

Saint Polycarp: Bishop, Martyr, and Teacher of Apostolic Tradition

Saint Polycarp: Bishop of Smyrna and Holy Martyr



Image courtesy of *Holy Transfiguration Monastery Icons*

Presented by: Brian Ephrem Fitzgerald, Ph.D.

At St. Philip's Antiochian Orthodox Church, Souderton, PA

3, 10, 17 June & 1 July 2006

Who was Saint Polycarp of Smyrna?

Saint Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna and Holy Martyr (c. 69 - c. 156), is one of the Apostolic Fathers of the Church, namely one of the early witnesses and teachers of the Apostolic traditions of the Christian Church. As a witness, he led a life of heartfelt purity ending his earthly sojourn as a faithful martyr to his Lord. The narrative of his martyrdom, the *Martyrium Sancti Polycarpi*, is the first Christian narrative of a martyrdom outside of the New Testament. As a teacher, he was less a formal theologian and more of a diligent transmitter of the Apostolic traditions which he had received. The composers of the *Martyrium* clearly understood St. Polycarp to be a teacher faithful to the traditions received from his apostolic forbears. St. Polycarp clearly understood himself as one who would faithfully pass on to following generations what he himself had received at the feet of the Apostles. Although he does not say this overtly, this self-understanding seems apparent in his *Epistle to the Philippians*, his only surviving work. These two brief works, the *Epistle to the Philippians*, and the *Martyrium Sancti Polycarpi*, are the primary sources concerning this remarkable saint and martyr and are therefore the foci of this study.¹

His Life

Little is known about the details of St. Polycarp's life. His *Epistle to the Philippians* gives one a taste of his personality, faith and teaching, but provides little for his biography.² The *Martyrium Sancti Polycarpi*, having been composed by eyewitnesses and those who knew them, provides a hagiographically stylized version of his death, albeit a rather accurate one.³ This study will discuss his life, beginning with his death, since this event provides the most solid date from which the dating of other events in his life may be deduced. Chapter 21 in the surviving text of the *Martyrium* provides a postscript to the narrative of his demise, giving the date of his death in the Macedonian calendar.

*Now the blessed Polycarp was martyred on the second day of the first half of the month of Xanthicus, the seventh day before the kalends of March, a great sabbath, at the eighth hour. And he was arrested by Herod, when Philip of Tralles was High Priest, when Statius Quadratus was Pro-Consul, but Jesus Christ was reigning for ever, to whom be glory, honour, majesty and an eternal throne, from generation to generation, Amen.*⁴

The date, 2 Xanthicus, together with the clue of the great Sabbath, help determine the likely date of St. Polycarp's martyrdom. Eusebius guessed that it occurred in 167 during the reign of Marcus Aurelius and this was generally accepted until 1867, when W. H Waddington placed the martyrdom on 23 February 155. With this date, both the naming of Quadratus as proconsul and the asiarch Philip of Tralles are in accord. But noticing that the martyrdom took place on a great Sabbath as well, C. H. Turner and Eduard Schwartz suggested 22 February 156, a leap year in which the Sabbath of Purim fell on 22 February. With this date, three data are made to agree and the dating of a visit of St. Polycarp to Anicetus, Bishop of Rome (c. 154-167) is made easier.⁵ This study therefore assumes the latter date to be the most likely date of St. Polycarp's martyrdom. The Orthodox Church celebrates his memory on 23 February.

With St. Polycarp's date of death established, one can approximate the latest possible year of his birth. When the proconsul urged St. Polycarp to revile Christ, the saint replied, "*Eighty-six years have I served*

¹See selected bibliography for selected texts and translations.

²Henceforth this work will be referred to as the *Epistle*.

³Henceforth this work will be referred to as the *Martyrium*.

⁴*Martyrium* XXI.1. The translation used is that of Kirsopp Lake unless otherwise cited.

⁵For a brief discussion see Richardson, "Introduction" 144, 147.

Saint Polycarp: Bishop, Martyr, and Teacher of Apostolic Tradition

*Him, and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who has saved me?"*⁶ One gleans from this two things. First, given how long he claims to have served Christ, St. Polycarp was baptized as an infant.⁷ Secondly, assuming the year of his martyrdom is 156, the year of his birth could be no later than 70.

One now has the probable date of his death, and the year after which his birth is unlikely. What other early evidence does one have concerning St. Polycarp's biography? St. Ignatius of Antioch (c. 35 - c. 107) refers to him as bishop of Smyrna in his epistles to the Ephesians, Magnesians, and to St. Polycarp himself.⁸ In the letter last mentioned, St. Ignatius requests that St. Polycarp assemble a local synod to select an official emissary to St. Ignatius' churches in Syria. The letters above were composed on St. Ignatius' journey to his martyrdom in Rome and this martyrdom is generally understood to have occurred in the latter part of the reign of Trajan (98-117). One thus learns that St. Polycarp was bishop of Smyrna by 117 at the very latest, probably earlier, although he seems not to have filled the office for long since St. Ignatius' letter hints that St. Polycarp may have been new and inexperienced in it.⁹

St. Irenæus of Lyons (c. 130 - c. 200), the great theologian and apologist, was a disciple of St. Polycarp and thus he provides some childhood memories concerning St. Polycarp as well as a few highlights from later in the saint's career. The main sources are *Adversus Hæresis*, the Letter to Florinus, and the Letter to Victor, Bishop of Rome.¹⁰ From these works one learns the following things. St. Polycarp knew John, the disciple, some of the Apostles, as well as others who knew the Lord personally. St. Irenæus especially remembers St. Polycarp referring to close conversations with John, the disciple of the Lord.¹¹ St. Polycarp therefore had close conversation with apostles and some who knew the Lord personally, being taught by them as well. St. Polycarp could apparently recall their words by memory and was understood as teaching them in accordance with Holy Writ. According to St. Irenæus, St. Polycarp was made bishop of the Church of Smyrna by apostles, although he does not specify by whom exactly. St. Polycarp, therefore, stood solidly in the Apostolic tradition of the Church, being a faithful deliverer of the teachings he had received. St. Irenæus mentions St. Polycarp's epistle to the Philippians, in which he believes one can derive the character of St. Polycarp's faith and teachings, as well as other epistles (now lost). He also reports that St. Polycarp was long-lived and died a glorious martyr's death.

⁶*Martyrium IX.3.*

⁷Indeed, a very *early* witness to infant baptism.

⁸*To the Ephesians XXI, To the Magnesians XV, and To Polycarp VII.*

⁹See *To Polycarp I-V.*

¹⁰See Irenæus *Adversus Hæresis* III.3.4. In *Adversus Hæresis* V.33.4 one learns that Papias was a hearer of the disciple John and a colleague of St. Polycarp. Although interesting, this is less relevant to our study. Also see the fragment of St. Irenæus' letter to Florinus in *Historia Ecclesiastica* V.20. See also St. Irenæus' letter to Bishop Victor in *Historia Ecclesiastica* V.24.

¹¹St. Irenæus understood the Apostle John, the disciple in Ephesus named John, John the Presbyter, and John of Patmos all to be one person. Current biblical scholarship sees this as far from certain. There is also no consensus concerning the authorship of the Johannine corpus (the Gospel of John, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, and the Apocalypse). Werner Georg Kümmel, for example, assumes the Gospel of John, 1 John, 2 John and 3 John to be composed by a Christian who knew the "beloved disciple" of the Gospel of John, while the Apocalypse was written by John of Patmos, another John altogether. See Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* 234-246, 442-445, 449-451, and 469-472. Raymond E. Brown, on the other hand, believes the Gospel of John, 1 John, 2 John, and 3 John to be composed by two authors (one of the Gospel, another of the three Johannine epistles) and a redactor (of the Gospel of John), arising from a Johannine school of writers based on the tradition of the "beloved disciple." In contrast, the author of the Apocalypse was not properly a member of that community but one who had some points of contact with it, either in Palestine in the 50's and 60's or in Ephesus in the 80's and 90's. See Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* 368-371, 389-392, 402, 802-805. For our study it suffices to say that St. Irenæus identified all of them with John the Apostle, emphasizing St. Polycarp's solid position within the Apostolic tradition of the Church.

Saint Polycarp: Bishop, Martyr, and Teacher of Apostolic Tradition

Standing so solidly in the Apostolic tradition of the Church, St. Irenæus reports that St. Polycarp had an utter aversion to heresy in all forms. Upon meeting Marcion in Rome,¹² St. Polycarp, being asked by the heresiarch whether St. Polycarp recognized him, quipped, "*I do know thee, the first-born of Satan.*" St. Irenæus relates an anecdote of St. Polycarp about John the disciple of the Lord fleeing a bathhouse in which the Gnostic heretic Cerinthus (fl. c. 100) bathed fearing the place would collapse in judgement due to the heretic's wickedness. He also reports how St. Polycarp, on this trip to Rome (c. 155), converted many from the heresies of Marcion and Valentinus¹³ by relating that he had received only *one truth* from the Apostles, namely that delivered and taught by the Church. He argued, in effect, against any secret transmission of truth from the Apostles outside of what was taught in the Church. Such supposedly secret Apostolic traditions were often a fundamental tenet of Christian gnostic sects.

During this trip to Rome (c. 155), which took place while Anicetus was bishop (c. 154-167), and which addressed certain issues arising between two bishops and communities (Rome and Asia), St. Polycarp reportedly made a very favorable impression on Bishop Anicetus. We know neither the original controversies nor their outcome. Yet both bishops addressed, in addition to these points, the Quartodeciman controversy, i.e., the issue concerning the churches of Asia celebrating Pascha on 14 Nisan regardless of the day of the week. Neither could persuade the other, St. Polycarp asserting that these traditions were handed down to him and observed by John, the disciple of the Lord, as well as by the Apostles whom he had known. Both preserved mutual communion, Anicetus even allowing St. Polycarp to serve the Eucharist out of respect.

This is all one finds concerning St. Polycarp of Smyrna which is reliable historically. Yet it suffices to establish him as a major transmitter of Holy Apostolic traditions to later generations of the Church. Due to the long lives of John, the disciple of the Lord (into the 90's) and St. Polycarp (c. 156), the Apostolic and sub-Apostolic ages in the churches of Asia were much longer than elsewhere, securing a valuable and solid connection within the Church to the Apostolic age. One sees an instance of this in the example of St. Irenæus of Lyons. Being the first great Father of the Church, he himself was a disciple of St. Polycarp, thereby showing the connection between the Patristic and Apostolic ages of the Church. Yet St. Polycarp was also a great martyr, the account of whose end provides the first martyrological work outside the New Testament. His life, character, teachings and death are therefore of great significance for the Church.

Date and Setting of the Epistle to the Philippians

It is difficult to affix a precise date to the *Epistle*. First of all, the text which currently exists is likely to be the amalgamation of two letters to the Church at Philippi. Chapter 13, and possibly 14, of the *Epistle* form a brief cover letter jotted down by St. Polycarp himself accompanying a collection of the letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch which were requested by the church of Philippi.¹⁴ Chapter 13 acknowledges a request by both St. Ignatius and the Church of Philippi that a certain letter be delivered to the churches in Syria should anyone from St. Polycarp's community journey there. St. Polycarp promises either to deliver it himself or to delegate this task to someone else. St. Polycarp also inquires after the condition of St. Ignatius and his companions, indicating that St. Ignatius was still living when this note was written. This cover letter would thus date to 117 or before.

¹²Marcion (c. 110-160) was the founder of the Marcionite heresy and sect. See also Irenæus *Adversus Hæresis* III.3.4

¹³Valentinus (c. 100-153) was a Gnostic theologian and founder of the Valentinian sect, a more widespread Gnostic sect.

¹⁴*Epistle* 13:1-14:1.

