

# **The Martyrdom of Polycarp**

The Encyclical Epistle of the Church at Smyrna,  
Concerning the Martyrdom of St. Polycarp

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The Church of God which sojourns in Smyrna, to the Church of God which sojourns in Philomelium, and to all the sojournings of the Holy Catholic Church in every place. "Mercy, peace and love" of God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ be multiplied.

## 1 – Introduction

We write to you, brethren, the story of the martyrs and of the blessed Polycarp, who put an end to the persecution by his martyrdom as though adding the seal. For one might almost say that all that had gone before happened in order that the Lord might show to us from above a martyrdom in accordance with the Gospel. For he waited to be betrayed as also the Lord had done, that we too might become his imitators, "not thinking of ourselves alone, but also of our neighbours." For it is the mark of true and steadfast love, not to wish that oneself may be saved alone, but all the brethren also.

## 2 – The sufferings of the Martyrs

Blessed then and noble are all the martyrdoms which took place according to the will of God, for we must be very careful to assign the power over all to God. For who would not admire their nobility and patience and love of their Master? For some were torn by scourging until the mechanism of their flesh was seen even to the lower veins and arteries, and they endured so that even the bystanders pitied them and mourned. And some even reached such a pitch of nobility that none of them groaned or wailed, showing to all of us that at that hour of their torture the noble martyrs of Christ were absent from the flesh, or rather that the Lord was standing by and talking with them. And paying heed to the grace of Christ they despised worldly tortures, by a single hour purchasing everlasting life. And the fire of their cruel torturers had no heat for them, for they set before their eyes an escape from the fire which is everlasting and is never quenched, and with the eyes of their heart they looked up to the good things which are preserved for those who have endured, 'which neither ear hath heard nor hath eye seen, nor hath it entered into the heart of man,' but it was shown by the Lord to them who were no longer men but already angels.

And in the same way also those who were condemned to the beasts endured terrible torment, being stretched on sharp shells and buffeted with other kinds of various torments, that if it were possible the tyrant might bring them to a denial by continuous torture. For the devil used many wiles against them.

## 3 – Germanicus

But thanks be to God, for he had no power over any. For the most noble Germanicus encouraged their fears by the endurance which was in him, and he fought gloriously with the wild beasts. For when the Pro-Consul wished to persuade him and bade him have pity on his youth, he violently dragged the beast towards himself, wishing to be released more quickly from their unrighteous and lawless life. So after this all the crowd, wondering at the nobility of the God-loving and God-fearing people of the Christians, cried out: "Away with the Atheists; let Polycarp be searched for."

## 4 – Quintus

But one, named Quintus, a Phrygian lately come from Phrygia, when he saw the wild beasts played the coward. Now it was he who had forced himself and some others to come forward of their own accord. Him the Pro-Consul persuaded with many entreaties to take the oath and offer sacrifice. For this reason, therefore, brethren, we do not commend those who give themselves up, since the Gospel does not give this teaching.

## 5 – Polycarp's retreat to the country

But the most wonderful Polycarp, when he first heard it, was not disturbed, but wished to remain in the city; but the majority persuaded him to go away quietly, and he went out quietly to a farm, not far distant from the city, and

stayed with a few friends, doing nothing but pray night and day for all, and for the Churches throughout the world, as was his custom. And while he was praying he fell into a trance three days before he was arrested, and saw the pillow under his head burning with fire, and he turned and said to those who were with him: "I must be burnt alive."

## 6 – His betrayal

And when the searching for him persisted he went to another farm; and those who were searching for him came up at once, and when they did not find him, they arrested young slaves, and one of them confessed under torture. For it was indeed impossible for him to remain hid, since those who betrayed him were of his own house, and the police captain who had been allotted the very name, being called Herod, hastened to bring him to the arena that he might fulfil his appointed lot by becoming a partaker of Christ, while they who betrayed him should undergo the same punishment as Judas.

