

Letters which St. Polycarp would have read...

Extract from the Epistle of St. Ignatius of Antioch to the Smyrnaeans

“But if [the Lord’s passion was] only in *appearance*, then am I also only in *appearance* bound in chains? Moreover, why did I surrender myself to death, to fire, to the sword, to wild beasts? Well, to be near the sword is to be near God; to be in the claws of wild beasts is to be in the hands of God. Only let it be done in the name of Jesus Christ! I undergo all these things that I may suffer together with Him, He who became the perfect man gives me strength.”

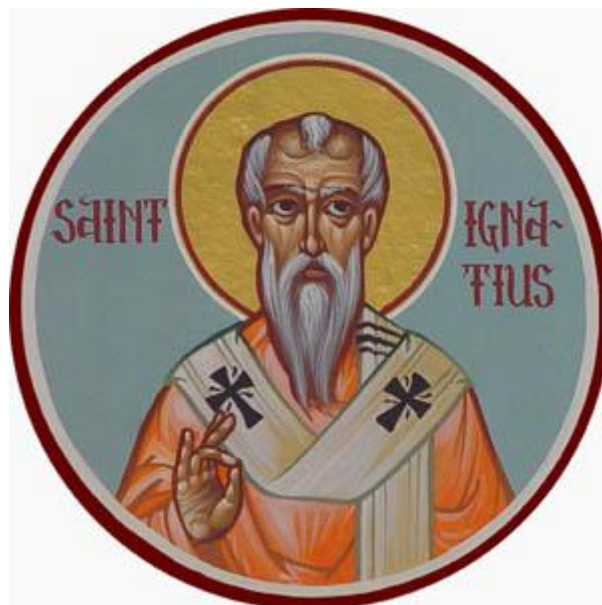
Extract from the Epistle of St. Ignatius of Antioch to St. Polycarp

“I am so well pleased that your mind is fixed in God, firmly built, as it were, upon an immovable rock. I am truly grateful for the privilege of having seen your saintly face.”

“To prayer, give yourself unceasingly; beg for an increase in understanding. Be watchful, possessing a sleepless spirit.”

“Bear with the infirmities of all, like a master athlete. The greater the toil, the greater the reward... Stand firm, like an anvil under the hammer. It is the part of a noble athlete to take blows, and yet to win the fight. We ought to bear all things for the sake of God, that He also may bear with us... Please Him under whom you fight, from Whom you receive your wages. Let none of you be found a deserter.”

“The times call for you, as pilots do for the winds, and as one tossed with tempest seeks for the haven, so that both you and those under your care may attain to God. Be sober as God’s athlete: the prize set before you is immortality and eternal life.”



The Martyrdom of St. Polycarp

(Abridged with mixed translation)

Greeting

From the Church of God which resides as a stranger at *Smyrna*, to the Church of God sojourning in *Philomelium*, and to all the congregations of the Holy and Catholic Church in every place: may mercy, peace, and love from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ be yours in abundance.



Chapter 1. The reason for writing

Brethren, we are sending you a written account of the martyrdoms and, in particular, that of blessed Polycarp, whose witness of faith brought to an end the persecution. By almost every step that led up to Polycarp's martyrdom, the Lord intended to show us anew the type of martyrdom narrated in the Gospel...

Chapter 2. The endurance of the martyrs

All the martyrdoms were blessed and noble and took place according to the will of God. For it becomes us, we who profess a greater piety, to ascribe to God authority over all things.

Who can fail to admire the heroism of the martyrs, their patience and their love of the Master? Some of them were so torn with scourging that the anatomy of their bodies could be seen down to their veins and arteries. Yet they remained steadfast, so that even the bystanders took pity on them and wept aloud.

Some proved themselves so heroic that they did not utter a cry or moan. It was thus made clear that in that hour of torture they were no longer in the flesh, or rather that the Lord stood beside them and communed with them. And so, looking to the grace of

Christ, they despised all the torments of this world, and in the space of a single hour purchased eternal life.

For this reason, the fire of their savage executioners appeared cool to them, for they fixed their eyes on their escape from the fire which is both eternal and unquenchable. With the eyes of the heart they looked forward to those good things which are prepared for those who endure. Of these good things, no ear has heard, no eye seen, nor human heart conceived; but to the martyrs – no longer men, but already angels – a glimpse of these things was granted to them by the Lord.

In like manner, those condemned to wild beasts endured dreadful tortures, being stretched out upon beds full of spikes, and subjected to various other kinds of torments, in order that the executioner might, by their lingering tortures, lead them to deny Christ.