This request for information about St. Ignatius and companions contrasts rather sharply with chapter 9 wherein St. Ignatius is assumed to be long dead.¹⁵ This would indicate that the remaining sections of the text, namely chapters 1-12 and possibly 14, form a separate letter to be dated later, as suggested by P. N. Harrison.¹⁶ Although this thesis is not universally accepted,¹⁷ a natural reading of these passages indicates a clear passage of time between the two texts. Attempts to close the gap seems, in the opinion of this study, to result in a forced reading of the text. The assumption, therefore, is that one has two letters in the current form of the *Epistle*, a brief cover letter by St. Polycarp himself, penned before St. Ignatius' death, and a later formal epistle to the Church at Philippi dictated by the bishop to Crescens.¹⁸ This study assumes chapter 14 to belong to the later epistle since it is clearly a concluding section typical of formal epistles. A quickly jotted note would have no literary pretensions and would thus require no such conclusion, while a formal epistle would. Assigning chapter 14 to the earlier cover letter thus seems unnecessary, leaving the later formal letter without a proper ending, making the surviving text of it a fragment. While this is possible, it is tidier to assign chapter 14 to the later formal epistle, thereby having one whole epistle and a quickly jotted cover letter.

So if the formal epistle (chapters 1-12 and 14) was written later, how much later then? This is not easy to determine precisely. The immediate setting is a request from the Church of Philippi for an exhortative epistle from St. Polycarp. Yet the request appears to be rather general, giving few clues for a precise dating of the letter. Chapter 11 addresses the fall of the presbyter Valens and his wife due to pecuniary corruption. St. Polycarp expresses his sorrow over the matter, advises against the love of money as leading to idolatry, but advocating moderation regarding the couple should they repent.¹⁹ Since nothing is known about Valens or his wife elsewhere, this does not help in dating the letter either. Furthermore, the letter offers no specific data about other events which might date it.

P. N. Harrison postulates a date of around 135-137. St. Polycarp's extensive citation of New Testament literature, Mr. Harrison believes, would fit better with the mid-second century rather than the early second century. He also believes chapter 7 of the *Epistle* to be directed again Marcion, indicating also a later date since Trajan's reign (98-117) would have been too early for Marcion to have been active.²⁰ But St. Polycarp's citation of New Testament writings seems to have been from memory and therefore too imprecise for purposes of dating. Chapter 7 of the *Epistle* does condemn docetic christology, and Marcion certainly advocated a docetic christology. But so also did Cerinthus, Valentinus, and other Gnostic teachers as well. The epithet, *first-born of Satan*, applied to those who deny the bodily resurrection and the Final Judgement, reminds one of St. Polycarp's reported quip to Marcion as reported by St. Irenæus.²¹ Yet St. Polycarp need not have reserved this epithet exclusively for Marcion. Both Gnostic teachers and Marcion denied the bodily resurrection. Concerning the Final Judgement, things are more complex. Marcion attributed judgement to the Demiurge, the secondary deity responsible for the material creation, while redemption came through the Good and Supreme God who was the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. Such an argument could be construed as effectively denying judgement altogether.²² Although Gnostic teachings did vary, a concept of final judgement as St. Polycarp understood it would

¹⁵*Epistle* 9:1-2.

¹⁶Harrison, *Polycarp's Two Epistles* 356 p.

¹⁷See Richardson, "Introduction" 124-125.

¹⁸*Epistle* 14:1.

¹⁹*Epistle* 11:1-4.

²⁰Richardson, "Introduction" 124-125, also Harrison, *Polycarp's Two Epistles*.

²¹Irenæus *Adversus Hæresis* III.3.4.

²²Tertullian (c. 155-230), the North African theologian, criticizes inconsistencies in Marcion's teaching which he saw as befuddling any effective concept of Final Judgement. See Tertullian *Adversus Marcionem* V:4, 13, also IV: 30, 35, 39, and V:12, etc.

hardly fit into such schemas. Hence accusations of a denial of the Final Judgement do not obviously implicate Marcion any more than the Gnostic teachers of the day. Therefore it is hard to affirm with certainty the dating proposed by Harrison, which is unfortunate since it would establish a more precise date. It appears to have been written well after St. Ignatius' death, but just how long one cannot know. Suffice it to say that the second letter probably was written between 120 and 140, although a later date, i.e., before St. Polycarp's death, is possible.

The earlier letter (chapter 13) therefore would date to 117 or before, the second letter (chapters 1-12, 14) to the 120's through perhaps the 140's. So much for dating the text, but what was their context? As stated earlier, the first letter was merely a cover note, without literary pretensions, accompanying the letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch being sent to Philippi. The second and later letter was a formal epistle whose content consisted of moral exhortations concerning a range of subjects addressed to the Church at Philippi. What can be said about its context? St. Polycarp states that he composed this letter about righteousness, not on his own initiative, but at the request of the faithful at Philippi. The relatively wide range of moral issues addressed confirms the nature of the original request. Beyond the reference to Valens and his wife, the letter records no other specific event which might explain the occasion for the letter. Could the fall of Valens have been the occasion of this request? It is hardly implausible since the Church at Philippi may have desired a moral boost after such an affair. St. Polycarp does warn against avarice repeatedly and against behavior which could induce blasphemy by non-believers.²³ Although this event obviously informed St. Polycarp's letter, it is not central to its structure.²⁴ It seems best to take St. Polycarp at his word. This was an epistle containing selected moral admonitions, corresponding to a request for just such an epistle. Valens' fall may have helped prompt this request and it clearly informed the letter. But St. Polycarp's reputation for Apostolic faithfulness and personal holiness could in itself have easily motivated the request for it. As stated earlier, the second letter was dictated by St. Polycarp to a certain Crescens who penned it down.²⁵

The Content of the Epistle: A Brief Overview of Its Contents

To savor the general flavor and structure of the *Epistle*, a brief overview of its contents is in order. Although a tabular format as below glides over some important details, a higher level view does help one grasp the general content and form of the document better. The content of the *Epistle* will be studied in more detail by analyzing individual themes elaborated by St. Polycarp.

Prologue: Introductory greetings of St. Polycarp and Smyrnaean presbyters to the Church of Philippi.

²³See *Epistle* 2:2, 4:1, 4:3, 5:1, 6:1, 10:2, 11:1-4.

²⁴This contrasts with *1 Clement* wherein rebukes and admonitions concerning the rebellion against the Corinthian presbyters dominates the work's structure, although the event instigating the bishop's letter is only first mentioned explicitly in chapter 44 (albeit also less explicitly in 3:3). See *1 Clement* 3:3, 44:6. St. Polycarp's references to Valens and his wife are important, but not nearly as central to his letter as was the rebellion to St. Clement's letter.

²⁵*Epistle* 14:1. The authenticity of the text is not seriously questioned, but the Greek manuscripts only preserve the text through *Epistle* 9:2. The remainder of the text is preserved in an old Latin translation, the comparison of which with the extant Greek texts shows the trustworthiness of the Latin translation. See Richardson, "Introduction" 124. Eusebius also preserves the Greek text of the bulk of chapter 13, which testifies as well to the genuineness of the later chapters and the reliability of the Latin translation. See Eusebius *Historia Ecclesiastica* III.36.

Saint Polycarp: Bishop, Martyr, and Teacher of Apostolic Tradition

Chapter 1: Commendation of the hospitality, charity, and faith of the Philippians, especially regarding the martyrs.

Chapter 2: Exhortation to Virtue: Adherence to faith and obedience of the Lord's commandments in hope of the Resurrection.

Chapter 3: St. Polycarp composes an epistle concerning righteousness at the invitation of the church at Philippi. Commendation of the writings of the Holy Apostle Paul (who founded the church at Philippi).

Chapter 4: Exhortation to Virtue: Love of money is the root of all evil, the duties of wives, the duties of widows.

Chapter 5: Exhortation to Virtue: the duties of deacons, the duties of young men, the duties of virgins.

Chapter 6: Exhortation to Virtue: the duties of presbyters.

Chapter 7: Avoid Heresy. Return to the faith delivered from the beginning, persevering in prayer and fasting.

Chapter 8: Persevere in our hope, in Jesus Christ, the pledge of our righteousness, imitating His endurance.

Chapter 9: Obey the Word of justice and endure as did the martyrs Ignatius, Zosimus, Rufus, the Apostle Paul and the other Apostles, knowing that they received their rewards.

Chapter 10: Abide in faith, brotherly love and almsgiving, avoiding by such good works giving non-believers the occasion to blaspheme.

Chapter 11: The fall of the presbyter Valens and his wife over pecuniary matters. Avarice leads inevitably to idolatry. Moderation toward the fallen couple advised in case of repentance.

Chapter 12: St. Polycarp's ignorance of Old Testament scriptures and the Church of Philippi's command of them. Parting Admonitions. Pray for emperors, rulers, persecutors, and enemies of the Cross so one's fruit may be manifest and that one may be perfected in Christ.

Chapter 13: Earlier cover letter inserted: Sending letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch to Philippi and promising the forwarding of a letter to the Church in Syria.

Chapter 14: Final Salutations and Commendations. Letter dictated by St. Polycarp to Crescens.

The Content of the Epistle: The Letter's Themes and Ideas

One grasps from the tabular view above the general flow and structure of the *Epistle*. But since the *Epistle* consists mainly of moral exhortations, ordering the study according to the moral concepts advanced should help one to grasp the mind and mood of St. Polycarp better. Therefore this study will now

analyze the themes discussed in his *Epistle*, allowing a more detailed analysis of some of this work's significant concepts.

The Virtue of Perseverance and the Examples of Christ and the Martyrs

For St. Polycarp, perseverance seems to be the prime Christian virtue. At least it is the virtue most frequently recommended by the saint.²⁶ Chapter Eight of the *Epistle* illustrates his admonitions unto perseverance well.

*Let us then persevere unceasingly in our hope, and in the pledge of our righteousness, that is in Christ Jesus, "who bare our sins in his own body on the tree, who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth," but for our sakes, that we might live in him, he endured all things. Let us then be imitators of his endurance, and if we suffer for his name's sake let us glorify him. For this is the example which he gave us in himself, and this is what we have believed.*²⁷

Citing the Gospel of Mark and 1 Peter, St Polycarp argues that one's perseverance as a Christian is rooted and grounded in Christ, Who is the pledge of our righteousness. Such perseverance is motivated by the hope which such a marvellous pledge inspires. Christ, Who is the pledge of righteousness, in His sufferings is the model of perseverance as well. Christian endurance of suffering is properly an imitation of Christ's sufferings. Christ Himself, therefore, not only inspires perseverance, but is the ideal model of it as well. The Christian's life is both to be inspired by Christ and an imitation of His patient endurance.

At the beginning of his *Epistle*, St. Polycarp, making the first literary citation of the Book of Acts known, rejoices that the church at Philippi has a firmly rooted faith which "*still flourishes and bears fruit unto our Lord Jesus Christ, who endured for our sins, even to the suffering of death, 'whom God raised up, having loosed the pangs of Hades, in whom, though you did not see him, you believed in unspeakable and glorified joy,'*"²⁸ In short, this community is still persevering in the faith. Here St. Polycarp cites Acts 2:24, 1 Peter 1:8, and Ephesians 2:8. Endurance in such faith brings joy, both to the faithful at Philippi and to St. Polycarp who addresses them. Likewise, wives are to be taught to *abide* in the faith given to them, and in love and purity. Widows are to pray *ceaselessly*, i.e., persevere in prayer, which reminds on of 1 Timothy 5:5 wherein the prayerfulness of the widow is a qualification for the receipt of aid from the local congregation.²⁹ Perseverance in fasting together with watchfulness in prayer also guards against the scourge of heresy.³⁰ Toward the end of his epistle, St. Polycarp, in a parting benediction, wishes their faith to be edified in faith, truth, and in many virtues, in which patient endurance and longsuffering figure prominently. "*Now may God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the 'eternal Priest' himself, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, build you up in faith and truth, and in all gentleness, and without wrath, and in patience, and in longsuffering, and endurance, and purity, and may he give you lot and part with his saints, and to us with you, and to all under heaven who shall believe in our Lord and God Jesus Christ and in his 'Father who raised him from the dead.'*"³¹ Perseverance, therefore, is the gift of the Christ Who is the model of perseverance. Christ Himself is the model and source of Christian endurance.

