

In the year 155CE, the blessed Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, suffered death at the hands of the Roman empire. He is recorded as being one of the most important and influential patriarchs of the Christian faith. Polycarp was known by the apostle John, who was a disciple and apostle of Jesus Christ and a witness of his death and resurrection. The martyrdom of Polycarp was written as an epistle from the church in Smyrna, which is modern Ismir, Turkey, to the church in Philomelium, Asia Minor.

The Church of Smyrna's Letter recording the martyrdom of Polycarp is the earliest account of Christian martyrdom (Baldwin, 2004). The only known writing of Polycarp's in existence today is his epistle to the Philippians which was read by the Byzantine Patriarch Photius (Baldwin, 2004). The year of Polycarp's martyrdom is disputed, though the Church of Smyrna's Letter reveals that "He was arrested when Statius Quadratus was the Proconsul, but Jesus Christ was reigning forever," which leaves out the reigning Roman emperor (Baldwin, 2004). Eusebius, the great Christian historian, dated Polycarp's martyrdom to the reign of Marcus Aurelius (161CE – 180CE), in either 166CE or 169CE (Baldwin, 2004). During his reign, Eusebius describes the rule in Asia under Marcus Aurelius as "thrown into confusion by the most savage persecutions in which Polycarp found fulfillment in martyrdom" (Baldwin, 2004).

The Roman games were held in amphitheaters across the entire Roman empire. They were free and open to the public (Thompson, 2002). West of the famous arena called the Colosseum in Rome, more than 252 amphitheaters have been discovered in connection with the games (Thompson, 2002). Masses of people would come to see games of violence, suffering, and dying. "One sees the same fascination in the descriptions of hangings in eighteenth-century England or lynching bees in the United States, which occurred as late as the middle of the

twentieth century. Residents from nearby towns came to enjoy the festivities with picnic lunches and their children who were photographed smiling next to a hanging victim (Thompson, 2002).” The games were sponsored by wealthy benefactors who sought greater status and prestige; the more brutal the game, the more prestigious’ the benefactor (Thompson, 2002). The evening before the game, a public banquet was held that included both gladiators and prisoners that were condemned to die the next day (Thompson, 2002). People would join the banquet out of curiosity to see who was to be killed (Thompson, 2002). Polycarp was not present for the banquet as his arrestors had not yet brought him back to the arena.

The event that pushed the crowd to call for Polycarp’s arrest was fueled by one named Germanicus, who proved his nobility during the Roman games, when the Governor told him to have pity on his youth (Smyrna, 1968). Germanicus responded by dragging one of the wild beasts near to himself “in his desire for a speedier release from the world of unjust and lawless men” (Smyrna, 1968). When Germanicus did this the crowd erupted and shouted, “Down with the infidels! Go and find Polycarp!” (Smyrna, 1968). The crowd was the informer and the proconsul decided to act because of their “unruly” behavior (Thompson, 2002).

Polycarp’s arrest came by night (Cobb, 2014). The crime that Polycarp was charged with was being Christian. In 112CE, the Emperor Trajan set precedent for dealing with Christians, and decreed that Christians should not be hunted down, but rather, if charges were made properly and proven, then punishment must follow (Thompson, 2002). The adequate and acceptable proof used to pardon an accused Christian was the act of worshiping the Roman, “our gods” (Thompson, 2002).

The inhabitants of Smyrna called out for Polycarp’s arrest (Cobb, 2014). The accusation that the crowd shouted was that he was “the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our Gods,

who teaches many neither to offer sacrifice nor worship” (Thompson, 2002). The captain was ordered and hurried to bring Polycarp back to the arena. (Thompson, 2002). Polycarp knew that he was being sought but refused to run away from the city of Smyrna (Cobb, 2014). Three days prior to his arrest, while he was deep in prayer and meditation, he saw in a vision his pillow burst into flames indicating the type of death he would die (Cobb, 2014). Polycarp told those who were near to him that, “It is necessary for me to be burned alive” (Cobb, 2014). He was soon moved to a farm not very far from the city.

When the soldiers found Polycarp, he was asleep in the attic (Smyrna, 1968). “The captain and the soldiers were filled with confusion at the sight of the venerable bishop,” and they wondered why the arrest of such an old man was so urgent (Smyrna, 1968; Thompson, 2002). The bishop, even though it was late at night, ordered them the food and drinks that they wanted and requested an hour undisturbed prayer (Smyrna, 1968). When they consented, Polycarp stood up and prayed out loud for two hours, bringing to remembrance all the people he could recall, and for the world-wide Catholic Church (Smyrna, 1968).

The soldiers, amazed and confused by Polycarp, were “unwillingly executing their commission [and] departed with him at break of day” (Liguori, 1887). While on the way to the arena, the soldiers asked Polycarp what the harm of saying, “‘Ceasar is Lord’ and offering incense and so forth, when it will save your life?” (Smyrna, 1968). The bishop declined which angered the soldiers who were uttering threats, and they kicked him out of the transport, causing Polycarp to scrape his shins after they arrived at the arena (Cobb, 2014; Smyrna, 1968). The old bishop was impervious to this pain and went at a brisk pace to meet the proconsul for his abbreviated trial (Cobb, 2014; Thompson, 2002).

