

## THE MARTYRDOM OF IGNATIUS AND POLYCARP AS MODELS FOR SUFFERING FOR THE MODERN CHURCH

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### 1 Introduction

The small and scattered churches of the first century after the New Testament period were forced to come to terms with questions related to suffering and martyrdom. They existed in an environment where Christians were distrusted, rejected and sometimes even persecuted unto death by the Roman State. In order to see what can be learned from these early churches, we will look at the letters of St Ignatius (ca. 40-110 AD), at the letter of St Polycarp (ca. 69-156 AD) to the church in Philippi and at the description of the death of Polycarp in the *Martyrdom of St Polycarp*.

History does not repeat itself, so the lessons learned by the early Church are not necessarily applicable in our days; I do suggest, however, that we look carefully at the attitudes and responses of the early Church to see whether some of what they learned could also be useful nowadays.

### 2 State and Church in the Roman Empire (100-150 AD)

The question of why Christians were persecuted by the Roman State is not easy to answer. Much depended on local governors and how zealously they wanted to prosecute Christians. Contemporary pagan and Christian sources mention different accusations against the Christians. These included charges of incest and cannibalism, maybe resulting from the rites which Christians celebrated in necessary secrecy - the *agape* (the 'love-feast') and the Eucharist (partaking of the body and blood of Christ).

Pagans were also suspicious of the Christian refusal to sacrifice to the Roman gods. The Roman State and 'civilized society' be-

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lieved that its integrity and strength largely depended on the common veneration of the Emperor. This had a political and a religious aspect. People were allowed to believe whatever they wanted in the large and multicultural empire, but adherence to the state, shown by sacrificing to the *genius* of the emperor, was considered the most important integrating factor that kept the empire together. Refusal to do so was, in the eyes of the rulers and many of their subjects, a threat to the harmony of the empire and therefore a matter of treason. Sacrificing to the Emperor became an easy way by which the authorities tested whether someone was a Christian. Whether individuals committed any wrongs from the perspective of Roman law, was irrelevant. To call oneself a Christian was proof enough that one should be punished by death.<sup>2</sup>

Islam and many Islamic regimes have a comparable approach to the harmony of the State and the loyalty of its citizens. Anyone inside the Islamic Ummah has reasonable freedom to believe whatever he or she wants, but to leave the Ummah by formally leaving Islam is unforgivable. It is seen as treason, and it is, according to the orthodox interpretation of the Islamic Shari'ah, punishable by death.

### **3 Ignatius of Antioch**

#### ***3.1 Ignatius and his last journey***

Ignatius (ca. 40-110 AD) was the third bishop of Antioch in Syria, after the Apostle Peter and Evodius.<sup>3</sup> Ignatius was arrested in Antioch and taken to Rome by ten Roman soldiers. The journey went overland through present-day Turkey via the northern Roman highway, to Laodicea, Philadelphia, Sardis and Smyrna. In Smyrna, Ignatius was allowed to receive visitors; representatives from the churches in Tralles, Magnesia and Ephesus spent time with him, to encourage him and to ask for his ecclesial advice. Tralles, Magnesia and Ephesus were cities on the southern Roman highway that were

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<sup>2</sup> Ch. Munier, 'Cult of the Emperor', in Angelo di Berardino, *Encyclopedia of the Early Church* Vol 1 (Cambridge, 1992), p. 271.

<sup>3</sup> According to Eusebius (263-339 AD), bishop of Caesarea in Palestine. Eusebius, *Historiae Ecclesiastica*, III.22.1 and III.36.2.

not visited by Ignatius. Those who had visited him from these churches carried letters from Ignatius back with them. From Smyrna, Ignatius also had a letter sent to the church in Rome to prepare them for his arrival. We know that he wrote this letter on 24 August; Ignatius does not mention the year.<sup>4</sup>

The journey continued to Troas, from where Ignatius sent letters to the churches in Philadelphia and Smyrna, two of the cities he had visited previously. From Troas he also wrote a more personal letter to his friend Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna. Then Ignatius was taken to Philippi where the church received him warmly. We know this because Polycarp later thanks that church for its hospitality to Ignatius.<sup>5</sup>

The journey continued to Rome where Ignatius was executed. There was enough confusion about the execution of Ignatius that his friend Polycarp was unsure of what actually happened in Rome; he wrote to the church in Philippi to find out what they knew about the last days of Ignatius.<sup>6</sup> The stories of his martyrdom by so-called eyewitnesses were late fabrications.<sup>7</sup>