²⁶*Epistle* 1:2-3, 4:2-3, 7:2, 8:1-2, 9:1-2, 10:1-3, and 12:2.

²⁷*Epistle* 8:1-2. Mark 14:38 and 1 Peter 2:22, 24 cited.

²⁸*Epistle* 1:2-3.

²⁹*Epistle* 4:2-3.

³⁰*Epistle* 7:2.

³¹*Epistle* 12:2. Galatians 1:1.

Not surprisingly, the example of the martyrs figure in St. Polycarp's admonitions about perseverance. The believers at Philippi are to obey the word of justice and practice all endurance as they saw in the examples of the martyrs, SS. Ignatius, Zosimus and Rufus, as well as in the Apostle Paul, other apostles, and others among the church at Philippi.³² Not only is Christ the model of Christian endurance, so also are the martyrs. Earlier St. Polycarp praises the Church at Philippi for its hospitality and charity displayed toward St. Ignatius and his companions, escorting them as far as they could. Such martyrs "*are the diadems of those who have been truly chosen by God and our Lord.*"³³ Concerning the martyrs' hope, he writes:

*Now I beseech you all to obey the word of righteousness, and to endure with all the endurance which you also saw before your eyes, not only in the blessed Ignatius, and Zosimus, and Rufus, but also in others among yourselves, and in Paul himself, and in the other Apostles; being persuaded that all of these "ran not in vain," but in faith and righteousness, and that they are with the Lord in the "place which is their due," with whom they also suffered. For they did not "love this present world" but him who died on our behalf, and was raised by God for our sakes.*³⁴

Martyrs are the jewels, the special prize of the elect. After Christ Himself, they are examples of Christian endurance for the Philippian believers. The martyrs have now the full enjoyment of their reward, eternal fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ. By following their example, the believers at Philippi can take heart through the hope set forth before them, eternal fellowship with Christ as a reward for their endurance. Should they suffer for His name, let them praise Him since He gave an example in His own person.³⁵ By implication therefore, believers can become jewels of the elect by following the path of endurance to the uttermost as did Christ and His martyrs.

Perseverance for St. Polycarp, therefore, is a key virtue of the Christian life. This virtue, and the saint's argumentation for it are biblically rooted in the patient endurance, suffering and Passion of Christ. Christ is the prime example of endurance which Christians are to imitate. It is also a blessing received from Christ which brings with it joy and the reward of eternal fellowship with Christ. Perseverance is perhaps the bedrock of virtue in St. Polycarp's moral universe.

Given such an high evaluation of perseverance, it follows that not only Christ, but Christian martyrs, are highly prized. The promise of eternal fellowship of Christ is presented in discussion of them. They are the jewels of the elect as well and, after Christ, the most valuable models of what Christian righteousness means. Such an high evaluation of perseverance is biblically rooted and is attested to in St. Polycarp's constant citation of New Testament scriptures relevant to this subject. Yet this high regard for perseverance and the eminent examples of the martyrs reflects a very otherworldly spirituality in a world wherein Christians are a small minority living in an often hostile world. Being to some degree spiritual outsiders in a non-Christian age, endurance was a necessity and martyrdom a distinct possibility. The Church of Philippi had seen the examples of St. Ignatius of Antioch and his companions, the example of the founder of their church, the Holy Apostle Paul, as well as unnamed others of their own community. St. Polycarp himself would eventually die a martyr's death. Such things are valued by Christians in safer times, but take on a greater significance in an age wherein Christ's name can be costly. The *Epistle* therefore reflects well the atmosphere of early Roman Christianity.

³²*Epistle* 9:1.

³³*Epistle* 1:1.

³⁴*Epistle* 9:1-2. Philippians 2:16 and 1 Timothy 4:10 cited.

³⁵*Epistle* 8:2.

Mildness, Goodness, Forgiveness and Almsgiving

Building off his notion of Christian endurance and the hope of the martyrs, St. Polycarp writes the following.

Stand fast therefore in these things and follow the example of the Lord, "firm and unchangeable in faith, loving the brotherhood, affectionate to one another," joined together in the truth, forestalling one another in the gentleness of the Lord, despising no man. When you can do good defer it not, "for almsgiving sets free from death; be ye all subject one to the other, having your conversation blameless among the Gentiles," that you may receive praise "for your good works" and that the Lord be not blasphemed in you. "But woe to him through whom the name of the Lord is blasphemed." Therefore teach sobriety to all and show it forth in your own lives.³⁶

Following the example of the Lord in a firm and unchangeable faith leads immediately to other Christian virtues, especially the mild and charitable ones. Christians are united in truth and are to love one another. They are to be gentle. They are not to be respecters of persons. They are to despise no man. Citing Proverbs 3:28, St. Polycarp advises the exercise of goodness without delay. The striking admonition about almsgiving is taken from the deuterocanonical text, Tobit 4:10: "*because that alms do deliver from death ...*" Although this is the only reference to almsgiving in the *Epistle*, the citation of this text makes the point quite strikingly, highlighting the importance of almsgiving in St. Polycarp's moral universe. Believers are to practice humility as well, submitting themselves one to another. In contrast to what many might expect, such an heavy emphasis on patient endurance and the imitation of Christ's sufferings does not lead to dour religiosity, but rather to a loving faith which nurtures one's fellow man, whether believer or not.

"Wherefore girding up your loins serve God in fear" and truth, putting aside empty vanity and vulgar error, "believing on him who raised up our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead and gave him glory," and a throne on his right hand, "to whom are subject all things in heaven and earth," whom all breath serves, who is coming as "the Judge of the living and of the dead," whose blood God will require from them who disobey him. Now "he who raised him" from the dead "will also raise us up" if we do his will, and walk in his commandments and love the things which he loved, refraining from all unrighteousness, covetousness, love of money, evil speaking, false witness, "rendering not evil for evil, or railing for railing," or blow for blow, or curse for curse, but remembering what the Lord taught when he said, "Judge not that ye be not judged, forgive and it shall be forgiven unto you, be merciful that ye may obtain mercy, with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again," and, "Blessed are the poor, and they who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of God."³⁷

Citing 2 Corinthians 4:14, St. Polycarp exhorts that Christians who obey Christ's will, walk in His commandments, and love the things which Christ loves, will be resurrected by the One Who raised up Christ. What are the things which Christ loves? St. Polycarp lists them: the avoidance of unrighteousness, covetousness, love of money, slander, lying, railing, revenge, etc. Avoidance of these vices are

³⁶*Epistle* 10:1-3. New Testament texts cited are: 1 Corinthians 15:58, 1 Peter 2:17, Romans 12:10, Proverbs 3:28 (one of the few Old Testament citations in the *Epistle*), Tobit 4:10 (the only citation of a deuterocanonical text in the *Epistle*), Ephesians 5:21, Isaiah 52:5 (another Old Testament reference). The quotation and usage of Isaiah 52:3 closely resembles an argument in St. Ignatius' *To the Tralleans* VIII, and is perhaps cited from St. Ignatius' epistle.

³⁷*Epistle* 2:1-3. Biblical texts cited: 1 Peter 1:3, 9, 21; Acts 10:42; 2 Corinthians 4:14; Matthew 5:3, 10, 7:1-2; and Luke 6: 20-22, 36-38.

negative virtues, so to speak, i.e., sins best avoided. But what are the positive virtues which Christ loves? These are: restraint in judgement, forgiveness, mercy, poverty, and suffering for righteousness' sake. Serving God in fear therefore entails eschewing behavior which harms others in any way. But Christian virtue also involves mildness, mercy, forgiveness, and restraint from judgement. A proper believer is to be harmless, merciful and forgiving, to anger without sin, not letting to sun go down on his wrath.³⁸

The believers of Philippi, for example, are to be forgiving and moderate regarding the fallen presbyter Valens and his wife. They are not to "*regard such men as enemies,*" but instead "*call them back as fallible and straying members, that you may make whole the body of you all. For in doing this you edify yourselves. By mercy and forgiveness they are to restore the fallen members and thus restore the body of Christ.*"³⁹ Deacons are to be compassionate, avoiding behavior harming of others, like servants of God and Christ.⁴⁰ Presbyters must be sympathetic and merciful to all. They are to "*guide back the wanderers,*"⁴¹ attend to the sick, widows, orphans and paupers, "*always providing what is good before God and men.*"⁴² They are to refrain from anger, unfair judgement, respect of persons and love of money. Being mindful of their own sins, they should refrain from judging others. This is to serve Him in fear and reverence as He commanded and as the Apostles taught. For St. Polycarp, mildness, goodness, forgiveness, compassion, and acts of charity are essential characteristics of serving Him in fear and reverence. Christians are not only to endure, but are to love and be merciful.

Love of Money and Poverty

"*But the beginning of all evils is the love of money.' Knowing therefore that 'we brought nothing into the world and we can take nothing out of it,' let us arm ourselves with the armour of righteousness, and let us first of all teach ourselves to walk in the commandment of the Lord ...*"⁴³ Citing 1 Timothy 6:7 and 10, St. Polycarp establishes the love of money as antithetical to righteousness, reminding the Philippian believers as well of the vanity and fleeting nature of riches. Avarice is extremely dangerous, even causing the presbyter Valens to depreciate the dignity of the office bestowed upon him. Avarice even leads to idolatry and being reckoned as a pagan.⁴⁴ One either serves God or money, but not both.

Avoidance of avarice, however, is not emphasized in isolation. Its avoidance is to be accompanied with mildness, compassion, forgiveness and prayer. In chapter 2 of the *Epistle* cited above, covetousness and love of money are to be set aside, along with vengefulness, injustice, lying and slander. But its avoidance is to be accompanied with forgiveness, mercy and poverty.⁴⁵ Widows are to set aside the love of money, among other sins, and embrace prudence in faith and ceaseless prayer.⁴⁶ Deacons are to avoid avarice and slander, embracing temperance, compassion, and a life guided by the truth of the Lord Who became the servant of all.⁴⁷ Presbyters are to avoid all love of money, among other sins. They should be slow to judgement and forgiving, and practice mercy, caring for the poor, widows and orphans.⁴⁸

³⁸*Epistle* 12:1. Psalm 4:5 and Ephesians 4:26 cited.

³⁹*Epistle* 11:4. 2 Thessalonians 3:15.

⁴⁰*Epistle* 5:2.

⁴¹Ezekiel 34:4.

⁴²2 Corinthians 8:21.

⁴³*Epistle* 4:1.

⁴⁴*Epistle* 11:1-2.

⁴⁵*Epistle* 2:2-3.

⁴⁶*Epistle* 4:2.

⁴⁷*Epistle* 5:2.

⁴⁸*Epistle* 6:1-2.

The reference to presbyters is interesting in that here the avoidance of avarice is coupled with the positive virtue of practicing mercy for the poor. St. Polycarp's pithiest, but perhaps most powerful advocacy of almsgiving comes in chapter 10, wherein he cites Proverbs 3:28 and Tobit 4:10, "*When you can do good defer it not, 'for almsgiving sets free from death ...*"⁴⁹ Now is the time for the charity that saves from death. Although St. Polycarp does not couple this concept of charity with the avoidance of avarice directly, one suspects that the section addressing presbyters, avarice, and charitable acts toward the poor, indicates such a connection in St. Polycarp's mind. For St. Polycarp, avoidance of avarice is inseparable from charitable acts of mercy.

