than the other way around. The same applies to the beasts, who are no longer enemies, but rather tools that help him to reach his goal of communion with Christ²⁴. Prey and animal fodder Ignatius remains, yet he is this willingly, enthusiastically even, which makes all the difference for the exercise of agency in this situation and, presumably, enables Ignatius to cope with the situation and to retain his dignity as a Christian and as a bishop. In the context of the battle in which Ignatius has become the victim, this is of significance: Ignatius has evidently lost the battle at the level of (church/religious) politics and is therefore paying the highest price. By interpreting this defeat as the beginning of his journey towards his life's destiny, communion with Christ, Ignatius in fact positions himself as the one who, in the end, stands to gain the most by the situation²⁵. His desire to be consumed physically in order to be with Christ is, in this manner, more than an exotic religious longing, but also renegotiates and reinterprets a conflict, in the course of which the roles of victor and victim are completely reversed.

Second, the place of consumption can be considered further. Except for the final passage from Ignatius' letter to the Romans, as quoted above, the focus is not on Ignatius' consumption of a deity, but rather on his own consumption by wild animals—a direct consumption of Ignatius by God or Christ does not occur. Yet consumption is closely related to Christ in the following ways. First, being consumed totally—Ignatius' graphic imagery leaves little to the imagination; he seems to have thought his fate through rather thoroughly—is for Ignatius the final proof of his total dedication

²³ Bakker (2013, pp. 172–73).

²⁴ The topic of unity, of pervasive importance for Ignatius, also governs his longing for communion with Christ, as has been recently discussed by Hartog (2019).

²⁵ Cf. with regard to Niederer Saxon (2017, pp. 31–57).

and faithfulness to Christ. He is, admittedly, somewhat anxious about this and unsure whether he will indeed remain faithful to the end. Yet, he is also intent on clearing away all possible obstacles, including well-meaning interventions on his behalf by the Roman church or animals that are too reluctant to tear him apart. Second, this ultimate proof of faithfulness is also bound up with an imitation of Christ in his suffering²⁶; the difference between crucifixion as a means of execution and execution by means of a *damnatio ad bestias* does not seem to matter. The *tertium comparationis* is suffering, as Ignatius makes quite explicit, referring in passing to Christ as ‘god’ (6:3). A faithful disciple both endures suffering that is brought upon him (or her) due to an allegiance to Christ, and s/he achieves further identification with Christ by means of this suffering. This is, of course, closely connected to the reversal of agency that was mentioned before, yet should be highlighted as a distinct dimension of Ignatius’ desire to suffer (by being consumed): enduring such suffering proves faithfulness to Christ and enables him to be with him. Third, being consumed, as Ignatius stresses, also means that he disappears completely from this world (e.g., 4:2), which likely facilitates his transfer to the realm of Christ, even if this is not something that the Antiochian bishop dwells upon extensively: he wants to ‘attain’ (ἐπιτύχω) Christ (cf. 5:3), and in order to do that he must disappear from the earthly realm as a faithful disciple who identifies with Christ in his suffering. Vanishing (by being consumed) is a necessary part of this process. A final dimension of the consumption pertains to the likely allusions to the Eucharist contained in Ignatius’ language involving becoming bread or wheat and being poured out²⁷. This is, at the very least, suggested by his focus on bread and drink as metaphors for his upcoming fate and his preoccupation with the Eucharist throughout his letters. The Eucharistic metaphors, of course, correspond well with Ignatius’ upcoming fate in the arena: both concern being eaten. Yet by alluding to the Eucharist, Ignatius also enhances the extent to which he is able to associate, even identify his upcoming suffering with that of Christ—the violent background of the Eucharist, connected as it is to Christ’s own death, and the violent aspect of eating as such, both play a key role in creating this association²⁸.

