

Studies in Patrology VI

St. Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna

St. POLYCARP was born in 70 A D to a Christian family who received its faith from the very apostles of Lord Jesus Christ. During these apostolic times, the young Church lived and was strengthened by visits of the apostles and their disciples. They had already warned of difficult times in their epistles, calling the Christians too that *"you say also rejoice and be glad when His glory is revealed"* (1 Peter: 13).

St. POLYCARP was chosen by the bishop as his personal secretary; and later, when he was forty years old became the bishop of Smyrna. There, he remained for 86 years of his life, faithfully serving the Church.

St. POLYCARP was one of the most illustrious of the apostolic fathers, who, being among the immediate disciples of the apostles, received instructions from their mouths, and inherited of them the spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ in a degree so much the more eminent as they lived nearer the fountain head. St. POLYCARP embraced Christianity very young, about the year 80 AD was a disciple of the apostles, in particular of St. John the Evangelist, and was constituted by him Bishop of Smyrna, probably before his banishment to Patmos in 96 AD.

St. POLYCARP seems to have been the angel or Bishop of Smyrna who was commended above all the bishops of Asia by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself in the Apocalypse, and the only one without a reproach. Our Savior encouraged him under his poverty, tribulation, and persecutions, especially the calumnies of the Jews, called him rich in grace, and promised him the crown of life by martyrdom (Revelation 2:8-10). This view was very common among the scholars St Jerome, Irenaus, Papias, and Origen within their commentaries on the Holy Book of Revelation in the Early Church.

This saint was respected by the faithful to a degree of veneration. He formed many holy disciples, among whom were St. Irenaeus and Papias. When Florinus, who had often visited St. POLYCARP, had broached certain heresies, St. Irenaeus wrote to him as follows: **"These things were not taught you by the bishops who preceded us. I could tell you the place where the blessed POLYCARP sat to preach the Word of God. It is yet present to my mind with what gravity he everywhere came in and went out; what was the sanctity of his deportment, the majesty of his countenance and of his whole exterior, and what his holy exhortations to the people were. I seem to hear him now relate how he conversed with John and many others who had seen Jesus Christ; the words he had heard from their mouths. I can protest before God that if this holy bishop had heard of any error like yours, he would have immediately stopped his ears, and cried out, according to his custom, Good God! That I should be reserved to these times to hear such things! That very instant he would have fled out of the place in which he had heard such doctrine."**

St. Jerome mentions that St. POLYCARP met at Rome the heretic Marcion in the streets, who resenting that the holy bishop did not take that notice of him which he expected, said to him, "Do you not know me, POLYCARP?" "Yes," answered the saint, **"I know you to be the firstborn of Satan."** He had learned this abhorrence of the authors of heresy, who knowingly and willingly adulterate the divine truths, from his master, St. John, who fled out of the bath in which he saw Cerinthus.

St. POLYCARP kissed with respect the chains of the elderly St. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, who passed by Smyrna on the road to his martyrdom, and who recommended to our saint the care and comfort of his distant Church of Antioch, which he repeated to him in a letter from Troas, desiring him to write in his name to those Churches of Asia to which he had not leisure to write himself. St. POLYCARP was the only individual to whom the great Antiochian martyr ever addressed a surviving personal letter. In the following years, St. POLYCARP gathered the letters of St. Ignatius and sent them to others.

St. POLYCARP wrote a letter to the Philippians shortly after, which is highly commended by St. Irenaeus, St. Jerome, St Eusebius, Photius, and others, and is still extant. It is justly admired both for the excellent instructions it contains and for the simplicity and perspicuity of the style, and was publicly read in the church in Asia in St. Jerome's time. In it he calls a heretic, as above, the eldest son of Satan.

About the year 158 he undertook a journey of charity to Rome, to confer with Pope Anicetus about certain points of discipline, especially about the time of celebrating the Glorious Resurrection, for the Asiatic churches kept it on the fourteenth day of the vernal equinoctial moon, as the Jews did, on whatever day of the week it fell; whereas Rome, Egypt, and all the West observed it on the Sunday following. It was agreed that both might follow their custom without breaking the bands of charity. St. Anicetus, to testify his respect, yielded to him the honor of celebrating the Eucharist in his own Church.

St. POLYCARP's Martyrdom:

St. POLYCARP's martyrdom was mentioned in a letter which was soon afterward written by the Christians at Smyrna to the Christians at Philomenius. This letter has come to be called the *Acts of the Martyrdom of Saint POLYCARP*:

In the sixth year of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, Statius Quadratus being proconsul of Asia, a violent persecution broke out in that country, in which the faithful gave heroic proofs of their courage and love of God, to the astonishment of the infidels. When they were torn to pieces with scourges till their very bowels were laid bare, amidst the moans and tears of the spectators, who were moved with pity at the sight of their torments, not one of them gave so much as a single groan, so little regard had they for their own flesh in the cause of God. No kinds of torture, no inventions of cruelty, were forborne to force them to conformity to the pagan worship of the times.

