The Martyrdom of Polycarp
Excerpt from *“When the Church was Young”* by Dr. Marcellino D’Ambrosio

Along the route of Ignatius and his ten leopards lay a bustling port town named Smyrna. Upon their arrival there, the bishop and his captors found waiting for them a delegation of Christians led by Polycarp, the bishop of that place. The church in this city, located sixty miles north of Ephesus, was an important apostolic church, one of the seven churches of the Apocalypse (see Revelation 1:11). Peter and Paul had died a few years before Polycarp was born in A.D. 69 or 70. But the apostle John was still alive in nearby Ephesus into the late 90s, and we are told that Polycarp was acquainted with him and was perhaps even appointed bishop by him.53

Of Ignatius’s seven letters, only one was addressed to an individual instead of a church. That individual happened to be Polycarp. Ignatius says, “While I was impressed with your godly mind, which is fixed, as it were, on an immovable rock, I am more than grateful that I was granted the sight of your holy face. God grant that I may never forget it!”54

*Ignatius’s Friend from Smyrna*

Polycarp was a relatively young bishop at the time he met Ignatius, probably about forty years old. In Ignatius’s advice to his younger colleague, he reveals the intimate, personal acquaintance a bishop was expected to have with his flock in this era, reminiscent of what we see in the letters of Paul: “Take a personal interest in everyone you talk to, just as God does…. Seek out everybody by name.”55 Ignatius, who is called by the nickname “the God-Inspired,” also shows us in his letter to Polycarp that the charisms or supernatural gifts of the Spirit mentioned on several occasions by Paul (e.g., 1 Corinthians 12:4ff and Romans 12:6–8) are still a normal part of Christian life. Far from any opposition between the official and the charismatic in the Church, a bishop is expected to be a prophet. “Ask that you may have revelations of what is unseen. In that way you will lack nothing and have an abundance of every gift.”56

Ignatius’s ship departed Troas for Neapolis, modern-day Naples. But on the way it stopped in Philippi. So Polycarp wrote a letter to the church in Philippi after Ignatius’s departure, addressing some current problems there, as Ignatius had addressed issues in Polycarp’s church, and asking them for news about Ignatius. The style of the letter shows us that Polycarp is not a scholar but rather a simple man who is practical and to the point. He humbly admits that he is not well versed in the Scriptures (meaning at this time the Old Testament), but he shows a wide acquaintance with many writings of the apostles and evangelists that ultimately became part of the New Testament.

*Away with the Atheists!*

Forty years after the encounter of these two bishops, persecution flared up in Smyrna. It appears that Quintus, a hothead from Phrygia, induced a few others to join him in voluntarily surrendering to the authorities. This may well have been the spark that ignited the fire of persecution. Polycarp sought to hide himself in the countryside but was apprehended after a Christian broke under torture and told the authorities of his whereabouts. Fortunately, the entire story of his capture––his interrogation and his martyrdom—was written down and preserved by Pionus, a member of Polycarp’s flock. *The Letter of the Church in Smyrna to the Church in Philomelium,* commonly known as *The* *Martyrdom of Polycarp* is, after the account of Stephen’s death in Acts, the oldest account of a Christian martyrdom that has come down to us.

As he tells the story, Pionus emphasizes the meaning of martyrdom as an imitation of Christ and a communion with his passion. He notes how, in every respect, Polycarp’s ordeal echoes the ordeal of his Lord Jesus Christ and is “a martyrdom conformable to the gospel.”57 Polycarp waited to be betrayed, just as the Lord did. He was captured on a Friday, the day Christ died. Like Jesus, he too prayed for his captors and his persecutors. In fact, when the authorities arrived at the farmhouse where he was staying, he got their permission to have an hour to pray before departing. While they waited for him to finish his prayer, Polycarp arranged for food and drink to be served to them.