St. Polycarp's citation of the Beatitudes at the end of chapter 2 matches neither Matthew 5:3, 10 or Luke 6:20, 22 precisely. The citation concerning persecution for righteousness' sake clearly resembles Matthew 5:10. Yet St. Polycarp says, "*blessed are the poor,*" and not "*blessed are the poor in spirit,*" clearly resembling Luke 6:20.⁵⁰ St. Polycarp's scriptural citations are often not very precise since he often cites from memory. Yet it is telling that he should cite "*blessed are the poor*" rather than "*blessed are the poor in spirit.*" He would certainly have been known both texts as evident in his mixed citation of the Beatitudes, and his citation elsewhere of both Matthew and Mark⁵¹. But he cited the text blessing poverty over the one blessing humility. He certainly upheld humility as a desirable quality, but one suspects that St. Polycarp saw virtue in poverty itself, as reflected in Luke 6:20. Although he does not elaborate a theology of poverty (St. Polycarp develops no "higher theology" in the *Epistle*), one cannot ignore his preferred usage. Such an emphasis would also fit together well with his strong aversion to avarice. St. Polycarp very likely held to the ancient Christian tradition of poverty as virtue.

Blamelessness, Purity and Chastity

Blamelessness, purity and chastity are important virtues for St. Polycarp. Wives are to be taught, for example, to abide in the faith given to them, tenderly loving their husbands in love and purity, loving all others equally in all chastity.⁵² Deacons are to be "*blameless before his righteousness, as the servants of God and Christ and not of man,*" avoiding such sins as slander, avarice and lying. They are to practice temperance, compassion, carefulness and walk in the truth of the Lord Who was the servant of all. Young men are to be blameless in all things as well, cherishing purity above all things. They are to avoid the lusts of the world which war against the Spirit, effeminacy and sexual perversion, subjecting themselves to the deacons and presbyters as unto God and Christ. In a quick notice, virgins are required to "*walk with a blameless and pure conscience.*"⁵³ Purity and chastity are also among the virtue cited in St. Polycarp's final benediction, "*Now may God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the 'eternal Priest' himself, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, build you up in faith and truth, and in all gentleness, and without wrath, and in patience, and in longsuffering, and endurance, and purity, and may he give you lot and part with his saints ...*"⁵⁴ Neither blamelessness, purity, nor chastity are given specific definitions in the text, but their context gives a good sense of what is meant. For wives, purity is associated with the love due their husbands. Chastity, in this case, regards the love which wives owe others, chastity and the married state being compatible. To be chaste means keeping marital bonds intact. For the diaconate,

⁴⁹*Epistle* 10:1, Proverbs 3:28, Tobit 4:10.

⁵⁰*Epistle* 2:3, μακάριοι οἱ πτωχοί; Luke 6:20, μακάριοι οἱ πτωχοί; Matthew 5:3, μακάριοι οἱ πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι.

⁵¹See Richardson's notes concerning textual citations, allusions and similarities in, Richardson, "Saint Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, to the Philippians" 131-137.

⁵²*Epistle* 4:2.

⁵³*Epistle* 5:2-3.

⁵⁴*Epistle* 12:2.

blamelessness is inseparable from the integrity of this ministry. For young men, blamelessness and purity are inseparable from avoiding sexually predatory or perverse behavior. Such self-restraint is coupled with submission to the offices of the Church as well. Stubbornness regarding both sexual and churchly matters is discouraged. Self-restraint and submissiveness compliment each other. For virgins, blamelessness accompanies a good conscience. Blamelessness and purity, having different applications according to the context, are essential qualities for all Christians. They entail, therefore, the proper fulfillment of Christian responsibilities according to one's station, whether in avoiding sin or in fulfilling the positive moral requirements both of Christianity and one's office. Chastity can be maintained in marriage by loving one's partner and preserving the bonds of matrimony. Hence for St. Polycarp, blamelessness, purity and chastity are positive commissions as well as restraints from evil.

Heresy is Utterly Evil

Believers are to serve Christ in fear and reverence as He Himself commanded and as the Apostles taught. They are to be zealous for what is good, avoiding offenses, false brethren, and those who carry Christ's name in hypocrisy, i.e., heretics.⁵⁵ About heretics, St. Polycarp says the following:

"For everyone who does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is an anti-Christ"; and whosoever does not confess the testimony of the Cross is of the devil: and whosoever perverts the oracles of the Lord for his own lusts, and says that there is neither resurrection nor judgment, -- this man is the first-born of Satan. Wherefore, leaving the foolishness of the crowd, and their false teaching, let us turn back to the word which was delivered to us in the beginning, "watching unto prayer" and persevering in fasting, beseeching the all-seeing God in our supplications "to lead us not into temptation," even as the Lord said, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."⁵⁶

These are the harshest words St. Polycarp has to utter. Anyone who adheres to a docetic christology is an anti-Christ. Anyone who denies the resurrection of the dead and the Final Judgement is the first-born of Satan. Very harsh words indeed! Even pagans are more highly esteemed by St. Polycarp. The believers at Philippi are to avoid scandalous behavior lest non-believers blaspheme, indicating some value in the opinions of non-believers.⁵⁷ He also writes "'Pray for all the saints. Pray also for the Emperors, and for potentates, and princes, and for those who persecute you and hate you,' and for 'the enemies of the Cross' that 'your fruit may be manifest among all men, that you may be perfected' in him."⁵⁸ So pagan emperors and rulers, even persecutors, are beneficiaries of Christian prayer along with the saints, but not heretics. Although such prayer is scriptural and its purpose more for Christian edification than for the benefit of pagans, non-believers still profit from Christian prayer. Heretics do not. Furthermore, nowhere in the *Epistle* does St. Polycarp debate with heresy. He simply condemns it as seen in *Epistle 7*.

Why such severity? Heretics do not persevere in "*the word which was delivered to us in the beginning*."⁵⁹ This is made clearer when St. Polycarp's concludes his discussion of heresy in chapter 8, "*Let us then persevere unceasingly in our hope, and in the pledge of our righteousness, that is in Christ Jesus ...*"⁶⁰ Heresy is therefore the fruit of discarding one of St. Polycarp's prime virtues, perseverance;

⁵⁵*Epistle 6:3.*

⁵⁶*Epistle 7:1-2.* 1 John 4:2-3, 3:8; 1 Peter 4:7; Matthew 6:13, 26:41 cited.

⁵⁷*Epistle 10:2-3.*

⁵⁸*Epistle 12:3.* Ephesians 6:18, 1 Timothy 2:1, Matthew 5:44 and Philippians 3:18 cited.

⁵⁹*Epistle 7:2.*

⁶⁰*Epistle 8:1.*

specifically, perseverance in truth. One avoids heresy by perseverance in prayer and fasting. It is cured by abandoning the foolishness of the crowd and returning to the word taught in the beginning. Argumentative persuasion is not required and St. Polycarp offers none. Repentance and a return to perseverance in truth, however, are required. This reference to "*leaving the foolishness of the crowd*," however, is another clue concerning why St. Polycarp is so harsh towards heresy.⁶¹ Walter Bauer understands this phrase as reflecting the tenuous state of the Orthodox Christian community in Philippi, the heterodox being the majority.⁶² But whether the majority or not, the heterodox were very numerous indeed and the visible boundaries between heterodoxy and orthodoxy foggier than St. Polycarp would like. Therefore heresy was not merely a lapse from perseverance in truth, it was a popular and thus dangerous lapse as well. For St. Polycarp heresy, not persecution, was probably the worst enemy of the Church in Philippi and Smyrna.

Ecclesiology

Although ecclesiology is not discussed as a moral topic, the *Epistle* is an important source for understanding the development of the monarchical episcopacy in the early Church. St. Polycarp mentions two offices of the Church in the *Epistle*, the diaconate and the presbyterate.⁶³ Nothing is said about the episcopacy directly, although St. Polycarp himself is addressed by St. Ignatius of Antioch precisely as a bishop.⁶⁴ St. Ignatius is famous for his notion of the exalted and authoritative role of the bishop in the Church, i.e., the monarchical episcopacy.⁶⁵ But if such was St. Ignatius' notion of the episcopacy and he addressed St. Polycarp as a bishop, why is there no mention of the episcopacy in the *Epistle*? It is probable that St. Ignatius' language about the monarchical episcopacy, especially in its stridency, did not reflect current realities, but rather St. Ignatius' ideals.⁶⁶ The advice of *To Polycarp VI* and *To the Smyrnaeans VIII* to follow the bishop indicate that some Smyrnaean Christians did not follow St. Polycarp, whether due to heresy or some other reason. But Polycarp's opening greeting, "*Polycarp and the Presbyters who are with Him to the Church of God dwelling at Philippi ...*" might indicate that not all the presbyterate at Smyrna was allied with him.⁶⁷ But in the prologue of the *Epistle* he does distinguish himself from the presbyters, apparently hinting, albeit indirectly, at a distinct office of bishop, although perhaps the realities of the day may have circumscribed the extent of his authority at Smyrna. St. Polycarp mentions no bishop of Philippi, but this could simply be due to that church being run by a council of presbyters as was the church at Corinth.⁶⁸ In any case, in the *Epistle* one has little evidence, beyond the hint in the Prologue, that the episcopacy had emerged from the presbyterate noticeably. A

⁶¹*Epistle* 7:2, see also 2:1 One finds, τὴν τῶν πολλῶν πλάνην, "*the error of the many*" in 2:1 and τὴν ματαιότητα τῶν πολλῶν, "*the vanity of the many*," wherein "*the many*" refers to heretics, indicating that they were numerous.

⁶²Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy* 69-73.

⁶³*Epistle* 5:1-2, 6:1-2, and 11:1-4.

⁶⁴Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Ephesians XXI*, *To the Magnesians XV*, and *To Polycarp VII*.

⁶⁵Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Smyrnaeans VIII*, *IX*, *To Polycarp VI*, *To the Magnesians III*, *VII*.

⁶⁶Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy* 61-64.

⁶⁷*Epistle* Prologue. Walter Bauer certainly understands it this way, and with good reason. The text reads, Πολύκαρπος καὶ οἱ σὺν αὐτῷ πρεσβύτεροι, meaning "*Polycarp and the 'with him' presbyters*," which would seem to hint that there were presbyters not supportive of him. See Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy* 70-72.

⁶⁸Bauer suggests that there was a bishop at Philippi, but who was heretical and thus not an object of appeal for St. Polycarp. *Orthodoxy and Heresy* 73-74. While possible, this seems very speculative. It is just as likely that they were ruled by a college of presbyters as was the Church at Corinth. See *1 Clement* 44:1-6. In this text, the terms bishop and presbyter are used interchangeably (τῆς ἐπισκοπῆς in 44:1 and οἱ πρεσβύτεροι in 44:5) for the same office, indicating no distinction yet having arisen between the two in that community.

monarchical episcopacy was certainly not yet in practice. But such an episcopacy only really took solid shape by the end of the second century, Rome being one of the earlier instances of it.

The Style of the Epistle

Having reviewed some major hortatory themes, it is now worth discussing the style of the *Epistle*. It is an exhortative text which, upon the invitation of believers at Philippi, advocates righteousness as applied to various contexts. Being an epistle it follows an epistolary format, which is the limit of its literary pretensions. St. Polycarp was no man of letters so the style of the *Epistle* is rather simple. Having neither literary nor intellectual pretensions, he is instead the pastoral figure advocating righteousness and faithfulness to fellow believers. There is no higher theology in this text, rather moral exhortations, which is in accordance with the original request.

