

Polycarp of Smyrna Apostolic Father

Documentation of the life of Polycarp is slim and existing sources are often difficult to interpret. We know that he was an early Bishop of Smyrna, one of the seven churches addressed in the Book of Revelation (Rev. 2:8-11). (Today, this city is Izmir, the third largest city in Turkey.) He is considered an “Apostolic Father” because he was of the generation who knew personally those who were alive during the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and conveyed the gospel message taught by the Apostles to their own and the generation following. Polycarp is remembered, in particular, because the account of his martyrdom was recorded in detail by witnesses who were present.

Our best evidence says that when Nympha was bishop of Smyrna, Callisto, a wealthy Christian woman known for her charity, had a dream telling her to go to a particular city gate where she would find a little boy whom she was to rescue. When she went to that gate she found Polycarp, a slave boy in the hands of two men willing to sell him. She paid for his freedom, took him to her home, and raised him as her own. It is unknown when he was born, but circumstantial evidence places the date no later than AD 69.

As Polycarp grew to manhood she made him overseer of her household, legally adopted him and made him heir to her estate. She educated him as a Christian. We know that he had access to and scrupulously studied Matthew, Mark, Luke; Acts, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 1 and 2 Peter, 1 John, and Jude, because he alluded to or quoted each in the sole letter he wrote that still exists. Moreover, he had the benefit of learning directly from and/or corresponding with the first generation of Christians. Polycarp’s student Irenaeus wrote that he was a student of the Apostle John.

As he matured in faith, Nympha took Polycarp under his wing. As a young man he was ordained a deacon. As such he was the bishop’s assistant in administrative affairs. His two primary responsibilities were to make sure everything was in order for worship services, and to ensure that the sick and poor were cared for. He often used his inheritance to meet those needs. In addition, he was the bishop’s scribe and taught catechumens.

When his hair began to turn gray, he was ordained an elder (aka “presbyter”). As such he was a member of the governing body of the Smyrna church, and could be called upon to preside at the Lord’s Supper—this position would become that of the office of priest in the Catholic/Orthodox Church. Because of his piety, beneficence, deportment and perspicacity of Christian teaching, upon the death of Nympha, he was elected bishop of Smyrna. Among neighboring bishops who journeyed to his consecration as bishop was the Apostle John. This must have occurred before AD 107, the latest date assigned to the death of the oldest of Jesus’ twelve disciples.

Sometime between AD 107 and 116, Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, traveled through Smyrna escorted by Roman soldiers—along with some fellow Christians—on his way to

Rome, where he suffered martyrdom. Ignatius is also considered an Apostolic Father who had known and heard the gospel from John. Ignatius and Polycarp had undoubtedly known each other for some time. Ignatius not only persuaded his escort to allow him to write letters to other churches as they went on their way, but also to pause in Smyrna while he conferred with Polycarp. (The laxity of his escort probably was because they became aware that Ignatius was non-violent and faced his execution without fear.) Continuing on their way, Ignatius visited the church in Philippi. After his departure, the Philippi church wrote to Polycarp requesting copies of all Ignatius' letters. Polycarp responded by sending these letters to the Philippians with a cover letter, carried by his scribe Crescens and his sister.

In his letter to the Philippians, Polycarp quotes and alludes to the seventeen books aforementioned, which he assumes his readers had accepted as true to the gospel—the complete twenty-seven books of the New Testament will not be canonized by the Catholic/Orthodox Church until the 4th century—applying their message to the specific challenges of the Philippian church.

He began by proclaiming the gospel: "...our Lord Jesus Christ, who endures death for our sins, 'whom God raised, having loosened the bands of the grave' ...for you know that it is 'by grace you are saved, not of your works,' but by the will God through Jesus Christ." Further on he admonishes "...build up upon the faith given to you, 'which is the mother of us all,' while hope follows after and love goes before—love toward God and Christ and toward our neighbor."

He then cautions specifically husbands, wives, widows, deacons, young men, virgins, and, lastly, presbyters against worldly desires and to follow Jesus' example. In addressing presbyters, he informs us of what his expectations of that office were: "...be compassionate, merciful toward all men; 'turning back those who wander, visiting the all the infirm, not neglecting a widow, or an orphan, or a poor man'...abstaining from...hasty judgement, knowing that we are all debtors of sin."

Polycarp then addresses the two major concerns of the Catholic/Orthodox Church: "[L]et us not forsake the vein doing of many and their false teachings, and turn unto the word which has delivered us from the beginning...." And: "I exhort you all to be obedient unto the word of righteousness and to practice all endurance, which you also saw with your own eyes in the blessed Ignatius, Zosimus, and Rufus, but also others among yourselves, and in Paul himself, and the rest of the apostles."

Before his salutation, Polycarp expressed his exceeding grief for Valens and his wife, since Valens had been a presbyter in the Philippian church, but had betrayed their trust. He admonishes the Philippians, "hold not such as enemies but restore them as frail and erring members, that you may save the whole body of you. For so doing, you do edify one another."

His parting words were: "Pray for the saints. Pray also for kings, potentates, and princes, and for those who persecute and hate you and for all enemies of the cross that your fruit be manifested to all, and you may be perfect in Him."

