

The Martyrdom of Polycarp

From: The colony of God's Church at Smyrna

To: The colony of God's Church at Philomelium, and to all the colonies of the Holy Catholic Church everywhere.

All mercy, peace, and love to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

1. In this letter, we are sending you an account of the martyrs, in particular the blessed Polycarp, whose witness acted as a seal on the most recent persecution and brought it to an end. It was as if everything that had happened was leading up to yet another Divine manifestation of Christ's own martyrdom we read of in the Gospel. For Polycarp, just like the Lord, patiently waited for his hour of betrayal, always putting others before himself. This is the very pattern we should all take from him. It is the sign of a true and steadfast love, when a man isn't so much concerned about saving his own life, as he is about saving the lives of his friends.

2. Indeed, all the martyrdoms that took place here in Smyrna were ultimately willed by God and were blessed and noble. Even in this, we must still acknowledge that everything that happens in this world is ultimately under His governance. Anyone who witnessed these martyrdoms could not fail to admire their endurance and the love they showed for their Master. Some were scourged so badly that their intestines, veins, and arteries were exposed. Still, they took the beating to the point where it was the bystanders who were the ones who broke down and wept tears of pity.

Others proved themselves to be so heroic that not once did they moan or cry out. This was clear proof to us all that these martyr-heroes of Christ were not present in the body anymore, or that the Lord was right by their side, helping them endure it. Indeed, they were so absorbed in the grace of Christ, that they actually made fun of the cruelties they were suffering. They realized that the price they were paying for everlasting life was nothing more than a single hour of torment. To them, the fires of their tormentors seemed cool and refreshing. They always looked beyond those flames to their escape from the flames of eternity. With their inward vision, they saw the good things that awaited those who persevere. The same held true for the martyrs who were thrown to the wild beasts. The pains they were forced to endure were horrible, be it lying on beds of spikes or being subjected to other forms of torture—the Fiend's last attempt to make them suffer so much that they break down and recant their faith in Christ. It seemed there was no end to his tortures.

3. But thank God that all of Satan's efforts failed. Germanicus showed just how noble and gallant he was by displaying his strength and endurance as he was thrown to the savage beasts. Even when the governor tried to convince him to have pity on his own children, and told him, "Just recant, and your children can still have their father," Germanicus actually coaxed the beast toward him instead. He wanted a speedy release from such a world of unjust and lawless men. When the entire crowd saw this, they were so enraged at the heroism of the Christians and at the love and fear of God they displayed, they started screaming, "Down with the atheists! Let's go get Polycarp!"

4. There was one man from Phrygia, though, Quintus was his name, who, along with a few others had actually voluntarily surrendered. But once he saw the beasts, he caved. When the governor asked him if he would take the oath and offer incense, he did. This is why we do not approve of Christians offering themselves spontaneously. There is nothing in the Gospel that encourages that.

5. When Polycarp heard about what had happened, he didn't show any sign of alarm and was actually prepared to stay in the city anyway. Eventually, though, the rest of us convinced him to leave and go out to his quiet country property just outside of the city. And so, he spent his time there with friends simply praying day and night for, not only us in Smyrna, but for all the churches around the world. In any case, it just so happened that three days before he was arrested, while he was praying, he had a vision in which his pillow was engulfed in flames and reduced to ashes. After the vision had passed, he turned to his friends and said, "I think I am going to be burnt alive."

6. Since it became clear that the authorities were continuing to hunt for him, he then moved to another farm. Shortly after he had left, the searchers came to that first place and, when they found he wasn't there, they arrested two young houseboys instead. One of them eventually confessed after being tortured. In all truth, it was inevitable that the police commissioner would find Polycarp, because the traitors who informed on him were men from his own household. And so, not only did Polycarp imitate Christ in being betrayed, but his betrayers ended up imitating Judas.

7. The policemen left that house on a Friday, around suppertime, weapons in hand and bringing the houseboy with them, and they arrived at the farm where Polycarp was staying late at night, with Polycarp in bed in the attic. Even then, he could have escaped, but he refused. He simply said, "God's will be done." As soon as they got there, he actually came downstairs and calmly chatted with them. Everyone was shocked and couldn't believe this was the man they were urgently sent to arrest. And, despite the fact it was so late, Polycarp invited them to dinner and ordered that they be given all the food and drink they wanted. He then asked them one favor—that they let him pray undisturbed for one hour. They said, "Okay," and he actually ended up praying for two hours. When they heard his prayers, the officers regretted having to arrest him.

8. After he finished praying, they put him on a donkey and took him into the city. It just so happened that that day was a special Sabbath day. Herod, the police commissioner, along with his father Nicetas, came out to meet him as he was brought into the city. They brought him into their carriage, sat beside him, and tried to persuade him, saying, "Come on, what is the big deal? How can it hurt anyone if you just say, 'Caesar is Lord' and offer a little bit of incense to save your life?" At first, Polycarp didn't reply, but when they kept at him, he eventually said, "No, I'm not going to do it." That's when they started to threaten him and then threw him out of the carriage. Polycarp then got back up, didn't look back, and let the officers lead him into the arena. The people were shouting in such a frenzy when they saw Polycarp, that you couldn't hear a thing.