What stands out about the *Epistle*, however, is the utter frequency with which St. Polycarp cites Holy Writ, especially the New Testament. His citations are so extensive that the *Epistle* reads almost like a pastiche of New Testament citations. He claims not to know the Old Testament well, and this is reflected in his relatively sparse citation of it.⁶⁹ He holds the writings of St. Paul in very high esteem as he writes in *Epistle* 3:2, "For neither am I, nor is any other like me, able to follow the wisdom of the blessed and glorious Paul, who when he was among you in the presence of the men of that time taught accurately and steadfastly the word of truth, and also when he was absent wrote letters to you, from the study of which you will be able to build yourselves up into the faith given you ..." ⁷⁰ One sees this reflected in his frequent usage of Pauline and Pastoral New Testament literature. These texts, as well as 1 Peter are what he cites most. St. Polycarp's relation to and usage of the Pauline tradition have entire studies dedicated to them and are beyond the scope of this introductory study.⁷¹ But given St. Irenaeus' assertion of the personal familiarity of St. Polycarp with the disciple John, it is surprising that Johannine literature is cited so little. This study has found no citations from the Gospel of John. Yet St. Polycarp finds 1 John very useful in his vilification of docetic teachings since this epistle itself seems also to attack docetic tendencies.⁷² If the extent of his citations is anything to go by, theologically speaking, St. Polycarp stands more in the Pauline than in the Johannine tradition. Such frequent citation of New Testament literature also shows St. Polycarp to be less interested in developing his own theological maxims than in handing down what he had received from the Apostles. Marcion, Valentinus, et alia might express new thoughts, but for St. Polycarp the height of Christian theology was to persevere in and pass on Apostolic truth.

St. Polycarp as seen through the Epistle

In the *Epistle*, St. Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, emerges as an Apostolic man, a faithful teacher of the traditions he had personally received from the Apostles. In these traditions he would persevere, finally to perish as a martyr later in life. The lack of high theology need not indicate mediocre intellect, but rather

⁶⁹*Epistle* 12:1. Old Testament citations, deuterocanonicals inclusive, found in this study are *Epistle* 2.2: Psalm 150:6, Isaiah 57:16, Ezekiel 3:18; *Epistle* 10:1-3: Proverbs 3:28, Tobit 4:10, Isaiah 52:5 (possibly cited via Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Tralleans* VIII.); *Epistle* 11:2: Jeremiah 5:4; *Epistle* 12:1: Psalm 4:5 (LXX). He apparently also used *1 Clement* as a source. One finds many passages which remind one of that earlier letter, indicating St. Polycarp's familiarity with it. Quasten, *Patrology* 1 79. See also Richardson's frequent notations of allusions to or similarities with *1 Clement*, Richardson, "Saint Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, to the Philippians" 131-137.

⁷⁰*Epistle* 3.2.

⁷¹See Berding, *Polycarp and Paul* 230 p., also Hartog, *Polycarp and the New Testament* 281 p.

⁷²*Epistle* 7:1, 1 John 4:2-3, 3:8. See also Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* 383-394.

a desire to adhere closely to Apostolic teachings. Being a morally exhortative epistle, this text would have provided comparatively few occasions for theological contemplation, if such endeavors ever interested St. Polycarp. Not highly educated, he was hardly ignorant, his free citation of New Testament writings indicating no meagre intellectual capacity. Furthermore, if St. Irenæus' report is accurate that St. Polycarp refuted Marcionitism and Valentinianism by asserting the existence of *only one Apostolic tradition*, namely that of the Church, this would show St. Polycarp to possess a certain logical clarity since such an argument undermines the assertion of secret Apostolic traditions so fundamental to many early Christian heresies. Finally, he was a simple, pure, and holy man dedicated to the truth which he had received and to the Lord for Whom he would soon die. Reading the *Epistle*, his personal traits shine through the text. Having come to know St. Polycarp somewhat, it is appropriate to turn to the account of his martyrdom, the *Martyrium*.

The Martyrium Sancti Polycarpi

About the Text

The *Martyrium* is an epistle written by representatives of the Church of Smyrna to the Church at Philomelium, which was to forward the epistle to yet more churches since it was addressed not only to the Church at Philomelium, but also "*to all the sojournings of the Holy Catholic Church in every place.*" The events were summarized by a certain Marcianus, but penned by another called Everestus.⁷³

Previously this study established 22 February 156 as the mostly likely date of St. Polycarp's martyrdom. The date of the *Martyrium* hinges upon when one assumes the martyrdom to have occurred since it was probably composed shortly after the events reported. Since the martyrdom took place in early 156, this study assumes that it was composed in 156. The text as we possess it today consists of the original letter together with three later supplements: a chronological addendum (*Martyrium* 21:1), a postscript of commendation (*Martyrium* 22:1), and an history of the epistle's textual transmission (*Martyrium* 22:2-end.) The chronological addendum is very likely a genuine postscript to the epistle made by the author himself. The commendatory postscript could have been added by the Church at Philomelium in fulfillment of the request to forward this letter on to further congregations. The history of transmission, both in the expanded form of the Moscow manuscript (the best Greek text) and the other texts end with a note, supposedly by a certain Pionius who claimed to have rescued the text from near oblivion by finding old and fragile texts with the aid of a vision of St. Polycarp himself.⁷⁴

The reliability of much of the text as we have it and its early date is vouched by Eusebius who quotes much of the text and summarizes parts thereof in his Church History. The narrative of St. Polycarp's martyrdom as Eusebius cites it, contains mainly the events related in the *Martyrium*, which seemed to have been Eusebius' main interest. He omits the Prologue altogether. Of chapters 1-4, Eusebius quotes only the first half of *Martyrium* 1:1, summarizing the rest. Here his summarizing includes the events related to the martyrdom, omitting the text's theological sections. He then quotes a text which contains largely the content of *Martyrium* 5:1-19:1 (first half of 19:1 only), citing nothing after the first half of *Martyrium* 19:1. Unfortunately, this makes it impossible to verify the content and date these sections of the text, including the final postscripts. Eusebius includes the events related in the *Martyrium*, and what he cites, especially what he quotes, varies relatively little from the text as we have it, which tends to

⁷³*Martyrium* Prologue, 20:1-2

⁷⁴Grimm, "Introduction" 148-149. *Martyrium* 22:2-end.

exonerate the text as we have it. He omits most of the text's theologizing, the final addenda, and generally anything not relating the events of the martyrdom directly. Given his purpose for the text, to relate the events of St. Polycarp's martyrdom in his Church History, he may simply have omitted these portions as irrelevant for his purposes. So an absence of these sections from the *Historia Ecclesiastica* is no certain proof of their later interpolation. As reliable as Eusebius' citations of earlier texts often are, they are not always exact replicas of the original texts. To excise the sections in question, especially the theological ones, disrupts an otherwise unified text. The theology provides the intellectual justification of the events in the narrative, i.e., why St. Polycarp's martyrdom is so exemplary. This study therefore assumes the general reliability of the text as it currently exists, allowing for minor changes due to manual transmission or for to the possibility that Eusebius may have used a variant text of the *Martyrium*.⁷⁵

The *Martyrium* is the first Christian report of a martyrdom outside of the New Testament. It is a significant piece of literature since **A:** St. Polycarp was an important transmitter of Apostolic tradition, **B:** it is a report generated by eyewitnesses of the martyrdom and by those who knew them, making it a very reliable historical document, **C:** the text served as a literary model for narratives of martyrdoms to come, and **D:** the text provides evidence concerning early the Christian cultus. The *Martyrium* is therefore a vital piece of early Christian history and literature.

The Content of the Martyrium: A Brief Overview of Its Contents

To facilitate the study of the *Martyrium*, a brief overview of its contents is helpful in highlighting the general content of the document, and in this case, the general flow of events. The content of the *Martyrium* will be studied in more detail later in the study.

Prologue: Greetings of the Church of Smyrna to the Church of Philomelium.

Chapter 1: General Introduction to the *Epistle*: The martyrdom of St. Polycarp as a martyrdom on the "Gospel Model".

Chapter 2: Martyrdom according to God's Will: The noble endurance of the martyrs with the Lord's help.

Chapter 3: Martyrdom according to God's Will: The example of Germanicus and his companions.

Chapter 4: Martyrdom not according to God's Will: The failure of Quintus and his companions.

Chapter 5: St. Polycarp's Virtue and Courage: His departure from the city only at the behest of others. His vision of death by fire.

Chapter 6: St. Polycarp's Virtue and Courage: St. Polycarp sought for arrest. His betrayal.

Chapter 7: St. Polycarp's Virtue and Courage: His arrest, hospitality, and prayer.

Chapter 8: St. Polycarp's Virtue and Courage: His return to Smyrna, St. Polycarp firm before dissuasions of Herod and Nicetas. He arrives at the Stadium.

⁷⁵Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* IV:15.

Chapter 9: St. Polycarp's Virtue and Courage: St. Polycarp stands firm at his Interrogation.

Chapter 10: St. Polycarp's Virtue and Courage: St. Polycarp remains firm during his Interrogation.

Chapter 11: St. Polycarp's Virtue and Courage: St. Polycarp remains firm in spite of the Proconsul's threats.

Chapter 12: St. Polycarp's Virtue and Courage: St. Polycarp remains firm before the savage crowd. St. Polycarp's death by fire decreed, as prophesied earlier.

Chapter 13: St. Polycarp's Virtue and Courage: St. Polycarp remains firm before the savage crowd. The feverish preparations for his death.

Chapter 14: St. Polycarp's Virtue and Courage: His final prayer.

Chapter 15: St. Polycarp's Virtue and Courage: Death by fire initiated. The miracle.

Chapter 16: St. Polycarp's Virtue and Courage: St. Polycarp finally dispatched by sword.

Chapter 17: The Removal of St. Polycarp's Body: The body withheld from Christians through pagan and jewish treachery. Christian veneration of holy martyrs.

Chapter 18: The Removal of St. Polycarp's Body: St. Polycarp's body burnt and given to Christians. Cultic veneration of martyrs and relics.

Chapter 19: St. Polycarp's Virtue and Reputation: Conclusion, a martyrdom of the "Gospel Model."

Chapter 20: Final Salutations and Commendations: Events summarized by Marcianus and penned by Everestus. Send letter to other churches.

Chapter 21: Concluding Postscripts: Date of St. Polycarp's martyrdom,

Chapter 22: Concluding Postscripts: Commendation and history of textual transmission.

The Theology of the Text

As important as the events of St. Polycarp's are, they would appear rather naked without being dressed in the theology of the text, namely that what makes St. Polycarp's martyrdom so special is that it is a martyrdom on the "Gospel Model." "*For one might almost say that all that had gone before happened in order that the Lord might show to us from above a martyrdom in accordance with the Gospel.*"⁷⁶ Also, "*He was not only a famous teacher, but also a notable martyr, whose martyrdom all desire to imitate, for it followed the Gospel of Christ.*"⁷⁷ The "Gospel Model" of martyrdom is central to an accurate

⁷⁶*Martyrium* 1:1.

⁷⁷*Martyrium* 19:2.

understanding of the purpose of the text since it provides the theological framework in which the events of St. Polycarp's martyrdom are cast. The text is intended to provide spiritual exhortation and advice as well as a record of events transpired. The "Gospel Model" of martyrdom according to this text consists of two parts: **A**: Martyrdom according to God's will, and **B**: Martyrdom as an Imitation of Christ's Passion. Each subtopic will be discussed in detail below.