## 7 – The arrival of the police, Their reception by Polycarp, His prayer

Taking the slave then police and cavalry went out on Friday about supper-time, with their usual arms, as if they were advancing against a robber. And late in the evening they came up together against him and found him lying in an upper room. And he might have departed to another place, but would not, saying, "the will of God be done." So when he heard that they had arrived he went down and talked with them, while those who were present wondered at his age and courage, and whether there was so much haste for the arrest of an old man of such a kind. Therefore he ordered food and drink to be set before them at that hour, whatever they should wish, and he asked them to give him an hour to pray without hindrance. To this they assented, and he stood and prayed - thus filled with the grace of God - so that for two hours he could not be silent, and those who listened were astounded, and many repented that they had come against such a venerable old man.

## 8 – His arrival in Smyrna – And in the arena

Now when he had at last finished his prayer, after remembering all who had ever even come his way, both small and great, high and low, and the whole Catholic Church throughout the world, the hour came for departure, and they set him on an ass, and led him into the city, on a "great Sabbath day." And the police captain Herod and his father Niketas met him and removed him into their carriage, and sat by his side trying to persuade him and saying: "But what harm is it to say, 'Lord Caesar,' and to offer sacrifice, and so forth, and to be saved?" But he at first did not answer them, but when they continued he said: "I am not going to do what you counsel me." And they gave up the attempt to persuade him, and began to speak fiercely to him, and turned him out in such a hurry that in getting down from the carriage he scraped his shin; and without turning round, as though he had suffered nothing, he walked on promptly and quickly, and was taken to the arena, while the uproar in the arena was so great that no one could even be heard.

## 9 – Polycarp's examination

Now when Polycarp entered into the arena there came a voice from heaven: "Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man." And no one saw the speaker, but our friends who were there heard the voice. And next he was brought forward, and there was a great uproar of those who heard that Polycarp had been arrested. Therefore when he was brought forward the Pro-Consul asked him if he were Polycarp, and when he admitted it he tried to persuade him to deny, saying: "Respect your age," and so forth, as they are accustomed to say: "Swear by the genius of Caesar, repent, say: 'Away with the Atheists'"; but Polycarp, with a stern countenance looked on all the crowd of lawless heathen in the arena, and waving his hand at them, he groaned and looked up to heaven and said: "Away with the Atheists." But when the Pro-Consul pressed him and said: "Take the oath and I let you go, revile Christ," Polycarp said: "For eighty and six years have I been his servant, and he has done me no wrong, and how can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"

## 10

But when he persisted again, and said: "Swear by the genius of Caesar," he answered him: "If you vainly suppose that I will swear by the genius of Caesar, as you say, and pretend that you are ignorant who I am, listen plainly: I am a Christian. And if you wish to learn the doctrine of Christianity fix a day and listen." The Pro-Consul said: "Persuade the people." And Polycarp said: "You I should have held worthy of discussion, for we have been taught to render honour, as is meet, if it hurt us not, to princes and authorities appointed by God. But as for those, I do not count them worthy that a defence should be made to them."

## 11 – The Pro-consul's threats

And the Pro-Consul said: "I have wild beasts. I will deliver you to them, unless you repent." And he said: "Call for them, for repentance from better to worse is not allowed us; but it is good to change from evil to righteousness." And he said again to him: "I will cause you to be consumed by fire, if you despise the beasts, unless you repent." But Polycarp said: "You threaten with the fire that burns for a time, and is quickly quenched, for you do not know the fire which awaits the wicked in the judgment to come and in everlasting punishment. But why are you waiting? Come, do what you will."

## 12 – The anger of the Jews

And with these and many other words he was filled with courage and joy, and his face was full of grace so that it not only did not fall with trouble at the things said to him, but that the Pro-Consul, on the other hand, was astounded and sent his herald into the midst of the arena to announce three times: "Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian." When this had been said by the herald, all the multitude of heathen and Jews living in Smyrna cried out with uncontrollable wrath and a loud shout: "This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our Gods, who teaches many neither to offer sacrifice nor to worship." And when they said this, they cried out and asked Philip the Asiarch to let loose a lion on Polycarp. But he said he could not legally do this, since he had closed the Sports. Then they found it good to cry out with one mind that he should burn Polycarp alive, for the vision which had appeared to him on his pillow must be fulfilled, when he saw it burning, while he was praying, and he turned and said prophetically to those of the faithful who were with him, "I must be burnt alive."