The chief of police happened to be named Herod. As they rode to the arena together, the cynical Herod, who evidently did not take very seriously the divinity of the emperor, said: “What harm is there to say ‘Lord Caesar’

and to offer incense and all that sort of thing, and to save yourself?” Polycarp politely declined to follow his advice. When they arrived, the arena was filled with a boisterous crowd. Christians, because they refused to worship pagan gods, were known as atheists and condemned as such. He was brought up to be interrogated in the presence of the crowd, and the proconsul said: “Have respect for your age, Polycarp. Swear by the fortune of Caesar; change your mind; say, ‘Away with the Atheists!’” So Polycarp, pointing to the pagan crowd in the stands, said “Away with the Atheists!” The proconsul was not amused. He continued: “Take the oath and I will release you. Curse Christ!”

Polycarp responded: “Eighty-six years I have served him, and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?… If you vainly suppose that I shall swear by the fortune of Caesar, as you say, and pretend that you do not know who I am, listen plainly: I am a Christian. But if you desire to learn the teaching of Christianity, appoint a day and give me a hearing.”

The proconsul replied, “I have wild beasts. I shall throw you to them, if you do not change your mind.”

Polycarp boldly retorted, “Call them.”58

But the proconsul had a problem. The night had grown late, and all the beasts had been locked securely in their cages. The crowd suggested an impromptu method of execution in which they could participate. People began running to nearby shops to fetch firewood. They demanded Polycarp be burned alive.

*Martyrdom as a Charism*

We must stop here and take note of an earlier occurrence recounted by Pionus. Three days before his arrest, the bishop “had a vision and saw his pillow blazing with fire, and turning to those who were with him, he said, ‘I must be burned alive.’ ”59 So Polycarp had followed Ignatius’s advice to pray for revelations, and the Lord had answered his prayer.

But the Lord had also given Polycarp another charism in addition to visions. Pionus tells us that the Phrygian who surrendered himself voluntarily ultimately buckled in fear and offered the required sacrifice. Polycarp, on the other hand, held his ground and was even exuberant after being condemned to death. “He was inspired with courage and joy, and his face was full of grace, so that not only did it not fall with dismay at the things said to him, but on the contrary, the proconsul was astonished.”60 Martyrdom is a charism, a grace (the Greek word being *charis*), a gift of supernatural love powered by the Holy Spirit. It cannot be something one presumptuously volunteers for, since it is impossible to accomplish by the power of natural zeal. The crowds at Roman games saw people die every day before their eyes. But not like this. The death of a martyr was not an ordinary execution or even like the courageous death of a fallen gladiator. It was a visible testimony to something most people had never witnessed before––the flame of divine love. This is why public martyrdoms like Polycarp’s, far from stamping out Christianity, stimulated its growth through all sectors of Roman society.

Polycarp was tied to the stake, and Pionus recorded for us the prayer he uttered before the execution began:

Lord God Almighty, Father of thy beloved and blessed Servant Jesus Christ, through whom we have received full knowledge of thee, “the God of angels and powers and all creation” and of the whole race of the righteous who live in thy presence: I bless thee, because thou hast deemed me worthy of this day and hour, to take my part in the number of the martyrs, in the cup of thy Christ, for “resurrection to eternal life” of soul and body in the immortality of the Holy Spirit; among whom may I be received in thy presence this day as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, just as thou hast prepared and revealed beforehand and fulfilled, thou that art the true God without any falsehood. For this and for everything I praise thee, I bless thee, I glorify thee, through the eternal and heavenly High Priest, Jesus Christ, thy beloved Servant, through whom be glory to thee with him and Holy Spirit both now and unto the ages to come. Amen.61

This prayer is remarkable, for it is almost certainly an adaptation of the prayer that Polycarp had prayed over the Eucharist on each Lord’s Day. It is valuable because it is one of the earliest examples of such a prayer and because it also makes clear that both martyrdom and the Eucharist have something in common––they both put us in touch with the one sacrifice of Christ and invite us to enter into that sacrifice.