The year St. POLYCARP was martyred, there was a civil celebration in Smyrna, and games were being held at the local amphitheater. A well-known Christian boy named Aereanicus had been martyred, preferring to fight the beasts rather than to follow pagan practices, the alternative given to him. When he had been slain by the animals, the Christians were accused of having brain washed him into doing such a foolish thing as prefer death to a "simple sacrifice". The mob began shouting; "Bring us POLYCARP!"

When St. POLYCARP heard of these events, he was not disturbed, and desired to remain in the city. But the faithful were able to convince him to withdraw to a farm nearby with a few friends. St. POLYCARP prayed night and day, for all men and for the Churches throughout the world. One night while he was praying, St. POLYCARP had a vision, seeing his pillow blazing with flames. He came to his friends and said, "**I must be burned alive.**"

Herod, the Irenarch, or keeper of the peace, whose office it was to prevent misdemeanors and apprehend malefactors, sent horsemen by night to arrest St. POLYCARP. Now, the soldiers who were searching for him arrived at St. POLYCARP's own house, and when they could not find him, they seized two young servant boys. One broke down under their torture and betrayed where the bishop had gone. And late in the evening of that Friday, they rode to the farm. They took the servant boy with them and found St. POLYCARP in bed in the upper room of the small cottage. When he heard of their arrival he went downstairs and talked with them. St. POLYCARP knew why they had come and greeted them. The soldiers became upset that there had been such an uproar and eagerness to arrest such an old man. St. POLYCARP ordered a meal for the band of captors, and asked them to give him an hour or so in order that he might pray. This was granted. The soldiers were astonished to see the bishop pray intently for two hours, remembering the names and the needs of so many of his and the whole church with so much earnestness and devotion that several of those that were come to seize him repented they had undertaken the commission. They set him on an ass, and were conducting him towards the city when he was met on the road by Herod and his father Nicetes, who took him into their chariot, and endeavored to persuade him to a little compliance, saying, "What harm is there in saying Lord Caesar, or even in sacrificing, to escape death?" By the word Lord was meant nothing less than a kind of deity or godhead. The bishop at first was silent, in imitation of our Saviour, but being pressed, he gave them this resolute answer, **"I shall never do what you desire of me."** At these words, taking off the mask of friendship and compassion, they treated him with scorn and reproaches, and thrust him out of the chariot with such violence that his leg was bruised by the fall.

The holy man went forward cheerfully to the place where the people were assembled. Upon his entering it a voice from Heaven was heard by many, **"POLYCARP, be courageous, and act manfully."** He was led directly to the tribunal of the proconsul, who exhorted him to respect his own age, to swear by the genius of Caesar, and to say, "Take away the impious," meaning the Christians. The saint, turning towards the people in the pit, said, with a stern countenance, **"Exterminate the wicked,"** meaning by this expression either a wish that they might cease to be wicked by their conversion to the faith of the Lord Jesus Christ, or this was a prediction of the calamity which befell their city in 177, when Smyrna was overturned by an earthquake, as we read in Dion and Aristides. The proconsul repeated, "Swear by the genius of Caesar, and I discharge you; blaspheme Christ." St. POLYCARP replied, **"I have served him these fourscore and six years, and he never did me any harm, but much good, and how can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour? If you require of me to swear by the genius of Caesar, as you call it, hear my free confession- I am a Christian; but if you desire to learn the Christian religion, appoint a time, and hear me."** The proconsul said, "Persuade the people." The martyr replied, **"I addressed my discourse to you, for we are taught to give due honor to princes as far as is consistent with religion. But the populace is an incompetent judge to justify myself before."** Indeed rage rendered them incapable of hearing him.

The proconsul then assuming a tone of severity, said: "I have wild beasts." **"Call for them,"** replied the saint: **"for we are unalterably resolved not to change from good to evil. It is only good to pass from evil to good."** The proconsul said: "If you contemn the beasts, I will cause you to be burnt to ashes." POLYCARP answered: **"You threaten me with a fire which burns for a short time and then goes out, but are yourself ignorant of the judgment to come, and of the fire of everlasting torments which is prepared for the wicked. Why do you delay? Bring against me what you please."** Whilst he said this and many other things, he appeared in a transport of joy and confidence, and his countenance shone with a certain heavenly grace and pleasant cheerfulness, insomuch that the proconsul himself was struck with admiration. However, he ordered a crier to make public proclamation three times in the middle of the Stadium (as was the Roman custom in capital cases): "POLYCARP hath confessed himself a Christian." At this proclamation the whole multitude of

Jews and Gentiles gave a great shout, the latter crying out, "This is the great teacher of Asia; the father of the Christians; the destroyer of our gods, who preaches to men not to sacrifice to or adore them." They applied to Philip the Asiarch to let loose a lion upon St. POLYCARP. He told them that it was not in his power, because those shows had been closed. Then they unanimously demanded that he should be burnt alive.

Their request was no sooner granted but every one ran with all speed to fetch wood from the baths and shops. The pile being prepared, St. POLYCARP put off his garments, untied his girdle, and began to take off his shoes, an office he had not been accustomed to, the Christians having always striven who should do these things for him, regarding it as a happiness to be admitted to touch him. The wood and other combustibles were heaped all round him.