## 13 – The preparations for burning him

These things then happened with so great speed, quicker than it takes to tell, and the crowd came together immediately, and prepared wood and faggots from the work-shops and baths and the Jews were extremely zealous, as is their custom, in assisting at this. Now when the fire was ready he put off all his clothes, and loosened his girdle and tried also to take off his shoes, though he did not do this before, because each of the faithful was always zealous, which of them might the more quickly touch his flesh. For he had been treated with all respect because of his noble life, even before his martyrdom. Immediately therefore, he was fastened to the instruments which had been prepared for the fire, but when they were going to nail him as well he said: "Leave me thus, for He who gives me power to endure the fire, will grant me to remain in the flames unmoved even without the security you will give by the nails."

## 14 – His last prayers

So they did not nail him, but bound him, and he put his hands behind him and was bound, as a noble ram out of a great flock, for an oblation, a whole burnt offering made ready and acceptable to God; and he looked up to heaven and said: "O Lord God Almighty, Father of thy beloved and blessed Child, Jesus Christ, through Whom we have received full knowledge of thee, the God of Angels and powers, and of all creation, and of the whole family of the righteous, who live before thee! I bless thee, that Thou hast granted me this day and hour, that I may share, among the number of the martyrs, in the cup of thy Christ, for the Resurrection to everlasting life, both of soul and body in

the immortality of the Holy Spirit. And may I, to-day, be received among them before Thee, as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, as Thou, the God who lies not and is truth, hast prepared beforehand, and shown forth, and fulfilled. For this reason I also praise Thee for all things, I bless Thee, I glorify Thee through the everlasting and heavenly high Priest, Jesus Christ, thy beloved Child, through whom be glory to Thee with him and the Holy Spirit, both now and for the ages that are to come, Amen."

## 15 – The fire is lighted

Now when he had uttered his Amen and finished his prayer, the men in charge of the fire lit it, and a great flame blazed up and we, to whom it was given to see, saw a marvel. And we have been preserved to report to others what befell. For the fire made the likeness of a room, like the sail of a vessel filled with wind, and surrounded the body of the martyr as with a wall, and he was within it not as burning flesh, but as bread that is being baked, or as gold and silver being refined in a furnace. And we perceived such a fragrant smell as the scent of incense or other costly spices.

## 16 – Polycarp's death

At length the lawless men, seeing that his body could not be consumed by the fire, commanded an executioner to go up and stab him with a dagger, and when he did this, there came out a dove, and much blood, so that the fire was quenched and all the crowd marvelled that there was such a difference between the unbelievers and the elect. And of the elect was he indeed one, the wonderful martyr, Polycarp, who in our days was an apostolic and prophetic teacher, bishop of the Catholic Church in Smyrna. For every word which he uttered from his mouth both was fulfilled and will be fulfilled.

## 17 – The treatment of the corpse

But the jealous and envious evil one who resists the family of the righteous, when he saw the greatness of his martyrdom, and his blameless career from the beginning, and that he was crowned with the crown of immortality, and had carried off the unspeakable prize, took care that not even his poor body should be taken away by us, though many desired to do so, and to have fellowship with his holy flesh. Therefore he put forward Niketas, the father of Herod, and the brother of Alce, to ask the Governor not to give his body, "Lest," he said, "they leave the crucified one and begin to worship this man." And they said this owing to the suggestions and pressure of the Jews, who also watched when we were going to take it from the fire, for they do not know that we shall not ever be able either to abandon Christ, who suffered for the salvation of those who are being saved in the whole world, the innocent for sinners, or to worship any other. For him we worship as the Son of God, but the martyrs we love as disciples and imitators of the Lord; and rightly, because of their unsurpassable affection toward their own King and Teacher. God grant that we too may be their companions and fellow-disciples.

## 18 – The Christians take the ashes

When therefore the centurion saw the contentiousness caused by the Jews, he put the body in the midst, as was their custom, and burnt it. Thus we, at last, took up his bones, more precious than precious stones, and finer than gold, and put them where it was meet. There the Lord will permit us to come together according to our power in gladness and joy, and celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom, both in memory of those who have already contested, and for the practice and training of those whose fate it shall be.