### ***3.2 Ignatius' attitude to martyrdom***

On his way to Rome, Ignatius writes that in the capital city he expected to be eaten by wild animals in the arena. He hopes to convince the Roman Christians *not* to try to save him from martyrdom, even if they can:<sup>8</sup>

I am afraid of your love, in that it may do me wrong; for it is easy for you to do what you want, but it is difficult for me to reach God unless you spare me. For I do not want you to please people but to please God, as you in fact are doing. For I will never again have an opportu-

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<sup>4</sup> Ignatius to the Church in Rome, 10:1-3. I do not know why Clayton Jefford says it is not clear from what city Ignatius wrote this letter to Rome, as Smyrna is explicitly mentioned in 10:1. See Clayton N. Jefford, *The Apostolic Fathers and the New Testament* (Peabody, 2006), p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Polycarp to the Church in Philippi, 1:1; 9:1.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 13:2.

<sup>7</sup> Michael M. Holmes (editor and translator), *The Apostolic Fathers; Greek Texts and English Translations* (Grand Rapids, 1992, 2007), p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> I use the English translations by Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*.

nity such as this to reach God, nor can you, if you remain silent, be credited with a greater accomplishment. For if you remain silent and leave me alone, I will be a word of God; but if you love my flesh, then I will again be a mere voice. Grant me nothing more than to be poured out as an offering to God while there is still an altar ready. (Ignatius, Romans 1:2-2:2)

‘Let me be food for the wild beasts, through whom I can reach God.’ (Ign, Rom 4:1) He hopes wild animals will eat him fully, so that ‘I will truly be a disciple of Jesus Christ, when the world will no longer see my body.’ (Ign, Rom 4:2) He considers his anticipated death to be ‘a sacrifice to God’ (Ign, Rom 4:2) and asks the Church in Rome: ‘Allow me to be an imitator of the suffering of my God.’ (Ign, Rom 6:3). In vivid language Ignatius speaks of his desire to suffer for Christ:

From Syria all the way to Rome I am fighting with wild beasts, on land and sea, by night and day, chained amidst ten leopards (that is, a company of soldiers) who only get worse when they are well treated. Yet because of their mistreatment I am becoming more of a disciple; nevertheless I am not thereby justified. May I have the pleasure of the wild beasts that have been prepared for me; and I pray that they prove to be prompt with me. I will even coax them to devour me quickly, not as they have done with some, whom they were too timid to touch. And if when I am willing and ready and they are not, I will force them. Bear with me – I know what is best for me. Now at last I am beginning to be a disciple. May nothing visible or invisible envy me, so that I may reach Jesus Christ. Fire and cross and battle with wild beasts, mutilation, mangling, wrenching of bones, the hacking of limbs, the crushing of my whole body, cruel tortures of the devil – let these come upon me, only let me reach Jesus Christ! (Ign, Rom 5:1-3)

In his other letters, Ignatius writes similar things, but less extensive. To the Church in Ephesus he writes that he expects to fight wild animals in Rome ‘in order that by so succeeding I might be able to be a disciple.’ (Ignatius, Ephesians 1:2) In this letter he further says: ‘For even though I am in chains for the sake of the Name, I have not yet been perfected in Jesus Christ. For now I am only beginning to be a disciple.’ (Ign, Eph 3:1) His chains are ‘spiritual pearls’ for Ignatius. (Ign, Eph 11:2) He hopes that carrying

those, as well as the prayers of the Ephesians, will make him 'rise again' from the dead. (Ign, Eph 11:2) 'I am being led to Rome in chains, as I – the very least of the faithful there – have been judged worthy of serving the glory of God.' (Ign, Eph 21:2) To the Church in Tralles, Ignatius writes: 'I strongly desire to suffer' (Ignatius, Trallians 4:2) and that he carries his chains 'for the sake of Jesus Christ'. (Ign, Trall 12:2) He asks all churches for their prayers 'in order that I may reach God'. (Ignatius, Magnesians 14)

### ***3.3 Harmony and heresies***

#### **3.3.1 Unity of the Church through submission**

Ignatius seems to be more worried about the state of the churches he has been in touch with than with his own expected martyrdom. The two overriding themes in his seven letters are those of the urgency of the unity of the Church and of its need to ward off heresies.

