

The Martyrdom of Polycarp

Modern English version · SermonIndex

The church of Smyrna · c. AD 155–160

A letter from the church at Smyrna telling how its bishop Polycarp was arrested and put to death. It is one of the earliest accounts of a Christian martyrdom outside the New Testament.

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Greeting

Gr. The church of God living as a stranger in Smyrna, to the church of God living as a stranger in Philomelium, and to all the communities of the holy and universal church living as strangers in every place: may the mercy, peace, and love of God the Father and of our Lord Jesus Christ be multiplied to you.

Translator's note. “Living as a stranger” translates paroikousa, a word for someone who lives in a place as a resident foreigner. The related noun paroikia (here translated “communities”) is the source of the English word “parish.” Philomelium was a town in Phrygia, in central Asia Minor. “Catholic” here means “universal.” This is one of the earliest uses of the phrase “catholic church” in Christian writing; Ignatius (To the Smyrnaeans 8.2) uses it earlier.

Chapter 1

1.1 We are writing to you, brothers, about the martyrs and about the blessed Polycarp, who ended the persecution as if he had set a seal on it by his own martyrdom. Almost everything that came before happened so that the Lord might show us from heaven a martyrdom that follows the pattern of the Gospel.

1.2 Polycarp waited to be handed over, as the Lord also did, so that we too might become imitators of him, thinking not only of ourselves but also of our neighbors. For it is the mark of true and steady love to wish for the salvation not only of oneself but of all the brothers.

Chapter 2

2.1 All martyrdoms that happen according to the will of God are blessed and noble. For we must be careful, as people who fear God, to give God the authority over everything.

2.2 Who would not marvel at their courage, their endurance, and their devotion to their Master? Some were torn by whips so badly that the inner workings of the flesh, down to the veins and arteries, could be seen. They endured it so that even the bystanders felt pity and wept. Others reached such a height of courage that none of them cried out or groaned. They showed all of us that in that hour of torture these brave witnesses of Christ were away from the body, or rather that the Lord was standing beside them and talking with them.

2.3 Fixing their attention on the grace of Christ, they despised the tortures of this world, buying eternal life at the cost of a single hour. The fire of their cruel torturers felt cold to them, for they kept before their eyes the escape from the eternal fire that is never put out. With the eyes of their hearts they looked up to the good things kept for those who endure, things “which no ear has heard and no eye has seen and which have not entered the human heart.” These were shown to them by the Lord, for they were no longer human beings but already angels.

Translator’s note. The quotation is from [1 Corinthians 2:9](#), which in turn draws on [Isaiah 64:4](#).

Scripture: [1 Corinthians 2:9](#)

2.4 In the same way, those who were condemned to the wild beasts endured terrible punishments. They were laid on sharp shells and tortured in many other ways, so that if possible the tyrant might force them to deny Christ by relentless torture. For the devil devised many schemes against them.

Translator’s note. The Greek word *kērykas* usually means “heralds,” but it can also mean a kind of sea snail, the trumpet shell. “Sharp shells” is the most likely sense here, but the meaning is not certain.

Chapter 3

3.1 But thanks be to God, the devil did not win against all of them. The very brave Germanicus strengthened the fearful ones by his own endurance, and he fought the beasts with distinction. The governor tried to persuade him and urged him to take pity on his youth. But Germanicus dragged the beast toward himself by force, because he wanted to be freed more quickly from their unjust and lawless life.

Translator’s note. The “governor” (*anthypatos*) is the Roman proconsul of Asia, who held authority over executions.

3.2 At this, the whole crowd was amazed at the courage of the God-loving and God-fearing people of the Christians, and shouted, “Away with the atheists! Find Polycarp!”

Translator’s note. Christians were called “atheists” because they refused to worship the gods of the city and the emperor. Polycarp will later turn the shout back on the crowd (9.2).