Third, the following can be observed when it comes to materiality. To begin with, Ignatius embraces his own physicality and his (current and) upcoming physical suffering. He also embraces his relatively moderate suffering en route to Rome: travelling in chains is mentioned explicitly and interpreted in terms of his proving himself a worthy disciple of Christ who identifies with his Lord’s suffering. By interpreting in this particular way, he gains some control over what happens to his body, but this in no way diminishes his emphasis on bodiliness: ‘performing an operation on the body that requires grueling endurance allows one to become a perfected self’, as Niederer Saxon aptly puts it²⁹. This aligns with his emphasis on the reality of Christ’s physical suffering and resurrection elsewhere in his correspondence; in fact, it is because Christ is physical that the equally physical Ignatius can relate to him and even identify with him. Spiritualization of suffering, or spiritualizing the Christian faith, is not something Ignatius is interested in, apparently.

Furthermore, and quite in line with the first point, it is precisely the physical body of Ignatius, in all its materiality, that is the site in which the conflict that he is involved in is played out. His coping with his physical suffering, his endurance of it, even his commitment to it and his eventual disappearance from this world due to it are the elements of Ignatius’ victory, as it were, over those who have captured and will torture and execute him. A further point is, therefore, that the body is the means by which Ignatius’ allegiance to Christ is mediated, which goes widely beyond a merely cognitive assent to

²⁶ Cf. also on the connection between Christology and discipleship in terms of imitation, e.g., Hartog (2019). See similarly Dehandschutter (2012).

²⁷ Cf. for this topic, particularly in relation to imitation and martyrdom, Clancy (2009) as well as Stefanut (2013).

²⁸ Cf. for a forceful and convincing argument along these lines: Klawiter (2007).

²⁹ Niederer Saxon (2017, p. 38).

believing that Christ is Lord, for instance. Physical suffering, particularly by means of being consumed, gains a sacramental quality, as it were: it mediates communion with Christ³⁰.

In addition to this, the body plays a paradoxical role in Ignatius' contemplation of his upcoming ordeal: the body is the necessary means by which his faithfulness to Christ is both tested and proven. It is equally necessary as the means by which Ignatius identifies with the suffering of Christ and thereby with Christ as such. At the same time, the body also needs to disappear in order for Ignatius to be united entirely with Christ. As this paradox is not resolved, it can only be mentioned here.

All of this also has a flipside, as it were, which has everything to do with materiality and mediation (and, given the focus on suffering, with conflict as well): precisely by imitating Christ in his suffering, Ignatius also makes Christ visible—he represents him, as it were. The body of the martyr, suffering intentionally and willingly, becomes a means of mediation and functions in the manner of a sacrament. Imitation not only assimilates the imitator into the example, but also turns the imitator into a representation of the example³¹. This aspect of Ignatius is of course completely in line with his other name, i.e., the Godbearer' (ὁ Θεοφόρος), and his ideas about the bishop's representation of the divine³². This also corresponds with another aspect of Ignatius' reflection upon his martyrdom: he associates it closely with the Eucharist and uses Eucharistic imagery to interpret his upcoming fate. This enables him to connect his suffering with Christ's suffering even more closely and in doing so he uses a very material aspect of early Christianity in order to facilitate his own understanding of the dire straits in which he finds himself and, no doubt, cope with it better. Given the sacramental quality of his own body—suffering in imitation of Christ makes Christ present—Ignatius can be seen as interpreting one sacramental act by means of another. Accidentally, in doing so, he also reminds the reader of his letters of the violent aspects of the Eucharist, given both the inherent violence of eating (and being eaten—as Ignatius is about to experience) and the indissoluble connection between the Eucharist and Christ's own suffering and death.

Finally, it is inviting to consider these lines of thought (and pathways of practice) of Ignatius in terms of initiation and mystagogy³³, as was explored with regard to other aspects of Ignatius thoughts in earlier contributions³⁴. This is to say that what Ignatius undergoes and the manner in which he understands his current and upcoming fate can be seen as his entering more deeply into the mystery of Christ, able to do so by the guards that currently accompany him on his way to Rome and by the wild animals that await him in the arena. What was meant to deny Ignatius life, from his perspective allows him to enter even more profoundly into a life-giving mystery: communion, even union, with Christ³⁵.