*** Chapter 3. The death of Germanicus and the demand for Polycarp's death**

For the devil did indeed employ many strategies against the martyrs; but thanks be to God, he could not prevail over all. The most noble *Germanicus* strengthened the natural timidity of others by the patient endurance he exhibited. He heroically fought with the wild beasts. For, when the proconsul sought to persuade him and urged him to take pity upon his youth, *Germanicus* forcibly dragged the beast towards himself, desiring to escape all the more quickly from an unrighteous and unholy world.

The whole mob, astonished at the heroism of the God-loving and God-fearing race of the Christians shouted: "*Away with the Atheists! Let Polycarp be found!*"

Chapter 4. The denial of Quintus

However, *Quintus*, a Phrygian, who had recently arrived from *Phrygia*, upon seeing the wild beasts, became afraid. He was the one who had come forward voluntarily for trial and had pressed others to do the same. The proconsul eventually persuaded him to take the oath and to offer incense. Therefore, brethren, we do not commend those who volunteer to come forward, since this is not the teaching of the Gospel.

*** Chapter 5. Polycarp's departure and vision**

On the other hand, the most wonderful *Polycarp* was not at all disturbed when the news reached him. In fact, his impulse was to remain in the city. However, in deference to the wish of many, he was persuaded to leave. Therefore, he withdrew to a farm not far from the city. There he stayed with a few friends and, night and day, prayed for all men and for the churches throughout the world, according to his usual custom.

And while he was praying, three days before his arrest, he saw a vision: he saw his pillow consumed by fire. Upon seeing this, he turned to those who were with him and said prophetically: "*I must be burnt alive*"

*** Chapter 6. Polycarp betrayed**

When those who sought Polycarp were nearby, he moved to another location. Since his pursuers did not find him, they arrested two young slaves, one of whom confessed under torture to telling of Polycarp's whereabouts. It was thus impossible that Polycarp should remain hidden, since those who betrayed him were of his own household. Besides, the chief of police, who providentially bore the same name as *Herod*, was in a hurry to bring him into the arena. In this way Polycarp was to fulfill his own destiny by entering into partnership with Christ, while his betrayers were to meet with the same punishment as Judas.

Chapter 7. Polycarp offers himself

Taking the slave with them, mounted policemen set out at supper-time on Friday, the day of preparation, armed as though they were in hot pursuit of a robber. Closing in on Polycarp late in the day, they found him lying down in the upper room of a certain little house. Even then, escape was possible, but Polycarp decided against it, saying: "*The will of God be done!*"

So when he heard of their arrival, he went down and spoke with them. Those who were present marveled at his age and composure, and some of them said: "*Was so much effort made to capture a man so old?*"

Then, late as it was, he at once ordered food and drink, as they wanted, to be set before them, and he begged them for an hour to pray without interruption. They granted this request; and there he stood and prayed, being full of the grace of God, so that he could not cease for two full hours! Those who heard him were struck with admiration, and many were sorry they had come to fetch so old a man of God.

*** Chapter 8. Polycarp is brought into the city**

When he had finished praying, having remembered all those he had ever met – small and great, illustrious and obscure, as well as the whole Catholic Church - they departed. They set Polycarp upon a donkey, and led him into the city. It was a great Sabbath.

He was met by *Herod* and his father *Nicetes* and taken up into their carriage. They seated themselves beside him and tried to persuade him, saying: "*Really, what harm is there in saying, 'Lord Caesar' and offering incense in order to be saved?*"

At first Polycarp gave them no answer, but when they persisted, he said: "*I shall not do as you advise me.*"

Having no hope of persuading him, they began to speak bitter threats against him and cast him from the chariot so that he hurt his leg in his descent. But without being disturbed, as though he had suffered no injury at all, he walked briskly as he was led towards the arena, where the uproar was so great, that no one could be heard.

*** Chapter 9. Polycarp refuses to revile Christ**

As Polycarp entered the arena, there came to him a voice from heaven: *"Be strong, and show yourself a man, O Polycarp!"* Nobody saw the one speaking, but those of our brethren who were present heard the voice.

When Polycarp was brought forward and it was announced that he had been captured, there was a terrific uproar among the people. The proconsul asked him whether he was Polycarp. On his confessing that he was, the proconsul sought to persuade him to deny Christ, saying: *"Have respect for your old age...swear by the Fortune of Caesar; change your mind; say, 'Away with the Atheists' "*.