Chapter 4

4.1 One man, named Quintus, a Phrygian who had recently come from Phrygia, lost his nerve when he saw the beasts. He was the one who had pushed himself and some others to come forward voluntarily. The governor begged him many times and persuaded him to swear the oath and offer sacrifice. For this reason, brothers, we do not approve of those who hand themselves over, since that is not what the Gospel teaches.

Translator’s note. This is an early and clear statement that Christians should not seek out martyrdom. Compare [Matthew 10:23](#).

Chapter 5

5.1 The most admirable Polycarp was not troubled when he first heard the news, and wanted to stay in the city. But most people persuaded him to slip away. He left for a small farm not far from the city and stayed there with a few companions. Night and day he did nothing but pray for everyone and for the churches throughout the world, as was his habit.

5.2 While he was praying, three days before he was arrested, he had a vision. He saw his pillow burning with fire. He turned and said to those with him, “I must be burned alive.”

Chapter 6

6.1 When the search for him continued, he moved to another small farm. The searchers arrived at once, and when they did not find him they seized two young slaves. One of them confessed under torture.

6.2 It was not possible for him to stay hidden, since those who betrayed him were members of his own household. The police chief had been given by lot the very same name, for he was called Herod. He was eager to bring Polycarp into the stadium, so that Polycarp could complete his own appointed lot by sharing in Christ, and those who betrayed him could suffer the punishment of Judas himself.

Translator’s note. Herod’s name recalls the Herod of the Gospels (compare [Luke 23:7-11](#)). The author draws a deliberate parallel between Polycarp’s arrest and the arrest of Jesus. There is a betrayer from his own household, a police chief named Herod, and an arrest late in the evening

by men armed as if against a robber (7.1).

Chapter 7

7.1 They took the young slave with them, and on the day of Preparation, around suppertime, a police squad and mounted men went out with their usual weapons, as though going after a robber. Late in the evening they came upon him together. He was lying down in an upstairs room. He could have gone to another place from there, but he refused, saying, “May the will of God be done.”

Translator’s note. “The day of Preparation” is Friday, the day before the Sabbath. Compare [Mark 15:42](#) and [Matthew 26:55](#), and Jesus’ prayer in [Matthew 6:10](#) and [Luke 22:42](#).

Scripture: [Acts 21:14](#)

7.2 When he heard they had arrived, he came down and talked with them. Those who were there were amazed at his age and his calm. They wondered why there had been such a hurry to arrest so old a man. At once he ordered food and drink to be set before them, as much as they wanted. He asked them to give him an hour to pray undisturbed.

7.3 They allowed it. He stood and prayed, so full of God’s grace that for two hours he could not stop. Those who heard him were astonished, and many regretted that they had come out against such a godly old man.

Chapter 8

8.1 When at last he finished his prayer, he had remembered everyone who had ever crossed his path, small and great, well-known and unknown, and the whole catholic (universal) church throughout the world. Then the time came to leave. They set him on a donkey and brought him into the city. It was a great Sabbath.

Translator’s note. A “great Sabbath” may be a Sabbath that fell at a festival; compare [John 19:31](#), where a Sabbath is called a “high day.” The account itself (ch. 21) gives a date equal to February 23. The year is debated and is usually placed in the mid-150s or the 160s AD.

8.2 The police chief Herod and his father Nicetes met him. They moved him into their carriage, sat beside him, and tried to persuade him, saying, “What harm is there in saying ‘Caesar is Lord,’ and offering sacrifice and the rest, and so saving yourself?” At first he did not answer them. When they kept pressing, he said, “I am not going to do what you advise.”

Translator’s note. “Lord Caesar” (Greek Kyrios Kaisar) was an acclamation of loyalty to the emperor. For Christians, calling Caesar “Lord” as an act of religious homage clashed with the confession “Jesus is Lord” ([Romans 10:9](#); [1 Corinthians 12:3](#)).

8.3 When they failed to persuade him, they spoke harsh words to him and pushed him out in a hurry, so that he scraped his shin as he got down from the carriage. He did not turn around, as though he had suffered nothing, but walked on eagerly and quickly. He was led to the stadium, where the noise was so great that no one could be heard.