3. Conclusions

The above considerations of Ignatius of Antioch's correspondence, with particular reference to his letter to the churches in Tralles and Rome, shed light on both the question of consumption in his thought and on the connections between consumption and materiality and conflict. This is to say, first, that in the act of eating, violence, an inherent part of conflict, and physicality (materiality) are evidently closely connected, as eating requires both violence and materiality of some sort. Second, for Ignatius,

³⁰ Cf. also, e.g., [Downs \(2017, p. 154\)](#), who stresses the connection between imitation of and participation in Christ in Ignatius.

³¹ With respect to the soteriological function of suffering (beyond its role in the redemption of Ignatius himself), here the position is also identified with the fact that Ignatius does not seek to redeem the Philippians by means of his suffering, but rather that he presents himself as an example of steadfast and "long suffering" discipleship in the footsteps (literally and figuratively) of Paul. See [Kirk \(2013\)](#).

³² Cf. [Maier \(2018\)](#).

³³ Cf. also [Niederer Saxon \(2017, pp. 41–42\)](#), on the shaping of the self and developing spiritually through martyrdom, suffering, and epistolary reflection upon it.

³⁴ Cf. [Smit \(2016, 2018a\)](#).

³⁵ Cf. also along these lines: [Schröter \(2018, p. 107\)](#), Die Teilhabe an der Eucharistie bewirkt eine Verbindung mit dem Leiden und Sterben Jesu Christi und vermittelt zugleich die Teilhabe an der Auferstehung. Ignatius entwickelt auf diese Weise eine christologisch fundierte Sicht auf die Existenz der zu Jesus Christus Gehörenden, die nicht auf das irdische Leben beschränkt, sondern erst dann "wahrhaftiges Leben" ist, wenn sie mit Jesus Christus verbunden ist und an seiner Auferstehung teilhat.

not so much eating the deity (with the exception of one text, as indicated above), but rather being eaten is the pathway to perfect divine–human communion. The eating does not take place, in Ignatius’ case, by the deity involved, i.e., Christ, but rather by those who appear to be his executioners: wild animals in the Roman arena who are, in reality (i.e., in Ignatius’ reality), merely instruments for proving his faithfulness to Christ, for achieving a fuller identification with Christ and arriving at complete communion with Christ. Consumption, in the sense of being consumed, here establishes divine–human communion not by eating the deity (theophagy), but rather by being consumed. Third, this interpretation of his *damnatio ad bestias* allows Ignatius to make sense of his situation in a positive manner: from an unwilling victim, he becomes a willing believer, looking forward to his journey, however painful, towards communion with his Lord and God. This changes who exercises control and has agency: no longer are those who captured and execute Ignatius in charge, but rather he is, even to the extent that he imagines coaxing and forcing the wild animals that he is to face in the arena into assisting him in proving his faith, identifying with Christ and arriving at perfect communion. Fourth, materiality plays a key role in this: the physicality of Christ is for Ignatius of high theological significance as such. His own body functions in a sacramental manner, becoming the medium through which his faithfulness and identification with Christ is mediated. It is, however paradoxical, because it is precisely the disappearance of his body that facilitates his arrival at complete communion with Christ. All of this can be captured through the language of initiation or of undergoing a mystagogical process. The Eucharistic metaphors that Ignatius uses also help to further this stress on materiality, recalling this very physical ritual of the Church, which is of key importance for Ignatius throughout his letters, and connecting it with both the consumed body of Ignatius and the suffering that this involves and the body of Christ. Thus, conflict, materiality, and consumption are all key components to Ignatius of Antioch’s negotiation of his fate and constitute vital parts of his understanding and embodiment of the Christian faith: it is hard to imagine a spirituality that is so physical as this ancient Syrian bishop’s³⁶.

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³⁶ Cf. also the remarks of [McGowan \(2012\)](#) regarding physicality, materiality and sacrifice.

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