Martyrdom according to God's Will

Blessed then and noble are all the martyrdoms which took place according to the will of God, for we must be very careful to assign the power over all to God. For who would not admire their nobility and patience and love of their Master? For some were torn by scourging until the mechanism of their flesh was seen even to the lower veins and arteries, and they endured so that even the bystanders pitied them and mourned. And some even reached such a pitch of nobility that none of them groaned or wailed, showing to all of us that at that hour of their torture the noble martyrs of Christ were absent from the flesh, or rather that the Lord was standing by and talking with them. And paying heed to the grace of Christ they despised worldly tortures, by a single hour purchasing everlasting life. And the fire of their cruel torturers had no heat for them, for they set before their eyes an escape from the fire which is everlasting and is never quenched, and with the eyes of their heart they looked up to the good things which are preserved for those who have endured, 'which neither ear hath heard nor hath eye seen, nor hath it entered into the heart of man,' but it was shown by the Lord to them who were no longer men but already angels. And in the same way also those who were condemned to the beasts endured terrible torment, being stretched on sharp shells and buffeted with other kinds of various torments, that if it were possible the tyrant might bring them to a denial by continuous torture. For the devil used many wiles against them.⁷⁸

Chapter 2 of the *Martyrium*, cited above, lays out this document's theology of God-sanctioned martyrdom. When martyred in God's will, martyrs are blessed and noble, possessing such patience and love from their Master as to endure frightful torments. As an aside, it is worth noting the stark, unexaggerated realism of these descriptions, strong evidence of an eyewitness account. These martyrs heeded the grace of Christ and for the price of an hour purchased eternal life, becoming even now angels in the flesh. But how were they capable of such things? First of all, they were martyred according to God's will, hence the need to assign the power over all to God. This guaranteed God's blessing of their endeavors, as seen through His enabling them to endure nobly their final agonies or through the close fellowship of the Lord which they had in their final hour. Being martyred in God's will, they received the blessing and grace needed to fulfill their glorious but arduous task.

Germanicus and his companions, but especially Germanicus, are prime examples of martyrdom according to God's will.⁷⁹ Due to his courageous example, not one of this group of martyrs faltered. Being tossed to the beasts, he ignored the blandishments of the proconsul and pulled the beast nearer to himself, reminding the reader of St. Ignatius' desire to goad the beasts lest they be coy in devouring him.⁸⁰ But what precisely makes one's martyrdom according to God's will? The bad example of Quintus reveals this.⁸¹ Quintus was a recent arrival from Pontus. He had forced himself and some others to step

⁷⁸*Martyrium* 2:1-4.

⁷⁹*Martyrium* 3:1-2.

⁸⁰Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Romans* 5.

⁸¹*Martyrium* 4:1.

forward for martyrdom of their own accord.⁸² He gave in to the proconsul's blandishments and sacrificed, the fate of his companions being unreported. About this the composers of the *Martyrium* write, "For this reason, therefore, brethren, we do not commend those who give themselves up, since the Gospel does not give this teaching."⁸³ One should not step forward or presume to take martyrdom upon oneself. Proper martyrdom is what God allows and others bring to one, not what one brings upon himself.

This was an important issue for the Church during the age of persecutions. Although not all voluntary martyrdoms were condemned, the Church did not typically recommend such behavior since it suffered sufficiently from the effects of persecution already. The *Martyrium* is unambiguous, however. Voluntary martyrdom is forbidden since it is not taught by the Gospel. St. Polycarp's own martyrdom was a model martyrdom in this regard since, although he did not flee martyrdom, he did not seek it out either.⁸⁴

St. Polycarp's martyrdom is portrayed as exemplary with regard to these points. He neither sought his martyrdom out nor fled it, leaving the city for the local countryside only when pressed to do so by fellow believers.⁸⁵ Evidence of divine aid is apparent in the courage and wit he displayed before the magistracy.⁸⁶ It is seen in the heavenly voice heard by believers saying, "Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man."⁸⁷ The divinely given gift of endurance is evident in Polycarp being bound by rope to the stake without nails lest he break free.⁸⁸ God's blessing of St. Polycarp's exemplary martyrdom is evident in the miracle of the fire not consuming his body, the arising of a sweet aroma, and his piercing producing such an outpouring of blood that it extinguished the fire.⁸⁹ In short, St. Polycarp's martyrdom is blessed and worthy of imitation since it meets and exceeds the criteria needed for a divinely sanctioned martyrdom.

Martyrdom as an Imitation of Christ's Saving Passion

We write to you, brethren, the story of the martyrs and of the blessed Polycarp, who put an end to the persecution by his martyrdom as though adding the seal. For one might almost say that all that had gone before happened in order that the Lord might show to us from above a martyrdom in accordance with the Gospel. For he waited to be betrayed as also the Lord had done, that we too might become his imitators, "not thinking of ourselves alone, but also of our neighbours." For it is the mark of true and steadfast love, not to wish that oneself may be saved alone, but all the brethren also.⁹⁰

St. Polycarp's martyrdom was also an ideal martyrdom since it followed Christ's saving Passion as a model. As a result, the saint provided an example of martyrdom to be imitated by others. In the text cited

⁸²*Martyrium* 4:1. The verb παραβιάζομαι, meaning "to force" or "to prevail upon," is used, implying that, without God's blessing, i.e. when one forces a martyrdom and does not let it come about in God's will, one is left with one's own resources, which are shown clearly not to be adequate.

⁸³*Martyrium* 4:1. Literally, οὐκ ἐπαινοῦμεν τοὺς προσιόντας ἑαυτοῖς, "we do not praise those who make themselves approach." Martyrdom is to be voluntary in the sense of accepting it should it come, but without provoking it on one's own initiative.

⁸⁴*Martyrium* 5:1, 7:1-3.

⁸⁵*Martyrium* 5:1, 7:1.

⁸⁶*Martyrium* 8:1-11:2.

⁸⁷*Martyrium* 9:1.

⁸⁸*Martyrium* 13:3.

⁸⁹*Martyrium* 15:1-16:2.

⁹⁰*Martyrium* 1:1-2.

Saint Polycarp: Bishop, Martyr, and Teacher of Apostolic Tradition

above, St. Polycarp imitated Christ in waiting to be betrayed and thus tending to the salvation of others. Yet there are many more examples of such imitation in the *Martyrium*.

St. Polycarp's vision and memorable statement, "*I must be burnt alive*," indicates foreknowledge of his coming fate, imitating Christ's foreknowledge of His own fate at Golgotha.⁹¹ He was, like Christ betrayed by his own so that his lot would be to partake in Christ whereas his betrayer's lot would be the punishment of Judas.⁹² The list of imitations is, in fact, long enough to justify another table, namely a table of Christ - St. Polycarp parallels found in this study (including as well some parallels with St. Paul as reported in Acts).

Christ and St. Polycarp foreknew their fates: *Martyrium* 5:2, 12:3;
Matthew 16:21-23, 26:31; Luke 18:33, 24:44-47; Mark 14:8; John 16:5-32, 18:4.

Christ and St. Polycarp waited to be betrayed: *Martyrium* 1:1;
Matthew 26:36-57; Mark 14:32-41; Luke 22:39-54; John 17:1-18:12.

Christ and St. Polycarp prayed before being taken: *Martyrium* 5:1, 7:3;
Matthew 26:36-45; Mark 14:32-41; Luke 22:39-46; John 17:1-26, 18:1-12.

Christ and St. Polycarp fled not their fates: *Martyrium* 5:1-2, 7:1-3;
Matthew 26: 36-54; Mark 14:32-50; Luke 22:39-54; John 18:1-12.

Christ and St. Polycarp were betrayed by their own: *Martyrium* 6:1-7:1;
Matthew 26:21-25, 46-50; Mark 14:1-20, 42-46; Luke 22:21-23, 47-48; John 18:1-5.

Christ and St. Polycarp faced persecutors named "Herod": *Martyrium* 6:2;
Luke 23:7-12.

Christ and St. Polycarp were seized as bandits: *Martyrium* 7:1;
Matthew 26:55; Mark 14:48-49; Luke 22:52-53.

Christ and St. Polycarp submitted to God's will: *Martyrium* 7:1;
Matthew 26:40-43; Mark 14:36; John 18:11; (Imitating St. Paul? Acts 21:1-14).

Christ and St. Polycarp enter the city riding an ass: *Martyrium* 8:1;
Matthew 21:1-11; John 12:12-23.

Christ and St. Polycarp face the enraged crowd: *Martyrium* 12:2;
Matthew 27:15-26; Mark 15:6-15; Luke 23:17-25; John 19:12-15; (Again like St. Paul: Acts 16:14-22, 19:24-41).

Christ and St. Polycarp as sacrifices acceptable to God: *Martyrium* 14:1-2;
John 12:52; Ephesians 5:2; Hebrews 7:27-28, etc. (Crucifixion narratives) Matthew 27:20-66;
Mark 15:15-39; Luke 23:25-54; .

⁹¹*Martyrium* 5:2, 12:3; Matthew 16:21-23, 26:31; Luke 18:33, 24:44-47; Mark 14:8; John 16:5-32, 18:4, etc.

⁹²*Martyrium* 6:1-7:1; Matthew 26:21-25, 46-50; Mark 14:1-20, 42-46; Luke 22:21-23, 47-48; John 18:1-5, etc.

Christ's and St. Polycarp's sacrifices as sweet aromas: *Martyrium* 15:2;
Ephesians 5:2.

Christ and St. Polycarp prayed before their deaths: *Martyrium* 14:1-3;
Luke 23:34.

Christ and St. Polycarp both are pierced: *Martyrium* 16:1;
John 19:24.

Such parallels can hardly be coincidental. In some, but not all, instances, the text states the parallels explicitly, as when it notes that both Christ and St. Polycarp waited to be betrayed.⁹³ It also notes that both Christ and St. Polycarp had persecutors named Herod and it compares the fate of St. Polycarp's betrayer with the fate of Judas.⁹⁴ But in most cases, the parallels are left for the reader to discern. What is the significance of this? St. Polycarp's martyrdom is not ideal because of passing similarities with Christ's Passion. It is ideal since it was according to God's will, imitating Christ's Passion in close detail. For this reason it is blessed and worthy of imitation. This theology provides the intellectual framework into which the narrative of St. Polycarp's martyrdom is cast. It is this theological understanding of St. Polycarp's death which makes it significant as a model for faithful Christians.

This was no moot issue for the Church in the age of persecutions. Although persecution was not a constant threat, it was a possible one before the rise of Constantine. Demonstrating this point, even St. Polycarp's relics were a source of comfort and strength for those in the Christian community at Smyrna facing martyrdom.⁹⁵ Without this theological insight, St. Polycarp's demise could be just another execution. The theological meaning of St. Polycarp's martyrdom is the intellectual core and binding motif of the *Martyrium*. It makes explicit the meaning of the events of St. Polycarp's martyrdom.

Yet one also finds apparent parallels with St. Paul as reported in Acts. St. Paul, and eventually the disciples at Tyre, submitted to God's will concerning St. Paul's arrest and eventual martyrdom.⁹⁶ St. Paul also faced crowds enraged, especially at his preaching.⁹⁷ St. Polycarp's crowd cried, "*This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our Gods, who teaches many neither to offer sacrifice nor to worship.*"⁹⁸ This reminds one of the enraged Ephesians of Acts 19:24-41 who decried the apparent threat to the cult of Diana of Ephesus, crying, "*Moreover ye see and hear, that not alone at Ephesus, but almost throughout all Asia, this Paul hath persuaded and turned away much people, saying that they be no gods, which are made with hands: so that not only this our craft is in danger to be set at nought; but also that the temple of the great goddess Diana should be despised, and her magnificence should be destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worshippeth.*"⁹⁹ Furthermore, St. Polycarp is willing to set an appointment to present the faith to the proconsul out of respect for his position, seen as God-given.¹⁰⁰ This reminds one of St. Paul's presentation of the faith before Agrippa in Acts 25:14-26:16 and seems informed by the theology of Romans 13:1-7 which understands secular authority as divinely ordained. These parallels are less frequent than those with Christ, but they are striking

⁹³*Martyrium* 1:2.

⁹⁴*Martyrium* 6:2.