Chapter 9

9.1 As Polycarp entered the stadium, a voice came from heaven: “Be strong, Polycarp, and act like a man.” No one saw who spoke, but those of our people who were there heard the voice. Then he was brought forward, and there was a great uproar when people heard that Polycarp had been arrested.

Translator’s note. The same Greek words (“ischue kai andrizou”) appear in the Greek Old Testament in God’s charge to Joshua, “Be strong and courageous” ([Joshua 1:6](#), 9; compare 1:7; [Deuteronomy 31:7](#), 23). Compare also [1 Corinthians 16:13](#).

9.2 When he was brought forward, the governor asked him whether he was Polycarp. When he said yes, the governor tried to persuade him to deny his faith. He said, “Have respect for your age,” and other things they usually say, such as, “Swear by the fortune of Caesar,” “Repent,” and “Say: Away with the atheists.” Polycarp looked with a stern face at the whole crowd of lawless pagans in the stadium. He waved his hand at them, groaned, looked up to heaven, and said, “Away with the atheists.”

Translator’s note. Pagans called Christians “atheists” because they refused to worship the gods. Polycarp turns the crowd’s slogan back on the crowd itself.

9.3 The governor kept pressing him: “Swear, and I will release you. Curse Christ.” Polycarp said, “For eighty-six years I have served him, and he has never done me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”

Translator’s note. The eighty-six years may be Polycarp’s age or the time since his baptism. If it is his age, he was born around AD 70–80, depending on the year of his death. Irenaeus knew Polycarp in his youth. He wrote that Polycarp had been taught by apostles ([Against Heresies 3.3.4](#)) and had known John (Letter to Florinus, in Eusebius, [Church History 5.20.6](#)).

Chapter 10

10.1 The governor kept insisting: “Swear by the fortune of Caesar.” Polycarp answered, “If you imagine that I will swear by the fortune of Caesar, as you say, and pretend not to know who I am, then listen plainly: I am a Christian. And if you want to learn the teaching of Christianity, set a day and hear it.”

10.2 The governor said, “Persuade the people.” Polycarp said, “You I would count worth answering. We have been taught to give rulers and authorities appointed by God the honor due to them, so long as it does us no harm. But as for those people, I do not think they deserve a defense from me.”

Translator’s note. Compare [Romans 13:1–7](#) and [1 Peter 2:13–17](#).

Chapter 11

11.1 The governor said, “I have wild beasts. I will throw you to them unless you repent.” Polycarp said, “Call them. For us, repentance from better to worse is impossible. But it is good to change from what is evil to what is right.”

11.2 The governor said to him again, “If you despise the beasts, I will have you burned up with fire, unless you repent.” Polycarp said, “You threaten me with a fire that burns for a little while and is soon put out. You do not know about the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment, which is kept for the ungodly. But why are you waiting? Do what you want.”

Translator’s note. Compare [Matthew 25:41](#), 46, where Jesus speaks of “the eternal fire” and “eternal punishment.”

Chapter 12

12.1 As he said these and many other things, he was filled with courage and joy, and his face was full of grace. Not only did his face not fall in dismay at what was said to him, but on the contrary the governor was astonished. He sent his herald into the middle of the stadium to announce three times: “Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian.”

12.2 When the herald had said this, the whole crowd of pagans and Jews living in Smyrna shouted with uncontrollable rage and a loud voice: “This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our gods, the one who teaches many not to sacrifice or worship.” As they said this, they shouted and asked Philip the Asiarch to let a lion loose on Polycarp. He said he was not allowed to, since he had already closed the animal hunts.

Translator’s note. The Asiarch was a leading official of the province who paid for public games. The title is also found in [Acts 19:31](#). Whether the Asiarch was the same as the high priest of the imperial cult is debated, but this account later calls Philip high priest (21.1).