9. As soon as Polycarp stepped into the arena, there came a voice from heaven that said, "Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man!" No one saw who said it, but we who were with him definitely heard it. Polycarp was then brought up for examination before the governor. There was so much shouting that it took a while for it to die down so the governor could question him. After the governor asked if he was Polycarp and Polycarp admitted it, the governor then tried to convince him to recant. He said, "Please, have a little consideration for how old you are. Just swear the oath and say, 'By the fortune of Caesar.' Just admit that you've been wrong, and say, 'Down with the atheists!'" At that point, Polycarp got a little perturbed, so he looked all around at the screaming heathens in the arena, and with a sweep of his hand at them, he looked up to heaven and growled out, "Down with the atheists!"

Seeing that didn't really work, the governor then said, "Just take the oath, and I'll let you go. Just revile your Christ. That's all. Just do that, and you're free." Polycarp, though, replied, "I've served him for 86 years, and He has never done me wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?"

10. Then the governor tried another track and said, “Just swear by the fortune of Caesar, then.” Polycarp shot back with, “If you think for one second that I am going to swear by the fortune of Caesar, then you really don’t know me at all. Let me be as clear as I can be. I am a Christian. If you want to learn more about Christianity, just name the date and I’ll teach you all about it.” The governor then said, “You’d do better to make your case before these people.” But Polycarp replied, “I thought it would be worth discussing it with you, because we Christians have been taught to always respect those in authority, as long as doing so doesn’t compromise our faith, because God has put them in those positions. But I’m not going to bother trying to defend myself before these people—it would be a complete waste of time.”

11. The governor then said, “I have wild beasts here. If you don’t change your mind, you’re going to be thrown to them.” “Go ahead, call them up!” said Polycarp. “There is no way in the world I am going to change my answer. It is completely out of the question to exchange a good way of thinking for a bad one, but it would be to your credit if you exchanged your wrong for the right.” Then, the one next to the governor said, “If you don’t recant, I’m going to have to burned to death, since it seems you don’t seem to be too worried about the wild beasts!” Polycarp replied, “That’s fine. The fire you threaten me with can’t burn for too long. It will soon go out. But what you don’t realize is that the flames of the future judgment and everlasting torment are waiting for the ungodly. Stop wasting my time and just bring out whatever you have in mind to do.”

12. It was amazing to see that throughout all of this, Polycarp was beaming with courage, joy, and grace. When the governor saw that Polycarp wasn’t dismayed at all by any of his threats, he was at a complete loss. He then motioned to the crier to shout out three times, “Polycarp has admitted he is a Christian!” When he did, both the heathens and the Jews in the arena started to furiously scream out, “That teacher of Asia is the father figure of the Christians! He’s the destroyer of the gods who is teaching people to not sacrifice to or worship them!” Others screamed out for Philip, the president of the Asian Conference and the games to unleash a lion on Polycarp, but he said he wasn’t allowed to do it because he had already officially declared the beast-fighting closed. And so, it was determined Polycarp was to be burnt alive. Polycarp’s vision was going to be fulfilled.

13. It only took a short time for the crowd to get everything ready. They went about collecting kindling from various shops, and the Jews, in particular, went out of their way to help get it all to the arena. When the pile was set up, Polycarp took off his outer cloak, his belt, and tried to unfasten his shoes. He had a hard time doing this though, because he was so old. His friends had routinely helped him because they venerated him and his saintly life so much, even before the martyrdom. Polycarp was then fastened with irons to the pyre. When some said that he should be nailed to the pyre too, he said, “Leave me alone. Christ will give me the strength to endure the flames. He’ll give me strength not to flinch either. You don’t have to nail me up.”

14. And so, they tied him to the stake instead. With his hands tied behind his back, he looked like a noble sacrificial ram taken from the flock—a readied burnt-offering for God. Polycarp then looked up to heaven and said, “O Lord God Almighty, you are the Father of your blessed and beloved Son Jesus Christ, the one through whom we have been given knowledge of you. You are the God of angels, powers, the entire creation, and all the generations of the righteous who live in your sight. Thank you for giving me this day and hour to be counted among the martyrs, to share the cup of your Anointed One, and to resurrect to the new life of the ages—body and soul, in the immortality of the Holy Spirit. Receive me into your presence today as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, just as you appointed and showed me ahead of time. It is now coming to pass, for you are the God of all truth. In you there is nothing false. I bless and glorify you, through our eternal High Priest in heaven, your beloved Son Jesus Christ! Glory be to you, to your Son, and to the Holy Spirit, now and into the ages of ages! Amen!”