⁹⁵*Martyrium* 18:3.

⁹⁶Acts 21:1-14.

⁹⁷Acts 16:14-22, 19:24-41.

⁹⁸*Martyrium* 12:2..

⁹⁹Acts 19:26-27.

¹⁰⁰*Martyrium* 10:2.

nonetheless. Although not central to the text's theology of martyrdom, this theme does reflect a certain appreciation of the example and ministry of St. Paul as well as an affinity to Pauline traditions in the Church at Smyrna.

The Martyrium Sancti Polycarpi as Hagiography

The *Martyrium Sancti Polycarpi* belongs to the literary genre of hagiography. Hagiography is the literary genre which deals with the lives of saints within the context of the cultus of the Church and the edification of believers. In short, hagiography is the literature which has as its topic the lives of the saints as remembered by the Church. This differs from historiographical literature, which strives to record and interpret events and their historical significance. The hagiographer does not usually strive to relate events exactly as they supposedly occurred, but reports them according to certain theological assumptions as molded by the literary rules of this genre. The hagiographer is expected not just to "state the facts," but to compose a narrative according to certain theological insights cast into certain literary forms. To read them as historical narratives contradicts their purpose and leads to misreading the text since the theology inculcated is more the issue than the facts reported.

Very often, however, when one wants to know the biography of a given saint or martyr, one only has hagiographical texts available as evidence. Ought one therefore to despair of finding firm historical data concerning these saints? Not always. Depending upon the nature of the texts available, one can derive much history from hagiographical literature. To do so, one must: **A:** establish the type of hagiographical work one is studying, **B:** understand the characteristics of hagiography, and **C:** discern the theological motivations of the composer. This is never an exact method, but this is what this study attempts regarding the *Martyrium*. The theological themes have already been discussed. So now is a good time to establish points A and B concerning this text.

About the Text: What sort of record is it?

The *Martyrium* is an hagiographical narrative about a martyrdom. Such reports fall into several categories, as seen below.¹⁰¹ This study utilizes Delehaye's categorization of the Acts of Martyrs and hagiographical documents according to their degree of historical reliability.

Official written reports of the interrogations of martyrs, or *Acta*: These usually have not survived alone but have been incorporated into Christian texts of edification. Even these are comparatively scarce, but when encountered, such interrogations are quite impressive. These are very reliable sources. Examples: *Passio Cypriani* and the *Acta Martyrum Scillitanorum*.

Accounts of eyewitnesses, or of well informed contemporaries with reports and recollections of eyewitnesses: These include **A:** reports of eye-witnesses writing in their own name, **B:** reports of contemporaries presenting the evidence of others, and **C:** a combination of both of these types of reports. Such narratives can also be quite impressive and reliable historically, but have much more room for subjective content, such as theological elaboration. These too are comparatively scarce. Example: *Martyrium Sancti Polycarpi*.

Acts of which the principle source is a written document of the first two categories above: Here the original records can be redacted, interpolated, and recast extensively. Without earlier records and

¹⁰¹Delehaye, *Legends of the Saints* 89-93.

evidence, it can be very difficult to verify the historical content of these texts. The most which can be established here are the theological purposes of the composer or redactor. Examples: some of the work of Symeon Metaphrastes.

Historical Romances: These are acts based on no written records, a few real particulars accompanied with a purely imaginary framework. These are very numerous. Without earlier texts and evidence, historical data can be very hard to find. Outside of the saint's name, the existence of his shrine, and the date of his feast, one can establish the theological purposes of the composer or redactor. Examples: the whole series of cycles of the Roman *Legendarium*.

Imaginative Romances: Here the hero or heroine is an imaginative invention. Outside of the text's theology or literary history one finds nothing here historically speaking. Examples: The Passion of St. Nicophorus, and Barlaam and Joasaph - a Christian reworking of one of the legends of the life of the Buddha.

Forgeries: Documents written to deceive the reader. Examples: the Cypriot legend concerning St. Barnabas and the translation of St. Denis to Ratisbonne.

Of the categories above, only the first two are very useful for establishing any biographical data concerning the saint in question. These are usually composed within one generation of the saint's life.¹⁰² Narratives composed later, typically narratives of the last three categories, tend to be popular but fantastic, any historical data being overwhelmed with imaginative content conforming to the composer's interest's and the literary genre's demands. The *Martyrium* belongs to the second category, subcategory C, a narrative containing the reports of eyewitnesses and contemporaries presenting the reports of others. It is a document genuine beyond any reasonable question. Hence it is an excellent witness concerning the martyrdom of St. Polycarp. It is reckoned as *Acta*, but not in the strict sense of containing any official Roman records, rather *Acta* in the wider sense of a narrative about a martyr's trial and death. In the stricter sense, it belongs to the literary genre of the epistle, as does also the *Epistle*.¹⁰³

About the Text: How is it molded by the characteristics of Hagiography?

Traditional TV Westerns tend to have very similar plots, although there are many of them and they can differ in some details. But they tend to have a standard plot format, each movie often being a variation of a common theme. The same can be said for hagiographical literature, in this case, the acts of a martyr. One may find variations in detail, especially in texts closer to the events reported, but the general format tends to be same. This is expected when watching a traditional TV Western, one expects certain things, so too with hagiographical reports. If they vary widely from the expected format, they are likely to be seen as odd and suffer in popularity. It must be remembered that hagiography is a popular literature and not an high art form.

What are the typical characteristics of the acts of a martyr? Frequently, they include the following: **A:** the occurrence of persecution of Christians, **B:** the arrest of many Christians, of which the hero is one, **C:** the saint's imprisonment, **D:** the saint's interrogation and confession of faith, **E:** the tortures endured by

¹⁰²Unfortunately, the works fitting into these categories are rather few, including the acts of SS. Polycarp, Justinus, the Martyrs of Lyons, the Scillitan Martyrs, Perpetua and Felicitas, Cyprianus, Fructuosus, Jacob and Marianus, Maximilianus, Marcellus and Cassianus Tingitanus. Delehaye, *Legends of the Saints* 78-79, 89-93.

¹⁰³Gerd Buschmann considers the *Martyrium Sancti Polycarpi* as a *Mischgattung*, a mixed category, being *Acta* in content but an epistle in literary form. See Buschmann, *Das Martyrium des Polykarp* 47-48.

the saint, and **F**: his death and post-mortem miracles. To this can be added such things as the names of the saint's parents, his state of life, his personal qualities, his life and adventures, the conversions he brought about, his miracles, the visions with which he was favored, and so forth.¹⁰⁴ Of these features, the *Martyrium* shares the following: the occurrence of persecution of Christians, the arrest of many Christians, of which the hero is one, the saint's interrogation and confession of faith, the tortures endured by the saint, his miracles, the visions with which he was favored, his death.

The *Martyrium* contains a significant historical core, although historiography in the modern sense was certainly not intended. It was composed to relate the martyrdom of St. Polycarp in such a way as to edify its readers through its theological interpretation of the events. The subjective content mentioned in the second category of Acta is evident in this theologization, namely, the discussion of martyrdom according to God's will and St. Polycarp's martyrdom being on the Gospel model.¹⁰⁵ But the *Martyrium* is not considered an hagiographical legend as is the *Vita Sancti Polycarpi* attributed to Pionius.¹⁰⁶ Such legends can become quite expansive, stereotypical, even monotonous in their regularity. The most popular candidates for such hagiographical elaboration are the sections concerning the martyr's trials and torments since these are the most amenable for padding a narrative out to the desired length. Exaggerations are common here, the judges being terribly fierce, the persecutions most heavy and utterly dark, punishments meted out ferocious beyond measure. The saint is made utterly heroic, eloquent, clever and verbose. Stock speeches are commonly interpolated into the text, being excerpted from appropriate treatises and adapted as necessary. Torments can be drawn out beyond credible length and miracles overwrought to the point of absurdity.¹⁰⁷

Such extensive and exaggerated reworking is not present in the *Martyrium*. The torment St. Polycarp endures consists mainly of his execution by fire. The account of it is neither long-winded nor morose. It is rather brief, his entire execution taking only the equivalent of a couple short paragraphs.¹⁰⁸ The failure of the fire to consume the saint's body, the precaution of dispatching by sword, and the blood of St. Polycarp quenching the fire are interpreted miraculously but are not terribly unrealistic in themselves.¹⁰⁹ Yet these details concerning the saint's execution serve their purpose of indicating the divine blessing of a martyrdom according to God's will. The descriptions of torment in chapter 2 are comparatively brief, but are chillingly realistic. One suspects that the reporters really saw such torments.¹¹⁰ Yet these reports serve their purpose of demonstrating the divine support true martyr's can expect to receive. The final prayer of St. Polycarp appears to be an early Eucharistic prayer inserted into the narrative by the original composers and adapted as needed. It is thus of interest in its own right for the history of Christian worship. Although maybe a little unrealistic in the context, it serves its purpose, portraying St. Polycarp as a willing martyr and a pleasing sacrifice. As discussed earlier, it also provides another example of St. Polycarp's martyrdom imitating Christ's death, being a martyrdom on the Gospel model.¹¹¹ His prophetic vision of execution by fire and its fulfillment are hardly incredible. They are brief and illustrate another parallel between Christ's and St. Polycarp's deaths, namely their

¹⁰⁴Delehaye, *Legends of the Saints* 68-70, 115.

¹⁰⁵*Martyrium* 1:1-2, 2:1-4:1, 19:1-2.

¹⁰⁶Aigrain, *L'Hagiographie* 156-157.

¹⁰⁷Delehaye, *Legends of the Saints* 19-20, 68-71. Aigrain, *L'Hagiographie* 145-148.

¹⁰⁸*Martyrium* 15:1-16:2.

¹⁰⁹The fire could easily have been underlit, making it unable to consume St. Polycarp's body. The blood extinguishing the fire is perhaps not so utterly unrealistic considering how much of the body consists of fluids and the expansive effects of heat. The dove's appearance, however, is not preserved in Eusebius' version of the text and one suspects it to be a flourish added later. See Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* IV:15.

¹¹⁰*Martyrium* 2:2-4.

¹¹¹*Martyrium* 14:1-3.

foreknowledge of them.¹¹² The events narrated have specific theological notions to express, but such theologizing does not obliterate the historical kernel of events.

St. Polycarp's interrogation is comparatively brief as well, being the equivalent of four short paragraphs.¹¹³ It has not been so stylized as to erase St. Polycarp's personality and replace it with an impersonal model as in common in legends of the saints.¹¹⁴ Polycarp's quip in response to the proconsul's order to revile Christ has a genuine touch of the real St. Polycarp. "*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?*"¹¹⁵ When advised earlier to denounce atheism, one senses sarcasm in St. Polycarp's response as reported, "*But Polycarp, with a stern countenance looked on all the crowd of lawless heathen in the arena, and waving his hand at them, he groaned and looked up to heaven and said: 'Away with the Atheists.'*"¹¹⁶ The theological elaborations in the narrative are clear, showing St. Polycarp to be inspired in speech by the Holy Spirit without need of premeditation.¹¹⁷ Yet they have not eradicated the real St. Polycarp. In short, a strong historical core shines through in the theological elaborations of the *Martyrium* as one sees also in other early historical accounts of martyrdoms. Such early martyrdoms, as our text and others such as the acts of SS. Perpetua and Felicitas and of St. Cyprian, tend to have real variations in detail and genuinely unique points. In later legends, the thematic content becomes everything, often producing a certain inflexibility and monotony.¹¹⁸ The early historical accounts of martyrdom are unfortunately rather scarce compared to the volume of martyrdom narratives available.