12.3 Then they decided to shout together that Polycarp should be burned alive. For the vision he had been shown of his pillow had to be fulfilled. While praying, he had seen his pillow burning, and he turned to the faithful who were with him and said prophetically, “I must be burned alive.”

Translator's note. The vision is described in 5.2, where Polycarp sees his pillow being consumed by fire three days before his arrest.

Chapter 13

13.1 All this happened faster than it can be told. The crowds immediately gathered logs and brushwood from the workshops and the baths, with the Jews especially eager to help, as is their custom.

Translator's note. The phrase “as is their custom” is the author’s own comment. It probably reflects tension between Christians and Jews in Smyrna at the time. It should not be read as a fair description of Jewish people in general.

13.2 When the fire was ready, he took off all his outer clothes, loosened his belt, and tried to take off his shoes as well. He had not done this before, because each of the faithful always rushed to be the first to touch his skin. Even before his martyrdom he had been honored with every respect because of his good way of life.

13.3 At once the fittings prepared for the pyre were put around him. When they were about to nail him as well, he said, “Leave me as I am. The one who gives me strength to endure the fire will also give me strength to stay on the pyre without flinching, without any need for the security of your nails.”

Chapter 14

14.1 So they did not nail him but tied him. He put his hands behind him and was bound like a fine ram chosen from a great flock, ready as an offering, a burnt sacrifice prepared and acceptable to God. He looked up to heaven and said: “Lord God Almighty, Father of your beloved and blessed servant Jesus Christ, through whom we have received knowledge of you, God of angels and powers and all creation, and of the whole family of the righteous who live in your presence:

Translator's note. The Greek word *pais* (“servant” or “child”) is used of Jesus here and in 14.3 and 20.2. It is the same word used in [Acts 3:13](#) and 4:27 and recalls the servant of [Isaiah 42](#) and 52–53. The offering language recalls [Genesis 22](#) and [Leviticus 1](#).

14.2 I bless you because you have counted me worthy of this day and hour, to receive a share among the number of the martyrs, in the cup of your Christ, for the resurrection to eternal life of both soul and body in the incorruption of the Holy Spirit. May I be received among them in your presence today as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, just as you, the God who does not lie and is true, prepared it beforehand, showed it beforehand, and now have fulfilled it.

Translator's note. “The cup of your Christ” recalls [Mark 10:38–39](#) and [Matthew 20:22–23](#), where Jesus asks his disciples whether they can drink

his cup.

14.3 For this and for everything I praise you, I bless you, I glorify you, through the eternal and heavenly high priest, Jesus Christ, your beloved servant, through whom, with him and the Holy Spirit, be glory to you both now and in the ages to come. Amen.”

Translator’s note. This prayer ends with one of the earliest known Trinitarian doxologies, and its formal style may reflect how prayer was spoken in worship at Smyrna.

Chapter 15

15.1 When he had said the “Amen” and finished the prayer, the men in charge of the fire lit it. A great flame blazed up, and we saw a marvel, those of us who were allowed to see it. We were kept alive to tell the others what happened.

15.2 The fire took the shape of an arch, like the sail of a ship filled with wind, and formed a wall around the martyr’s body. He was in the middle of it, not like burning flesh but like bread being baked, or like gold and silver being refined in a furnace. We also smelled a sweet fragrance, like incense or some other precious spice.

Translator’s note. Compare [Daniel 3](#), where the three young men are in the fire without being burned.

Chapter 16

16.1 At last, when the lawless men saw that his body could not be consumed by the fire, they ordered an executioner to go up and stab him with a dagger. When he did, a dove came out, along with so much blood that it put out the fire. The whole crowd was amazed that there was such a difference between the unbelievers and the chosen.

Translator’s note. The Greek manuscripts include the dove, but Eusebius leaves it out when he quotes this passage. Many scholars suspect a scribal corruption. One proposal is that the words read “around the hilt” (peristyraka) and were miscopied as “dove” (peristera). Lake keeps the dove in his text.