Ignatius writes much about how the monarchical bishop and his priests and deacons have to relate. Ignatius is, for instance, pleased with the situation in the church of Magnesia, because the priests are subject to their bishop as 'to the Father of Jesus Christ, the bishop of all.' (Ign, Magn 3:1) He commends the deacon Zotion from Magnesia because 'he is subject to the bishop as to the grace of God, and to the council of presbyters as to the law of Jesus Christ.' (Ign, Magn 2) Here is a representative selection of quotes from Ignatius' letter to the Magnesians showing his desire for unity through obedience:

Be eager to do everything in godly harmony, the bishop presiding in the place of God and the presbyters in the place of the council of the apostles and the deacons, who are especially dear to me, since they have been entrusted with the ministry of Jesus Christ. (Ign, Magn 6:1)

Let there be nothing among you that is capable of dividing you, but be united with the bishop and with those who lead. (Ign, Magn 6:2)

Therefore, as the Lord did nothing without the Father [...] so you must not do anything without the bishop and the presbyters. [...] Let all of you run together as to one temple of God, as to one altar, to one Jesus Christ. (Ign, Magn 7:1-2)

Ignatius writes similar things in all letters. Of interest are Ignatius' statements that all must be done 'in godly harmony' (Mag 6:1) and that the church must 'run together [in harmony] with the mind of the bishop.' (Ign, Eph 4:2) Christians are also called to be 'harmonious in unanimity' in their worship of Jesus Christ.<sup>9</sup> (Ign, Eph 4:2) These concepts were congruent with the Roman State's desire for harmony. We meet here with the idea of the church being an alternative kingdom and a spiritual empire. That Christians did not want to sacrifice to the genius of the Emperor could easily be explained as a Christian rejection of the unity of the Roman Empire, notwithstanding the fact that they proved to be loyal citizens.

Harmony in the Church was a typical 'contextual' moral ideal. Not only from Ignatius but also in other Christian literature from this period, harmony is presented as an important moral good. In 1 Clement for instance, written by Clement of Rome around 95 AD, we see a similar stress on the need for harmony in the Church. Clement uses the concept, just as Ignatius does, in the context of unity in the Church through submission to its leadership.

### 3.3.2 Heresy of docetism

Harmony in the Church through submission is for Ignatius not only morally good in itself, but it is also the major antidote against heresy in the Church. He writes to the Philadelphians:

Flee from division and false teaching. Where the shepherd is, there follow like sheep. For seemingly trustworthy wolves attempt [to take you captive]; but in your unity they will find no opportunity. (Ignatius, Philadelphians 2:1)

Ignatius warns the churches about two heresies. The first one was Judaism, the original religion of many members of the churches. The other heresy is *docetism*. (from Gr: *dokein* = to seem, to appear) This gnostic doctrine taught that Christ's body was not human but either a phantasm or of real but celestial substance, and that therefore his sufferings were only apparent. Especially in the letter to

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<sup>9</sup> Ignatius uses the Greek *harmonia* in Magn 6:1. In Eph 4:2 he uses the Greek terms *symphoonoi en homonoia*. *Symphoonoi* is used in the New Testament; the other terms are never used in the New Testament.

Smyrna, Ignatius stresses the physicality of Jesus. He praises the church because it is:

[...] established in an unshakable faith, having been nailed, as it were, to the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ in both body and spirit, and firmly established in love by the blood of Christ, totally convinced with regard to our Lord that he is truly of the family of David with respect to human descent, Son of God with respect to the divine will and power, truly born of a virgin, baptized by John [...], truly nailed in the flesh for us under Pontius Pilate and Herod the tetrarch - from its fruit we derive our existence, that is, from his divinely blessed suffering. (Ignatius, Smyrna 1:1-2)

[He] truly suffered just as he truly raised himself - not, as certain unbelievers say, that he suffered in appearance [Gr: *dokein*] only. (Ign, Smyr 2)

For I know and believe that he was in the flesh even after the resurrection; and when he came to Peter and those with him, he said to them: 'Take hold of me; handle me and see that I am not a disembodied demon.' And immediately they touched him and believed, being closely united with his flesh and blood. For this reason they too despised death; indeed, they proved to be greater than death, and after his resurrection he ate and drank with them like one who is composed of flesh, although spiritually he was united with the Father. (Ign, Smyr 3:1-3)

For if these things were done by our Lord in appearance [Gr: *dokein*] only, then I am in chains in appearance only. Why, moreover, have I surrendered myself to death, to fire, to sword, to beasts? (Ign, Smyr 4:2)

[Not] confessing that he was clothed in flesh? Anyone who does not acknowledge this thereby denies him completely. (Ign, Smyr 5:2)

These quotes show, among other things, that docetism for Ignatius meant the denial of the value of his own physical *Via Dolorosa*.