## 19 – Conclusion

Such was the lot of the blessed Polycarp, who though he was, together with those from Philadelphia, the twelfth martyr in Smyrna, is alone especially remembered by all, so that he is spoken of in every place, even by the heathen. He was not only a famous teacher, but also a notable martyr, whose martyrdom all desire to imitate, for it

followed the Gospel of Christ. By his endurance he overcame the unrighteous ruler, and thus gained the crown of immortality, and he is glorifying God and the Almighty Father, rejoicing with the Apostles and all the righteous, and he is blessing our Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour of our souls, and Governor of our bodies, and the Shepherd of the Catholic Church throughout the world.

## 20

You, indeed, asked that the events should be explained to you at length, but we have for the present explained them in summary by our brother Marcion; therefore when you have heard these things, send the letter to the brethren further on, that they also may glorify the Lord, who takes his chosen ones from his own servants. And to him who is able to bring us all in his grace and bounty, to his heavenly kingdom, by his only begotten Child, Jesus Christ, be glory, honour, might, and majesty for ever. Greet all the saints. Those who are with us, and Evarestus, who wrote the letter, with his whole house, greet you.

## 21 – The date

Now the blessed Polycarp was martyred on the second day of the first half of the month of Xanthicus, the seventh day before the kalends of March, a great sabbath, at the eighth hour. And he was arrested by Herod, when Philip of Tralles was High Priest, when Staius Quadratus was Pro-Consul, but Jesus Christ was reigning for ever, to whom be glory, honour, majesty and an eternal throne, from generation to generation, Amen.

## 22 – Notes by a later scribe

We bid you God-speed, brethren, who walk according to the Gospel, in the word of Jesus Christ (with whom be glory to God and the Father and the Holy Spirit), for the salvation of the Holy Elect, even as the blessed Polycarp suffered martyrdom, in whose footsteps may it be granted us to be found in the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. Gaius copied this from the writing of Irenaeus, a disciple of Polycarp, and he lived with Irenaeus, and I, Socrates, wrote it out in Corinth, from the copies of Gaius. Grace be with you all. And I, again, Pionius, wrote it out from the former writings, after searching for it, because the blessed Polycarp showed it me in a vision, as I will explain in what follows, and I gathered it together when it was almost worn out by age, that the Lord Jesus Christ may also gather me together with his elect into his heavenly kingdom, to whom be glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever, Amen.

## 23 – Another conclusion from the Moscow manuscript

We bid you God-speed, brethren, who walk according to the Gospel, in the word of Jesus Christ (with whom be glory to God and the Father and the Holy Spirit), for the salvation of the Holy Elect, even as the blessed Polycarp suffered martyrdom, in whose footsteps may it be granted us to be found in the Kingdom of Jesus Christ.

This account Gaius copied from the writings of Irenaeus, and he also had lived with Irenaeus, who was a disciple of the holy Polycarp. For this Irenaeus, at the time of the martyrdom of the bishop Polycarp, was in Rome, and taught many, and many most excellent and correct writings are extant, in which he mentions Polycarp, saying that he had been his pupil, and he ably refuted every heresy, and he also handed on the ecclesiastical and catholic rule, as he had received it from the saint. And he also says this that once Marcion, from whom come the so-called Marcionites, met the holy Polycarp and said: "Recognise us, Polycarp," and he said to Marcion, "I do recognise you, I recognise the first-born of Satan." And this is also recorded in the writings of Irenaeus, that at the day and hour when Polycarp suffered in Smyrna, Irenaeus, who was in the city of Rome, heard a voice like a trumpet saying: "Polycarp has suffered martyrdom."

From these papers of Irenaeus, then, as was stated above, Gaius made a copy, and Isocrates used in Corinth the copy of Gaius.

And again I, Pionius, wrote from the copies of Isocrates, according to the revelation of the holy Polycarp, after searching for them, and gathering them together when they were almost worn out from age, that the Lord Jesus Christ may also gather me into his Heavenly Kingdom together with his Elect. To him be glory, with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever, Amen.