16.2 The admirable martyr Polycarp was one of these chosen. In our own times he was an apostolic and prophetic teacher and bishop of the universal church in Smyrna. Every word that came from his mouth was fulfilled and will be fulfilled.

Chapter 17

17.1 But the jealous, envious, and evil one, the enemy of the family of the righteous, saw how great his martyrdom was and how blameless his life had been from the beginning. He saw that Polycarp had been crowned with the crown of immortality and had

won a prize that could not be disputed. So he worked to prevent us from taking even his poor body, though many of us wanted to do it and to share in his holy flesh.

17.2 So he prompted Nicetes, the father of Herod and brother of Alce, to appeal to the magistrate not to give us the body. “Otherwise,” he said, “they will abandon the crucified one and begin to worship this man.” They said this at the urging and insistence of the Jews, who also kept watch when we were about to take him from the fire. They did not know that we could never abandon Christ, who suffered for the salvation of the whole world of those being saved, the blameless one for sinners. Nor could we ever worship anyone else.

Translator’s note. Herod is the police captain who arrested Polycarp (6.2). A woman named Alce is greeted by Ignatius in his letters to the Smyrnaeans (13.2) and to Polycarp (8.3). She may be the same person.

17.3 For we worship this one, since he is the Son of God, but the martyrs we love as disciples and imitators of the Lord, and rightly so, because of their unsurpassed devotion to their own King and Teacher. May we also be their partners and fellow disciples.

Chapter 18

18.1 When the centurion saw the dispute stirred up by the Jews, he placed the body in the middle and burned it, as was their custom.

Translator’s note. The Greek does not say whose custom is meant. It probably refers to the Roman practice of burning bodies.

18.2 Afterward we gathered his bones, which are more valuable than precious stones and more tested than gold, and laid them in a suitable place.

18.3 There, as far as we are able, the Lord will allow us to gather in joy and gladness and celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom, in memory of those who have already competed, and to train and prepare those who will do so in the future.

Translator’s note. The “birthday” (genethlion) is the day of the martyr’s death, understood as his birth into eternal life. This passage is usually regarded as the earliest clear evidence of a church planning a yearly commemoration of a martyr on the day of his death.

Chapter 19

19.1 That is the story of the blessed Polycarp. He was the twelfth martyr in Smyrna, counting those from Philadelphia, yet he alone is especially remembered by everyone, so that even the pagans talk about him everywhere. He was not only a distinguished teacher but also an outstanding martyr, whose martyrdom everyone longs to imitate because it followed the Gospel of Christ.

19.2 By his endurance he overcame the unjust ruler and so received the crown of immortality. Now he rejoices with the apostles and all the righteous, glorifies God the almighty Father, and blesses our Lord Jesus Christ, savior of our souls, helmsman of our bodies, and shepherd of the universal church throughout the world.

Translator's note. "The unjust ruler" is most likely the devil, whom the letter elsewhere presents as the real opponent of the martyrs. Some readers take it to mean the Roman proconsul.

Chapter 20

20.1 You asked us to give you a fuller account of what happened, but for now we have sent only a summary through our brother Marcion. When you have learned these things, send the letter on to the brothers farther away, so that they too may glorify the Lord, who makes his choices from among his own servants.

Translator's note. "You" are the church at Philomelium, to whom the letter is addressed. This Marcion is otherwise unknown. He is not the famous heretic Marcion mentioned in the alternative ending.

20.2 To the one who is able to bring us all by his grace and gift into his heavenly kingdom, through his only-begotten servant Jesus Christ, be glory, honor, power, and greatness forever. Greet all the saints. Those with us greet you, as does Evarestus, who wrote this letter, with his whole household.

Translator's note. "Servant" translates the Greek *pais*, which can mean either "child" or "servant." In [Acts 3:13](#) and 4:27 Jesus is likewise called God's *pais*.