The executioners would have nailed him to the stake; but he said to them: "**Suffer me to be as I am. He who gives me grace to undergo this fire will enable me to stand still without that precaution.**" They therefore contented themselves with tying his hands behind his back, and in this posture looking up towards Heaven, he prayed as follows: "**O Almighty Lord God, Father of thy beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, by whom we have received the knowledge of thee, God of angels, powers, and every creature, and of all the race of the just that live in thy presence! I bless thee for having been pleased in thy goodness to bring me to this hour, that I may receive a portion in the number of thy martyrs, and partake of the chalice of thy Christ, for the resurrection to eternal life, in the incorruptibleness of the Holy Spirit. Amongst whom grant me to be received this day as a pleasing sacrifice, such a one as thou thyself hast prepared, that so thou majesty accomplish what thou, O true and faithful God! Hast foreshown. Wherefore, for all things I praise, bless, and glorify thee, through the eternal high priest Jesus Christ, thy beloved Son, with whom, to Thee and the Holy Spirit be glory now and for ever. Amen.**"

He had scarce said **Amen** when fire was set to the pile, which increased to a mighty flame. But behold a wonder, say the authors of these acts, seen by us reserved to attest it to others; the flames forming themselves into an arch, like the sails of a ship swelled with the wind, gently encircled the body of the martyr, which stood in the middle, resembling not roasted flesh, but purified gold or silver, appearing bright through the flames; and his body sending forth such a fragrance that we seemed to smell precious spices. The blind infidels were only exasperated to see his body could not be consumed, and ordered a spearman to pierce him through, which he did, and such a quantity of blood issued out of his left side as to quench the fire.

The malice of the devil ended not here: he endeavored to obstruct the relics of the martyr being carried off by the Christians; for many desired to do it, to show their respect to his body. Therefore, by the suggestion of Satan, Nicetes advised the proconsul not to bestow it on the Christians, lest, said he, abandoning the crucified man, they should adore St. POLYCARP: the Jews suggested this, "**Not knowing,**" say the authors of the Acts of Martyrs, "**that we can never forsake Christ, nor adore any other, though we love the martyrs, as his disciples and imitators, for the great love they bore their king and master.**" The centurion, seeing a contest raised by the Jews, placed the body in the middle, and burnt it to ashes. "**We afterwards took up the bones,**" say they, "**more precious than the richest jewels or gold, and deposited them decently in a place at which may God grant us to assemble with joy, to celebrate the birthday of the martyr.**" It was at two o'clock in the afternoon, which the authors of the Acts of Martyrs call the Eighth Hour, in the year 166, that St. POLYCARP received his crown, according to Tillemont; but in 169, according to Basnage. His tomb is still shown

with great veneration at Smyrna, in a small chapel. St. Irenaeus speaks of St. POLYCARP as being of an uncommon age.

The Epistle of St. POLYCARP to the Philippians

The Epistle of St. POLYCARP to the Philippians, is the only one among those which he wrote that has been preserved, is a standing proof of the apostolic spirit with which he was animated, and of that profound humility, perfect meekness, burning charity, and holy zeal, of which his life was so admirable an example. The beginning is an effusion of spiritual joy and charity with which he was transported at the happiness of their conversion to God, and their fervor in divine love. His extreme abhorrence of heresy makes him immediately fall upon that of the Docetae against which he arms the faithful, by clearly demonstrating that the Lord Jesus Christ was truly made man, died, and rose again: in which his terms admirably express his most humble and affectionate devotion to our Divine Redeemer, under these great mysteries of love. Besides walking in truth, he takes notice, that to be raised with the Lord Jesus Christ in glory, we must also do His Will, keep all His commandments, and love whatever He loved; refraining from all fraud, avarice, detraction, and rash judgment; repaying evil with good, forgiving and showing mercy to others that we ourselves may find mercy. **"These things,"** says he, **"I write to you on justice, because you incited me; for neither I, nor any other like me, can attain to the wisdom of the blessed and glorious Paul, into whose epistles if you look, you may raise your spiritual fabric by strengthening faith, which is our mother, hope following, and charity towards God, Christ, and our neighbor preceding us. He who has charity is far from all sin."** The saint gives short instructions to every particular state, then adds, **"Every one who hath not confessed that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh, is antichrist; and who hath not confessed the suffering of the cross, is of the devil; and who hath drawn the oracles of the Lord to his passions, and hath said that there is no resurrection nor judgment, he is the oldest son of Satan."** He exhorts to watching always in prayer, lest we be led into temptation; to be constant in fasting, persevering, joyful in hope, and in the pledge of our justice, which is Christ Jesus, imitating his patience; for, by suffering for his name, we glorify him. To encourage them to suffer, he reminds them of those who had suffered before their eyes: Ignatius, Zozimus, and Rufus, and some of their own congregation, **"who are now,"** says our saint, **"in the place which is due to them with the Lord, with whom they also suffered."**