A marvelous thing happened when the fire was lit. The flames, instead of burning Polycarp, fled outward, away from his body, forming a sort of chamber around him “like a ship’s sail filled by the wind.” Suddenly, the arena was filled with a sweet aroma, “as the breath of incense.” Since he could not apparently be killed by fire, someone was dispatched to run him through with a dagger. Such “a great quantity of blood came forth, so that the fire was quenched and the whole crowd marveled that there should be such a difference between the unbelievers and the elect.”62

*Relics and the Cult of the Martyrs*

After Polycarp’s death, the Christians wanted to take possession of his unburned body. But the pagans and Jews in the crowd objected. They were afraid that the Christians would “abandon the crucified and begin worshiping this one.”63

Here the author pauses the story to make a very important point. He says that such a concern could only arise because these people were “ignorant that we could never forsake Christ…nor could we ever worship any other. For we worship this One as Son of God, but we love the martyrs as disciples and imitators of the Lord, deservedly so, because of their unsurpassable devotion to their own King and Teacher.”64

This shows clearly that the cult of the martyrs and saints goes back to the earliest days of the Church, but that there was a very clear distinction in the minds of the early Christians between the adoration due to God alone and the honor due to his disciples. For them, these were not mutually exclusive, but flowed naturally one from the other.

To prevent the Christians from taking the body, it was burned. But somehow the Christians managed to gather up his ashes:

So we later took up his bones, more precious than costly stones and more valuable than gold, and laid them away in a suitable place. There the Lord will permit us, so far as it is possible, to gather together in joy and gladness to celebrate the day of his martyrdom as a birthday, in memory of those athletes who have gone before, and to train and make ready those who are to come hereafter.65

This helps explain the image that so many of us have today of the early Christians hiding from the Romans in the catacombs. Yes, Christian were often found in the catacombs of Rome and other places such as Smyrna, but not because they were hiding. Rather, they went there to celebrate the Eucharist over the bones of the martyrs on the anniversary of their martyrdom. They spent lots of time in the catacombs because there was an ever-increasing number of birthdays to celebrate as persecution dragged on for nearly three hundred years.

We also find here a witness to the ancient origins of the veneration of relics. When Christianity became legal (through the Roman Emperor Constantine’s Edict of Milan in 313AD) and churches began to be built, some of the remains of the martyrs were brought into the churches. Sometimes they were interred under the main altar, or churches were built so that the main altar was situated directly above the ancient tomb of a martyr (e.g., St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome). In other circumstances, the relics of the martyrs were actually inserted into the main altar. This traditional practice of embedding relics of the martyrs and the saints in the altar of a church survives today in the Orthodox and Catholic churches. It can all be traced back to the days when, in the catacombs, the tombs of the martyrs themselves served as Eucharistic altars.66

Finally, this document, which we can date with relative certainty to A.D. 155 or 156, demonstrates where the whole liturgical calendar of saints’ days67 comes from. Pionus identifies February 23 as the date of Polycarp’s martyrdom. Ever since the year of his death, Polycarp has been honored each year by Orthodox, Catholic, and Anglican churches throughout the world on this very same day.

Besides Peter and Paul, Polycarp and Ignatius, many others died as martyrs. After the first three centuries of persecution had passed, exceptionally holy and inspiring Christians continued to be born into eternal glory, but mostly through natural death. The remains of these saints came to be venerated in the same way as the remains of the martyrs. And the commemoration of each of these heroes usually occurred, following the pattern of the martyrs, on the day of their death, their eternal birthday. The various birthday celebrations of the saints, superimposed over the great seasons associated with Christ’s birth and resurrection, form the liturgical calendars used by many Christian churches today.

So devotion to saints, saints’ days, and relics are not pagan practices imported into Christianity by Constantine. Nor are they an invention of medieval superstition. Rather *The* *Martyrdom of Polycarp* shows that these practices go back to the earliest ages of the Church, the days of the apostles and martyrs.

53. See Iraneus, *Against Heresies,* III.3.4. and Jerome, *Illustrious Men,* 17.

54. *Polycarp* 1:1.

55. *Polycarp* 1:3; 4:2.

56. *Polycarp* 2:2.

57. *The* *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 1:1.

58. *The* *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 9–10.

59. *The* *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 5:2.

60. *The* *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 12.

61. *The* *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 14.

62. *The* *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 16.

63. *The* *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 17:2.

64. *The* *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 17:2–3.

65. *The* *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 18:2–3.

66. See also *Revelation* 6:9.

67. Known as the sanctoral cycle in the Roman Catholic Church.