Chapter 21

21.1 The blessed Polycarp was martyred on the second day of the month Xanthicus, seven days before the Kalends of March, on a great Sabbath, at the eighth hour. He was arrested by Herod, when Philip of Tralles was high priest and Statius Quadratus was proconsul, but Jesus Christ was reigning forever. To him be glory, honor, greatness, and an eternal throne from generation to generation. Amen.

Translator's note. Lucius Statius Quadratus is thought to have been proconsul of Asia in the mid-150s, so Polycarp's death is usually dated to 155 or 156 AD. The exact year depends on how his term is reckoned. Eusebius placed the martyrdom later, under Marcus Aurelius, and some scholars still argue for a date in the 160s.

Chapter 22

22.1 We wish you well, brothers, as you walk by the word of Jesus Christ according to the Gospel. With him be glory to God the Father

and to the Holy Spirit, for the salvation of the holy chosen ones, just as the blessed Polycarp bore witness. May it be granted to us to be found following in his footsteps in the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

Translator's note. Section 22.1 is a closing farewell. Sections 22.2-3 are notes added by later copyists tracing how the text was handed down. Many scholars think chapters 21-22 were not part of the original letter. Another form of the copyists' notes, found in the Moscow manuscript, is given below as "Alternative ending."

22.2 Gaius, who had lived alongside Irenaeus, copied this from the writings of Irenaeus, a disciple of Polycarp. I, Socrates, wrote it out in Corinth from Gaius's copies. Grace be with you all.

22.3 I, Pionius, then wrote it out again from the previous copy, after searching for it. The blessed Polycarp had revealed it to me in a vision, as I will explain below. I gathered it up when it was almost worn out by age, so that the Lord Jesus Christ may also gather me with his chosen ones into his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.

Translator's note. The "Pionius" named here may be the Pionius who was martyred at Smyrna around 250 AD, but this is not certain. "As I will explain below" probably refers to the Life of Polycarp that is attributed to Pionius, which many scholars date to the fourth century.

Alternative ending

Alt. 2 Gaius copied this from the writings of Irenaeus. Gaius had also lived alongside Irenaeus, who was a disciple of the holy Polycarp.

Alt. 3 This Irenaeus was in Rome at the time of the martyrdom of bishop Polycarp and taught many people. Many excellent and sound writings of his survive, in which he mentions Polycarp, saying he learned from him. He thoroughly refuted every heresy, and he passed on the church's universal rule of faith just as he received it from the saint.

Translator's note. Irenaeus speaks of having heard Polycarp in his youth in Against Heresies 3.3.4 and in his letter to Florinus, quoted by Eusebius (Church History 5.20). The claim that he was in Rome when Polycarp died is found only in this note.

Alt. 4 He also says this: Marcion, from whom the so-called Marcionites come, once met the holy Polycarp and said, "Recognize us, Polycarp." Polycarp answered him, "I do recognize you. I recognize the firstborn of Satan."

Translator's note. Irenaeus tells this story in Against Heresies 3.3.4. In his own letter to the Philippians (7.1), Polycarp uses the same phrase, "firstborn of Satan," for anyone who twists the Lord's words and denies the resurrection and the judgment.

Alt. 5 It is also reported in Irenaeus's writings that on the day and

hour when Polycarp was martyred in Smyrna, Irenaeus, who was in the city of Rome, heard a voice like a trumpet saying, "Polycarp has been martyred."

Translator's note. This story is not found in any surviving work of Irenaeus.

Alt. 6 From these writings of Irenaeus, as was said above, Gaius made a copy, and Isocrates in Corinth made a copy from Gaius's copies. I, Pionius, then wrote from Isocrates' copies, after searching for them according to the revelation of the holy Polycarp. I gathered them up when they were almost worn out by age, so that the Lord Jesus Christ may also gather me with his chosen ones into his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory, with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, forever and ever. Amen.

Translator's note. The copyist in Corinth is called "Isocrates" here but "Socrates" in 22.2.

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