15. As soon as Polycarp said, “Amen,” the men set fire to the pyre and a great sheet of flame blazed up. And then we who were there saw something amazing. We are fortunate to have been spared, so we can tell you about it. The fire seemed to take the shape of a hollow chamber, sort of like the sail of a ship when the wind fills it, and it formed a wall of fire around the martyr’s body! There he was, right in the middle of it, not so much like a human being burned in flames, but more like a loaf of bread in the oven, or like a chunk of gold or silver being refined in a furnace! And then we started to smell some kind of delicious fragrance, like the smell of incense or some other kind of spice.

16. When they realized that Polycarp’s body wasn’t burning, they ordered one of the executioners to go up and stab him with his spear. When he did, Polycarp’s soul departed his body like a dove and his blood gushed out and extinguished the flames. Everyone there was astonished at what they had just seen. Polycarp, the bishop of the Church at Smyrna, our very own teacher who was both apostle and prophet for us, was dead. Every word he ever uttered has come, or will come, to its fulfillment.

17. As it turned out, the Evil One clearly saw that not only had Polycarp been crowned with immortality and received his prize, but that everyone there had seen it happen, he decided to try to make sure we could not get access to Polycarp’s remains, something we really wanted to have, so we could have a share of the hallowed relics. Satan put into the head of Nicetas (the father of police commissioner Herod and the brother of Alce) to ask the governor not to release the body. He said, “These Christians might stop worshipping the crucified one and start worshipping this guy!” The Jews there who saw us trying to draw out Polycarp’s body also asked the governor to not release the body too. How any of them could even think for a minute that we would ever abandon Christ who died for the salvation of every soul in the world—the Sinless One dying for sinners—and worship another, is beyond me! Christ is the Son of God. He is the one we worship. The martyrs, who have imitated the Lord in their death, we love them and give the respect and honor they deserve for their matchless devotion to our King and Teacher. We pray that we can someday share their company and their discipleship.

18. Yet when the centurion saw that the Jews were just looking to rile people up, he had the body confiscated and burned up, leaving only the bones. So, when it was done, we still went and gathered up his bones—we consider them to be more precious than jewels or fine gold—and laid them to rest in an undisclosed location. We Christians still assemble at that spot when we can to celebrate the birthday of Polycarp’s martyrdom. It serves both as a commemoration of all those who have triumphed before, and as training and preparation for anyone who might be called to be crowned with martyrdom in the future.

19. With that, our account of the martyrdom of Polycarp the Blessed is done. If you include the martyrs from Philadelphia, he was the twelfth one to meet a martyr’s death in Smyrna, although he is the only one to be singled out for universal remembrance. Even in heathen circles, he is the one they talk about. Not only was he a famous doctor, but he was also a martyr without peer. It is his martyrdom that Christians hope to imitate, since it was in such accord with the Gospel of Christ. Polycarp’s determination was more than a match for the governor’s injustice, and it won him his immortal crown. He is now in the fully enjoying the company of the Apostles and the entire hosts of heaven, giving glory to the Almighty God and Father and uttering praises to our Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of our souls, the Master of our bodies, and the Shepherd of the Universal Church throughout the world.

20. Now, we know you wanted a more exhaustive account of everything that happened, but this brief summary is all we were able to do. Brother Marcian actually wrote it. When you finish reading it, copy it and send it to Christian communities further away, so they can glorify the Lord who chooses certain men from among His community to be saints who imitate Him in death.

Now, to Him whose abounding grace is able to bring us all into His Heavenly kingdom through His only-begotten Son Jesus Christ, be all glory, honor, might, and majesty, into the ages of ages. Send our greetings to all the people of God. All those here send their greetings as well, as does Polycarp's family.

Your scribe,
Evarestus

Postscript

21. Our blessed Polycarp died his martyr's death at 2 o'clock in the afternoon, on the Greater Sabbath, on February 23rd, AD 155. The official responsible for his arrest was Herod, the high priest and president of the Asian Conference was Philip of Tralles, and the proconsul was Statius Quadratus. But make no mistake, the ruling king was Jesus Christ, who reigns into the ages of ages! To him be given all glory, honor, majesty, and an eternal throne from generation to generation. Amen.

22. We bid you all farewell, brothers and sisters. Be sure to order your lives according to the word of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, with whom be glory to God the Father and the Holy Spirit for the salvation of His holy elect, even as the Blessed Polycarp bore witness to with his martyrdom. May we all be found following in his footsteps in the Kingdom of Jesus Christ.

Copyists' Notes

(i) The above account has been transcribed by Gaius from the papers of his contemporary Irenaeus, who was a disciple of Polycarp. I, Socrates, have not made this copy here in Corinth from Gaius' manuscripts. Grace be with you all.

(ii) I, Pionius, have made a fresh transcript of those earlier writings. I found them after the Blessed Polycarp had revealed their whereabouts in a vision, as I will explain later. Time had reduced them to almost tatters, but I gathered them together carefully, in the hope that the Lord Jesus Christ may gather me, along with His elect, into His heavenly kingdom. To Him, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be glory into the ages of ages. Amen.