But Polycarp, gazing with a stern countenance on all the whole rabble of lawless heathen in the arena, let out a deep groan and, looking up to heaven and, with a wave of his hand at those present, said: *"Away with the Atheists!"*

The proconsul insisted, saying: *"Take the oath and I will set you free – revile Christ!"*

Polycarp declared: *"Eighty-six years have I served Him, and He never did me any wrong: how then dare I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?"*

*** Chapter 10. Polycarp confesses to be a Christian**

And the proconsul pressed him yet again: *"Swear by the fortune of Caesar!"*

He answered: *"Since you flatter yourself that I will swear by the Fortune of Caesar and since you pretend to not know who I am, hear me declare with boldness: I am a Christian! If you wish to learn the teaching of Christianity, set a date and I will explain."*

The proconsul replied: *"Persuade the people."*

But Polycarp said: *"It is right to offer an account of my faith to you; for we are taught to give all due honour to authorities ordained by God, in so far as it does not harm us. But as for the crowd, I do not think it proper to make an appeal to them."*

Chapter 11. Threats have no effect on Polycarp

The proconsul then said to him: *"I have wild beasts at hand; I will throw you to them, unless you repent."*

But Polycarp answered: *"Call them, for we are not accustomed to repent of what is good in order to adopt what is evil. Rather, it is noble to change from what is evil to what is good."*

But then the proconsul said to him: *"If you make little of the beasts, I shall have you consumed by fire."*

But Polycarp said: *"You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour, and after a little while is extinguished. You evidently do not know the fire of judgment to come and the eternal punishment which awaits the wicked. But why do you delay? Bring forth what you will..."*



Chapter 12. Polycarp sentenced to be burned

While he spoke these and many other like things, he was filled with courage and joy, and his countenance was suffused with beauty. As a result, he did not collapse from fright at what was being said to him. The proconsul, on the other hand, was astounded. He sent his herald to proclaim three times in the midst of the stadium: *"Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian"*.

Upon this announcement, the whole multitude who lived in Smyrna, both the heathens and Jews, shouted with uncontrollable fury at the top of their voices: *"This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, and the overthrower of our gods! He teaches many not to sacrifice and not to worship!"*

Amid this noisy demonstration, they called upon *Philip*, the minister of public worship in Asia, to let loose a lion upon Polycarp. But he replied he had no authority to do so, since he had already closed the hunting sports. Then they decided with one accord to demand that Polycarp be burnt alive. This was to fulfill Polycarp's vision and his prophetic utterance: *"I must be burnt alive"*.

Chapter 13. The funeral pile erected

The crowds hurriedly gathered logs and firewood from the shops and baths. The Jews too, as it was their custom, eagerly assisted them. When the pyre was ready, Polycarp laid aside all his clothes and loosened his girdle. He prepared also to take off his sandals - a thing he was not accustomed to do, because the faithful always vied with each other

to see which of them would be the first to touch his skin. For, on account of his holy life, he was, even before his martyrdom, adorned with every kind of good.

Without delay the material prepared for the pyre was piled up around him, but when they were about to fix him with nails to the pyre, he said: *"Leave me as I am. He who gives me strength to endure the fire, will also enable me to remain on the pyre without need of your nails."*

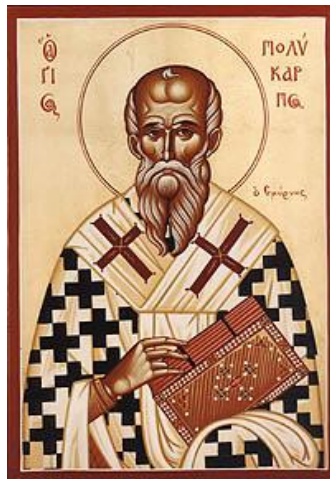
*** Chapter 14. Polycarp's Prayer**

They did not nail him then, but simply bound him. And being bound like a distinguished ram taken out of a great flock for sacrifice, and prepared to be an acceptable burnt-offering to God, he looked up to heaven, and said:

"O Lord God Almighty, the Father of your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, through whom we have received the knowledge of You - the God of angels, hosts and every creature - and of the whole race of saints who live before you...

I give You thanks that You have counted me worthy of this day and this hour, to share with Your martyrs the cup of Christ and to rise to eternal life both in soul and body, through the immortality imparted by the Holy Spirit. May I be accepted in Your sight today as a rich and pleasing sacrifice, as You foreordained, revealed beforehand to me, and have now fulfilled.

Therefore I praise You for everything. I bless You, I glorify You, through the everlasting and heavenly High Priest Jesus Christ, Your beloved Son, through whom be glory to You, together with Him and the Holy Spirit, both now and for the ages to come. Amen."



*** Chapter 15. Polycarp in the fire**

When he had pronounced this "*Amen*" and so finished his prayer, the men attending to the fire lit it. As the flame blazed forth in great fury, we witnesses saw a wonderful thing, and have been preserved that we might report to others what took place.

