

## January 23 - St. Polycarp



Once the apostles were gone, heresies sprang up pretending to be true teaching, persecution was strong, and controversies arose over how to celebrate liturgy that Jesus never laid down rules for.

Polycarp, as a holy man and bishop of Smyrna, found there was only one answer -- to be true to the life of Jesus and imitate that life. Saint Ignatius of Antioch told Polycarp "your **mind** is grounded in God as on an immovable rock."

On the other hand when faced with Christian disagreements he was all forgiveness and respect. One of the controversies of the time came over the celebration of Easter. The East, where Polycarp was from, celebrated the Passover as the Passion of Christ followed by a Eucharist on the following day. The West celebrated Easter on the Sunday of the week following Passover. When Polycarp went to Rome to discuss the difference with Pope Anicetus, they could not agree on this issue. But they found no difference in their Christian beliefs. And Anicetus asked Polycarp to celebrate the Eucharist in his own papal chapel.

But that didn't stop them from taking him into the arena on the Sabbath. As he entered the arena, the crowd roared like the animals they cheered. Those around Polycarp heard a voice from heaven above the crowd, "Be brave, Polycarp, and act like a man."

At the age of 80, he found himself arrested because of his beliefs. A proconsul (a Roman Governor) begged the eighty-six-year-old bishop to say "Away with the atheists" in a arena of atheists. Polycarp calmly turned to the face the crowd, looked straight at them, and said, "Away with the atheists." The proconsul continued to plead with him. When he asked Polycarp to swear by Caesar to save himself, Polycarp answered, "If you imagine that I will swear by Caesar, you do not know who I am. Let me tell you plainly, I am a Christian." Finally, when all else failed the proconsul reminded Polycarp that he would be thrown to the wild animals unless he changed his mind. Polycarp answered, "Change of mind from better to worse is not a change allowed to us." Even with the threat of being burned alive, he did not budge.

When he was tied up to be burned, Polycarp prayed, "Lord God Almighty, Father of your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, through whom we have received knowledge of you, God of angels and powers, of the whole creation and of the whole race of the righteous who live in your sight, I bless you, for having made me worthy of this day and hour, I bless you, because I may have a part, along with the martyrs, in the chalice of your Christ, to resurrection in eternal life, resurrection both of soul and body in the incorruptibility of the Holy Spirit. May I be received today, as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, among those who are in your presence, as you have prepared and foretold and fulfilled, God who is faithful and true. For this and for all benefits I praise you, I bless you, I glorify you, through the eternal and heavenly High Priest, Jesus Christ, your beloved Son, through whom be to you with him and the Holy Spirit glory, now and for all the ages to come. Amen."

The fire was lit as Polycarp said Amen and then the eyewitnesses who reported said they saw a miracle. The fire burst up in an arch around Polycarp, the flames surrounding him like sails, and instead of being burned he seemed to glow like bread baking, or gold being melted in a furnace. When the captors saw he wasn't being burned, they stabbed him. The blood that flowed put the fire out.

The proconsul wouldn't let the Christians have the body because he was afraid they would worship Polycarp. After the body was burned, they stole the bones in order to celebrate the memory of his martyrdom and prepare others for persecution. The date was about February 23, 156.