Polycarp was tried without a formal petition or court proceeding in the Roman forum (Thompson, 2002). He was brought straight from his arrest into the stadium at Smyrna where he would be tried, charged, and executed (Thompson, 2002). When Polycarp stepped into the arena the crowd made a great uproar, and a voice from heaven came and said, “Be strong Polycarp, and play the man,” which was witnessed by many (Thompson, 2002; Smyrna, 1968). His entrance into the stadium was that of a condemned man, socially, as the real stars of the show were in the stands, Polycarp was yet a prop for status (Thompson, 2002). The proconsul immediately opened the trial and ordered Polycarp to “respect his age”, and to “swear by the genius of Ceasar, repent, say ‘Away with the infidels.’” (Thompson, 2002; Smyrna, 1968). Polycarp looked up with a darkened countenance and observed the roaring crowd of heathens in the arena (Smyrna, 1968; Thompson, 2002). He waved his hand indicating to whom his comment was directed and said, “Down with the infidels!” (Smyrna, 1968).

Pressing into Polycarp, the proconsul urged him to “take the oath and I’ll let you go, revile Christ.” (Thompson, 2002). Polycarp answered, “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?” (Thompson, 2002). The proconsul was still insistent that the old man make a pledge to Caesar, and Polycarp continued, “If you vainly supposed 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.” (Thompson, 2002). The stubborn proconsul refused the offer and continued to threaten the bishop with wild beasts, to which Polycarp replied, “Call for them, for repentance from better to worse is not allowed us; but it is good to change from evil to righteousness.” (Thompson, 2002). The infuriated proconsul then threatened Polycarp with death by fire, to which he responds, “The fire you threaten me with

cannot go on burning for very long; after a while it goes out. But what you are unaware of are the flames of future judgement and everlasting torment which are in store for the ungodly. Why do you go on wasting time? Bring out whatever you have a mind to.” (Smyrna, 1968).

While the bishop was speaking, “he was overflowing with courage and joy, and his whole countenance was beaming with grace.” (Smyrna, 1968). It was a stalemate between the proconsul and Polycarp, each were unwilling to change what they had a mind to do, and so the proconsul sent the crier to announce that Polycarp admitted to being a Christian (Thompson, 2002; Smyrna, 1968). When the pyre was ready, Polycarp took off his clothes and loosed his undergarment (Baldwin, 2004). Being surrounded by the material for the pyre, men tried to fasten him to it by nails, to which Polycarp responded, “The one who gives me strength to endure the fire will also give me strength to stay quite still on the pyre, even without the precaution of your nails.” (Baldwin, 2004). So, they instead tied his hands behind his back (Baldwin, 2004).

Looking up to heaven, Polycarp prayed his last prayer. He blessed the Lord for judging him worthy of sharing in the cup of Christ and offered himself as a rich and pleasing sacrifice to God (Smyrna, 1968). He acknowledged God’s revelation given to him and praised, blessed, and glorified God through Jesus Christ His beloved Son, and together with the Holy Spirit as One (Baldwin, 2004). And when he said “Amen,” the fire was lit, and an intense flame broke out, and a strange and wonderful thing happened by the witness of many (Baldwin, 2004). The flame became as a dome, surrounding Polycarp, it encircled his body which appeared as gold and silver within a furnace (Baldwin, 2004). A sweet fragrance filled the atmosphere, and not that of burning flesh, but like “incense or some other costly precious gum” (Baldwin, 2004; Smyrna, 1968).

When they came to understand that Polycarp could not be burned alive, one of the spearmen was ordered to go up and stab Polycarp (Smyrna, 1968). When the bishop was stabbed, a dove appeared and flew out along with a profuse amount of blood from the wound (Smyrna, 1968). The blood rushed out and extinguished all the flames which filled the spectators with awe, for what they had witnessed was miraculous (Smyrna, 1968). Though Polycarp was dead, those assembled asked the proconsul to release the body for burning so that the Christians would not worship Polycarp's remains and turn him into their "new" Christ (Smyrna, 1968). When a centurion witnessed the quarrelling, he had the remains publicly fetched and burned (Smyrna, 1968).

The remains of St. Polycarp are still in existence today and can be found in churches in both Rome and Smyrna. In 2013, the remains of St. Polycarp's right hand were stolen from the church in Smyrna but were partially recovered and returned in 2019 (Vlasiou, 2019). The martyrdom of the early church fathers establishes an understanding for what it means to be a true Christian. These accounts hold great value for learning how to live peaceably and how to stand firm in belief without wavering. Polycarp's death in the Roman games put an end to the persecution of Christians in Smyrna (Smyrna, 1968). The day that the martyrdom of St. Polycarp occurred was February 23, which is still celebrated by the church to this day, and was also the day I decided to write about this account (to my surprise).

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