For the fire, shaping itself in the form of an arch, like the sail of a ship when filled with the wind, surrounded the martyr, his body in the centre of it, not as burning flesh, but as bread that is baking or as gold and silver refined in a furnace! In fact, we even caught a sweet aroma such as the scent of incense or of some other precious spice.

Chapter 16. Polycarp stabbed

At length, seeing that his body could not be consumed by the fire, those wicked men ordered an executioner to approach him and pierce him through with a dagger.

This done, there issued [a dove and] a great quantity of blood, so much so that the fire was quenched. All the people wondered that there should be such a difference between the unbelievers and the elect. And of the elect the most admirable Polycarp was certainly one, having in our own times been an apostolic and prophetic teacher, and bishop of the Catholic Church at Smyrna. For every word that went forth from his mouth either has been or shall yet be accomplished.

*** Chapter 17. Polycarp's body**

But the jealous and malicious rival, the adversary of the saints, had witnessed the splendor of his martyrdom, had seen that his life was blameless from the beginning, and now saw him adorned with the crown of immortality and carrying off an incontestable prize. And so he busied himself, preventing even Polycarp's poor body entering into our possession, for many were eager to have a share in his holy remains.

The malicious rival therefore prompted *Nicetas* (*Herod's* father and *Alice's* brother) to go and entreat the magistrate not to give up his body for burial saying: "*...or else they will forsake Him who was crucified and worship this man instead*" This he said at the suggestion and urgent persuasion of the Jews

They did not realize that we could never abandon Christ, He who suffered for our salvation – the blameless one for sinners! – or worship any other. Him we worship as being the Son of God, the martyrs we love as being disciples and imitators of the Lord; and deservedly so, because of their unsurpassable devotion to their King and Teacher. May it be our good fortune, too, to be their companions and fellow disciples!

Chapter 18. The body of Polycarp is burned

When the centurion noticed the contentiousness of the Jews, he declared the body property of the state and, according to their custom, burnt it. Afterwards, we collected Polycarp's bones, being more precious than the most exquisite jewels and more purified than gold, we interred them in a fitting place.

There the Lord will permit us, as far as possible, to assemble in rapturous joy and celebrate his martyrdom – his birthday – both in order to commemorate the heroes that have gone before, and to train the heroes yet to come...

Chapter 19. Praise of the martyr Polycarp

This, then, is the story of the blessed Polycarp. Although he suffered martyrdom at Smyrna with eleven others from *Philadelphia*, he alone is universally remembered by preference, so much so that even the heathen speak of him in every place.

He was not only an illustrious teacher, but also a pre-eminent martyr, whose martyrdom all desire to imitate since it was in accord with the Gospel of Christ.

By his patient endurance he overcame the unjust magistrate, and thus won the crown of immortality. And now, in heaven with the Apostles and all the righteous, he glorifies God and the Father Almighty, and blesses our Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour of our souls, the Captain of our bodies, and the Shepherd of the Catholic Church throughout the world.

*** Chapter 20. Please pass on this letter**

You asked for a more detailed account of what took place, but for the present we are giving you only a summary report through our brother *Marcus/Marcion*. Take note, then of the contents of this letter and forward it to the brethren further away. They too, should glorify the Lord, He who makes His choice from among His servants.

To Him who is able to bring us all by His grace and goodness into His everlasting kingdom, through His only-begotten Son Jesus Christ, to Him be glory, and honour, and power, and majesty, for ever. Amen.

Salute all the saints. Those who are with us wish to remember you, especially *Evarestus*, who committed this letter to paper.

Chapter 21. The date of the martyrdom

Blessed Polycarp's martyrdom was on 22nd February, on the great Sabbath, at 2pm. He was taken by *Herod, Philip the Trallian* being high priest, *Staius Quadratus* being proconsul, but *Jesus Christ* being King forever - to whom be glory, honour, majesty, and an everlasting throne, from generation to generation. Amen.

* Chapter 22. Salutation

We say farewell to you, brethren. Make the teaching of Jesus Christ, as expressed in the Gospel, your rule of life. Together with Him be glory to God – the Father and the Holy Spirit – for the salvation of the holy elect. It was thus that the blessed Polycarp suffered martyrdom. May we be privileged to follow in his footsteps and arrive in the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

*A transcript of this letter was made by **Gaius** from a manuscript in the possession of **Irenaeus**. He was a contemporary of Irenaeus, who in turn was a disciple of Polycarp. And I, **Socrates**, copied it out in Corinth from the duplicates of Gaius. Grace be with you all!*

*And I, **Pionius**, in my turn, copied it out from the aforesaid manuscript, after I had discovered it through a revelation made to me by blessed Polycarp. I gathered the leaves when they were already almost worn out by age. May the Lord Jesus Christ gather me, too, together with His elect into His heavenly kingdom. To Him belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.*