Even in old age Polycarp visited the newly elected Bishop of Rome. Anicetus. He was the Roman church's eleventh bishop since the time of the Apostle Peter, and the seventh since Clement of Rome (d. AD 97), who was the last Apostolic Father living at that place. Because it was tantamount that every bishop continued passing on the Apostolic Tradition (i.e., the true gospel message), each new bishop had to be consecrated by other consecrated bishops (i.e., the "apostolic succession" tradition), Polycarp would have considered his presence especially important for the consecration of such a prestigious bishop as that of Rome. Despite their warm relationship and agreement on most issues, Polycarp and Anicetus could not come to terms on one matter; thus, the first visible fissure between the Greek-speaking eastern and Latin-speaking western Catholic/Orthodox Church occurred. Each tradition had different means for determining the date for the celebration of Easter. Polycarp could not convince Anicetus that the eastern tradition was the apostolic practice.

After returning from Rome, Polycarp found himself in the midst of the persecution of the church of Smyrna. At the time there was an imperial law which made atheism a crime; everyone was required to give homage to the capricious supernatural powers, i.e., the gods, including the emperor, that determined the fates of humanity, otherwise the gods would be provoked to curse the empire. If a person was accused of being a Christian and refused to make a sacrifice to the emperor, he was to be executed. If he sacrificed, he was released. Proconsuls were to use their judgement in enforcing the law. In no case should Christians be hunted down. Therefore, execution of the law varied considerably throughout the empire, and was usually implemented only when complaints he could not ignore were made against persons known as being Christian.*

The persecution in Smyrna began when one Germanicus, an old man, was thrown to the beasts, and several others, including some who were brought from Philadelphia, were put to death at Smyrna. At first Polycarp intended to stay in the city and brave martyrdom. As anti-Christian hysteria grew, the pleas of his flock led him to retreat into the surrounding country, where he passed his time in prayer. While at that place, he had an extraordinary dream that he would be burned at the stake. When it was discovered that soldiers had been sent to apprehend him, he agreed to be move to another retreat. However, that place was discovered by torturing a child who knew where he was. Consequently, Polycarp decided to be apprehended rather than allow anyone else to suffer for his sake, saying, "The will of God be done." When the soldiers arrived, he received them calmly and courteously and offered a prayer that affected some of his captors with remorse. The officer into whom he was delivered, tried to persuade him, apparently through pity, to offer divine honors and sacrifice to the emperor. But his insistent refusals to do so changed his guards' attitude from pity to anger, and they violently threw him from the carriage in which they were riding.

On entering the amphitheater, the proconsul, Statius Quadratus, like others; moved by his appearance, exhorted him to consider his advanced age, and comply with the

requirements of government: “Swear by the fortune of Caesar, recant, and cry out, ‘Away with the godless.’” The proconsul again urged him, “Swear by Caesar’s fortune, and I will release you. Revile Christ.” “Eighty-six years I have served him,” was his reply, “and he never did me wrong; how then can I revile my King and my Savior?” Threats of being thrown to wild beasts, and of being committed to the flames, failed to move him. His bold avowal that he was a Christian provoked the wrath of the crowd. “This man,” they shouted, “is the teacher of impiety, the father of Christians, the man that does away with our gods; who teaches many not to sacrifice to nor worship the gods.” They demanded that he be thrown to the wild beasts, and when the Asiarch, Philip of Tralles, who presides over the games which were going on, responded by declaring that the combat with wild beasts was over, the crowd demanded that he be burned alive.

The demand was complied with, and the populace, in their rage, soon collected the logs and fagots from the baths and workshops for the pile. The old man ungirded himself, laid aside his garments, and took his place in the midst of the fuel. When they prepared to secure him with nails to the stake, he said, “Let me remain as I am: for he who enables me to brave the fire will so strengthen me that, without the nails, I shall, unmoved, endure its fierceness.” After he offered a short, beautiful prayer, the fire was kindled, but a high wind drove the flame to one side, so that he was roasted rather than burned. The executioner was ordered to dispatch him with a sword. On striking him with it, so great a quantity of blood flowed from the wound as to quench the flames, which were, however, resuscitated, in order to consume his lifeless body. His ashes were collected by his Christian flock, and deposited in a suitable place of internment.

The traditional year of his martyrdom is AD 155. The Lutheran Church commemorates the life of: Polycarp of Smyrna on February 23; Ignatius of Antioch on October 17; Clement of Rome on November 23; and Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon on June 28.

*Christians were also accused of being unpatriotic because they refused to serve in the army or the government and refused to attend public blood-sport spectacles. They were accused of immorality because they broke up family hierarchies and said to sacrifice human beings to eat their flesh and drink their blood. They were also accused of being subversive by forming an unsanctioned organization and gathering secretly. Moreover, they experienced wide-spread discrimination and could be targeted by anyone who had a grudge against someone who was thought to be a Christian.

Before the legalization of Christianity in AD 312, except for four short periods—from one to five years—of intense empire-wide persecutions, persecutions were sporadic and local. In fact, between AD 260 and 305 there were no persecutions of Christians.

Sources: Harry R. Boer, *A Short History of the Early Church*, Eerdmans, 1976; Alexander Roberts, et. al., eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Christian Literature Publishers, 1885; “Polycarp,” *McClintock and Strong Biblical Cyclopaedia*, 1880, www.biblicalcyclopedia.com