

The veneration of saints began with the special reverence paid to martyrs. The first reliable record we have comes from “The Martyrdom of Saint Polycarp” who gave his life for the faith in the year 155. (We celebrate his memorial, today, on the 23rd of February).

Polycarp was a disciple of Saint John the Evangelist. He studied personally with the author of the Gospel of John, the Book of Revelation, and several Letters. As John’s disciple, Polycarp may have been one of the learned Christians to help compile, edit, and publish the New Testament. Saint Irenaeus tells us Polycarp “was not only instructed by apostles and conversed with many who had seen Christ; but he was also, by apostles, appointed bishop of the Church in Smyrna.”ⁱ

Serving as a bishop was no easy task in the second century. In addition to ongoing persecution of Christians, false teachings began to take hold in the forms of various heresies. They contended that Jesus could not have had a fully human nature and they denied the suffering, death, and resurrection as only a symbolic idea.

In his letter to the Philippians, Polycarp wrote very forcefully against the heretics:ⁱⁱ

- For everyone who shall not confess that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh, is antichrist, and whosoever shall not confess the testimony of the Cross, is of the devil; and whosoever shall pervert the oracles of the Lord to his own lusts and say that there is neither resurrection nor judgment, that man is the firstborn of Satan.
- Wherefore, forsaking the vanity of many, and their false doctrines, let us return to the word which has been handed down to us from the beginning. Persevere in prayer and in fasting. We beseech our all-seeing God not to lead us into temptation. The spirit truly is willing, but the flesh is weak.

His brother bishop Ignatius of Antioch wrote a letter to Polycarp with this advice:ⁱⁱⁱ

- Have a regard to preserve unity, then which nothing is better.
- Bear with all, even as the Lord does with you.
- Support all in love. Give yourself to prayer without ceasing.
- Be watchful, possessing a sleepless spirit. Speak to every man separately, as God enables you.
- Bear the infirmities of all, as being a perfect athlete in the Christian life: where the labor is great, the gain is all the more.

At the age of 86, Polycarp had a vision of his martyrdom and recognized that he should turn himself in rather than let others suffer for keeping him hidden from his persecutors. To avoid martyrdom, all the bishop needed to do was worship the emperor. Instead, he remained steadfast in his faith:^{iv}

- Hear me declare with boldness, I am a Christian. And if you wish to learn what the doctrines of Christianity are, appoint me a day, and you shall hear them.
- You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour, and after a little is extinguished. But you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly.

Assisted by the strength of God, Polycarp remained a faithful witness unto death.

His tormentors wanted to burn him alive, but the flames had no effect. Witnesses described the scene: “shaping itself into the form of an arch, it encompassed – as by a circle – the body of the martyr. And he appeared within not like flesh, which is burnt, but as bread that is baked, or as gold and silver glowing in a furnace.”^v They had to resort to stabbing him instead. Executing the Bishop of Smyrna was meant to send a lesson of intimidation to others. It failed.

As a disciple of an original apostle, he was highly regarded for his knowledge of the faith. As a martyr who defied death for a short time, he was a hero.

On the anniversary of his death, Christians from Smyrna gathered around the grave of their deceased bishop. His brave example led them to and even greater worship of the crucified Christ.

ⁱ catholicnewsagency.com/saint/st-polycarp-of-smyrna-156

ⁱⁱ newadvent.org/fathers/0136.htm

ⁱⁱⁱ catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=3836

^{iv} Ibid, CNA

^v Ibid, CNA