A quick defense of the legends of the saints is now in order. These texts are useful for their original purposes, namely Christian edification. Even though such texts usually provide little useful historical information about the saints being covered, they still have theological and spiritual value. Historically speaking, they can reveal much about the values of their authors and at times information about the history of a given saint's cultus, about the history of religions, and so forth. To question the existence of saints recorded only in such legends is unwarranted. But such texts in themselves cannot be considered sound sources for historical research about the saint in question. They are good for what they are intended, sources of Christian edification.

A final note about the *Martyrium* and hagiography is worth making. This work is the first hagiographical narrative of a Christian martyrdom outside of the New Testament. If it fits the model of martyriological hagiography well, it is because it produced the mold, being the first of its kind. Certainly most *Acta* are not epistles as is our text, but their content is very similar. Analyzing the influence of the *Martyrium* on later works is beyond the scope of this study. But being the first of its kind and intended for wide distribution, it is hardly unlikely that it served as a model for later martyriological narratives.

The Martyrium Sancti Polycarpi and the Cult of the Martyrs

But the jealous and envious evil one who resists the family of the righteous, when he saw the greatness of his martyrdom, and his blameless career from the beginning, and that he was crowned with the crown of immortality, and had carried off the unspeakable prize, took care that

¹¹²*Martyrium* 5:2, 12:2.

¹¹³*Martyrium* 8:1-11:2.

¹¹⁴Delehaye, *Legends of the Saints* 19-20.

¹¹⁵*Martyrium* 9:3.

¹¹⁶ *Martyrium* 9:2. Christianity was often accused of being atheistic in denying the ancient gods.

¹¹⁷See Matthew 12:17-20, Mark 13:9-11, and Luke 12:11-12.

¹¹⁸Delehaye, *Legends of the Saints* 19-20.

not even his poor body should be taken away by us, though many desired to do so, and to have fellowship with his holy flesh. Therefore he put forward Niketas, the father of Herod, and the brother of Alce, to ask the Governor not to give his body, "Lest," he said, "they leave the crucified one and begin to worship this man." And they said this owing to the suggestions and pressure of the Jews, who also watched when we were going to take it from the fire, for they do not know that we shall not ever be able either to abandon Christ, who suffered for the salvation of those who are being saved in the whole world, the innocent for sinners, or to worship any other. For him we worship as the Son of God, but the martyrs we love as disciples and imitators of the Lord; and rightly, because of their unsurpassable affection toward their own King and Teacher. God grant that we too may be their companions and fellow-disciples.

When therefore the centurion saw the contentiousness caused by the Jews, he put the body in the midst, as was their custom, and burnt it. Thus we, at last, took up his bones, more precious than precious stones, and finer than gold, and put them where it was meet. There the Lord will permit us to come together according to our power in gladness and joy, and celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom, both in memory of those who have already contested, and for the practice and training of those whose fate it shall be. ¹¹⁹

Chapters 17 and 18 of the *Martyrium* quoted above are of extraordinary historical value since they provide the earliest evidence for the Christian cultic veneration of martyrs and their relics, showing the hoar antiquity of such veneration.¹²⁰ The Church at Smyrna celebrates annually the memory of St. Polycarp on the day of his death, a practice now traditional in the Orthodox Church. Veneration of the martyr's relics are already a developed and inseparable part of this cultic celebration, both commemorating previous martyrs and preparing those to come. Already, the theology of veneration is mature. The saints *worship* Christ as the Son of God, but *love* the martyrs as disciples and imitators of the Lord.¹²¹ Already a clear distinction in form and quality of worship between that due to God and that due to the martyrs is designated and conceptualized in a way intelligible to modern Orthodox Christians. This maturity reveals that such worship and theology had already been in development from the earliest days of Christianity since such things do not appear at once fully developed. Such practices and theology of worship, which are essential to Orthodox Christian worship, are therefore not later deviations but arise from the earliest days of Christianity.¹²²

Final Conclusion

Both the *Epistle* and the *Martyrium* have shown themselves to be valuable sources of edification as well as sources for first hand information about St. Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna. In fact, these are the primary sources available concerning the sainted bishop. From the *Epistle* one receives a taste of St. Polycarp's personal qualities. He appears to have been a simple and merciful man with a profound faith in our Lord, God, and Savior, Jesus Christ. He reveals himself in his letter as a man of purity and sincerity. He strove to be an Apostolic teacher who handed down faithfully what he received. He sought to be true to his Lord all things.

¹¹⁹*Martyrium* 17:1-18:3.

¹²⁰Delehay, *Les Origines du Culte des Martyrs* 41, 46.

¹²¹With regard to the Lord, προσκυνέω, "to venerate, revere, adore, or worship" is the term used whereas concerning the martyrs, ἀγαπάω, "be fond of, love, show affection" is used. The distinction between the two sorts of worship are already distinguished conceptually and terminologically.

¹²²Delehay, *Les Origines du Culte des Martyrs* 40-41, 51.

Saint Polycarp: Bishop, Martyr, and Teacher of Apostolic Tradition

The *Martyrium* confirms this last point when it reports, "*Such was the lot of the blessed Polycarp, who though he was, together with those from Philadelphia, the twelfth martyr in Smyrna, is alone especially remembered by all, so that he is spoken of in every place, even by the heathen. He was not only a famous teacher, but also a notable martyr, whose martyrdom all desire to imitate, for it followed the Gospel of Christ.*"¹²³ He was famous as a teacher, but the *Martyrium* also shows him to be courageous and reveals the depth of his fidelity to Christ, having striven unto blood for the faith. Such was the saint's fidelity to Christ that the Church at Smyrna even saw his martyrdom as a model worthy of imitation due to its adherence to Christ and the Gospel. St. Polycarp of Smyrna is one of the strongest historical and spiritual links between the Apostolic age and subsequent ages of the Church. He remains today a vital Apostolic witness in Orthodox tradition and merits the reverence of all Orthodox Christians. May we always be the beneficiaries of his prayers.

¹²³*Martyrium* 19:1.

Selected Bibliography:

Das Martyrium des Polycarp (intro., ed. and German trans. Gerd Buschmann; Kommentar zu den Apostolischen Vätern 6; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998).

"The Martyrdom of Saint Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, as Told in the Letter of the Church of Smyrna to the Church of Philomelium" *Early Christian Fathers* (trans. Cyril C. Richardson, Th.D., D.D.; LCC 1; New York: Collier Books, 1970) 149-158.

"The Martyrdom of St. Polycarp," *The Apostolic Fathers* (trans. Francis X. Glimm, S.T.L.; Fathers of the Church 1; New York: Christian Heritage, 1948) 151-163.

Aigrain, René. *L'hagiographie : ses sources, ses méthodes, son histoire* (Mayenne: Bloud & Gay, 1953).

Bauer, Walter. *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Early Christianity* (ed. and trans. Robert A. Kraft; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971).

Berding, Kenneth. *Polycarp and Paul: Analysis of their Literary & Theological Relationship in light of Polycarp's use of Biblical & Extra-Biblical Literature* (Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae* 62; Leiden: Brill, 2002).

Brown, Raymond E., S.S. *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997).

Buschmann, Gerd. *Das Martyrium des Polycarp* (German trans. Gerd Buschmann; Kommentar zu den Apostolischen Vätern 6; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998).

Clement of Rome. "The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians," *The Apostolic Fathers I* (trans. Kirsopp Lake: LCL; London: William Heinemann, 1985).

Clement of Rome. "The Letter of the Church of Rome to the Church of Corinth, Commonly Called Clement's First Letter," *Early Christian Fathers* (ed. and trans. Cyril C. Richardson; LCC 1; New York: Collier Books, 1970) 43-73.

Delehaye, Hippolyte, S.I. *Les Origines du Culte des Martyrs* (Brussels: La Société des Bollandistes, 1912).

Delehaye, Hippolyte, S.I. *The Legends of the Saints* (trans. Donald Attwater; Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 1998).

Eusèbe de Césarée. *Histoire Ecclésiastique Livres I - IV* (French trans. Gustave Bardy; Sources Chrétiennes 31; Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1952).

Eusebius of Caesarea. *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine* (trans. G. A. Williamson; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1975).

Grimm, Francis X., S.T.L. "Introduction," *The Apostolic Fathers* (trans. Francis X. Grimm, S.T.L.: Fathers of the Church 1; New York: Christian Heritage, 1947) 147-150.

Saint Polycarp: Bishop, Martyr, and Teacher of Apostolic Tradition

Harrison, Percy Neale. *Polycarp's Two Epistles to the Philippians* (Cambridge: 1936).

Hartog, Paul. *Polycarp and the New Testament: the Occasion, Rhetoric, Theme, and Unity of the Epistle to the Philippians and its Allusions to New Testament Literature* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament. 2. Reihe 134; Tübingen: J.C.B Mohr, 2002).

Ignatius of Antioch. "The Epistles of Saint Ignatius," (trans. Kirsopp Lake: LCL; London: William Heinemann, 1985).

Ignatius of Antioch. "The Letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch," *The Apostolic Fathers* (trans. Gerald G. Walsh, S.J., M.A.[Oxon], Ph.D., S.T.D.; Fathers of the Church 1; New York: Christian Heritage, 1948) 67-133.

Irenæus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* (Rev. Alexander Roberts, D.D., and James Donaldson, LL.D.; ANF 1; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985) 315-567.

Kümmel, Georg Werner. *Introduction to the New Testament* (trans. Howard Clark Kee; Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1981).

Polycarp of Smyrna. "The Epistle to the Philippians of Saint Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna and Holy Martyr," (trans. Kirsopp Lake: LCL; London: William Heinemann, 1985).

Polycarp of Smyrna. "The Letter of Saint Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, to the Philippians," *Early Christian Fathers* (trans. Cyril C. Richardson, Th.D., D.D.; LCC 1; New York: Collier Books, 1970) 131-137.

Polycarp of Smyrna. "The Letter of St. Polycarp to the Philippians," *The Apostolic Fathers* (trans. Francis X. Glimm, S.T.L.; Fathers of the Church 1; New York: Christian Heritage, 1948) 135-143.

Quasten, Johannes. *Patrology 1* (Christian Classics; Westminster, MD: 1984) 76-82.

Richardson, Cyril C. "Introduction," and "Books," *Early Christian Fathers* (trans. Cyril C. Richardson, Th.D., D.D.; LCC 1; New York: Collier Books, 1970) 144-148.

Tertullian. *The Five Books Against Marcion* (ed. Allan Menzies, D.D.; trans. Rev Peter Holmes, D.D., F.R.A.S., etc.; ANF 3; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986).

Cover icon courtesy of *Holy Transfiguration Monastery Icons* at <http://www.thehtm.org/mounted-p.htm>

Contents:

1	Who was Saint Polycarp of Smyrna?
1	His Life
3	Date and Setting of the <i>Epistle to the Philippians</i>
5	Content of the <i>Epistle</i>: A Brief Overview of Its Contents
6	Content of the <i>Epistle</i>: The Letter's Themes and Ideas
7	The Virtue of Perseverance and the Examples of Christ and the Martyrs
9	Mildness, Goodness, Forgiveness and Almsgiving
10	Love of Money and Poverty
11	Blamelessness, Purity and Chastity
12	Heresy is Utterly Evil
13	Ecclesiology
14	The Style of the <i>Epistle</i>
14	St. Polycarp as seen through the <i>Epistle</i>
15	The <i>Martyrium Sancti Polycarpi</i>: About the Text
16	Content of the <i>Martyrium</i>: A Brief Overview of Its Contents
17	The Theology of the Text
18	Martyrdom according to God's Will
19	Martyrdom as an Imitation of Christ's Saving Passion
22	The <i>Martyrium Sancti Polycarpi</i> as Hagiography
22	About the Text: What sort of record is it?
23	About the Text: How is it molded by the characteristics of Hagiography?
25	The <i>Martyrium Sancti Polycarpi</i> and the Cult of the Martyrs
26	Final Conclusion
28	Selected Bibliography