But if, as some atheists (that is, unbelievers) say, he suffered in appearance only [...], why am I in chains? And why do I fight with wild beasts? If that is the case, I die for no reason; what is more, I am telling lies about the Lord. (Ign, Tral 10)

The letters to the other churches contain similar emphasis on the physicality of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

### 3.3.3 Eucharist

Interesting also, is that for these docetists Holy Eucharist was meaningless. They rejected it because it signified the physicality of the body of the Lord Jesus Christ. See for instance what Ignatius writes to Smyrna:

Even the heavenly beings and the glory of angels and the rulers, both visible and invisible, are subject to judgment if they do not believe in the blood of Christ. [...] They abstain from Eucharist and prayer because they refuse to acknowledge that the Eucharist is the flesh of our savior Jesus Christ, which suffered for our sins and which the Father by his goodness raised up. (Ign, Smyr 6:1-2)

To the Philadelphians, Ignatius writes that the heretics and schismatics disconnect themselves from the Kingdom of God; such people separate themselves from the suffering of Christ and from Holy Eucharist:

For all those who belong to God and Jesus Christ are with the bishop, and all those who repent and enter into the unity of the church will belong to God, so that they may be living in accordance with Jesus Christ. Do not be misled, my brothers: if any follow a schismatic, they will not inherit the Kingdom of God. If any hold to alien views, they disassociate themselves from the passion. Take care, therefore, to participate in one Eucharist (for there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup that leads to unity through his blood; there is one altar, just as there is one bishop, together with the council of presbyters and deacons). (Ign, Phil 3:2-4:1)

The unity of the church around the bishop is for Ignatius the *sine qua non* of being able to celebrate Holy Eucharist and of being connected with the suffering of Jesus Christ. Without being subjected to the bishop and his priests, there is no proper Eucharist and no unity with the suffering of Christ, hence no salvation in eternity. This means that celebrating Eucharist is of utmost importance:

Therefore make everyone to come together more frequently to give thanks and glory to God. For when you meet together frequently, the

powers of Satan are overthrown and his destructiveness is nullified by the unanimity (Gr: *homonoia*) of your faith. (Ign, Eph 13:1)

All of you [...] gather together [...] in order that you may obey the bishop and the council of presbyters with an undisturbed mind, breaking one bread, which is the medicine of immortality, the antidote we take in order not to die but to live forever in Jesus Christ. (Ign, Eph 20:2)

### ***3.4 Assessment of Ignatius' model***

Ignatius considers his anticipated martyrdom as the ultimate participation in the suffering of Jesus Christ and as the final stage in becoming a true follower of Christ. His martyrdom is a sacrifice to God and will finally make him rise from the dead to bring him to God and Jesus Christ. He assumes his death will be a stronger witness to Christ than his life could ever be; he is therefore eager not to escape from the honor.

The physicality of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is of utmost importance for Ignatius, as he endures similar physical suffering and sets his hope on the physical resurrection in order to be with God. This suffering of Christ is reflected in the tangible Holy Eucharist that connects Ignatius with the Lord who suffered and rose again. Participation in this suffering of Christ through Eucharist is worked out in his own death for Christ.

For celebrating the proper Eucharist that connects the believer with Jesus Christ, unity of the Church under its proper leadership is important. This unity of the Church, a proper view of Jesus Christ and Eucharist, are threatened by heretics and schismatics.

For Ignatius, the pain of suffering is of lesser weight than the pain of heresy and division. A focus on Church unity through the office of the bishop (not an administrator but a teacher of apostolic orthodoxy!) was practical and necessary at a time when heretics were teaching that Christ did not physically suffer or rise from the dead.

## 4 Polycarp of Smyrna

### 4.1 Polycarp's life and death

Our best information about Polycarp comes from Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in the second part of the second century. He had been a pupil of Polycarp in his younger years in Smyrna, where Polycarp was the bishop. According to Irenaeus, Polycarp had been a student of St John the Apostle in Ephesus. Polycarp also met with others who had seen Jesus Christ in the body.

Polycarp was already bishop when Ignatius passed through his city in ca. 110 AD. He received a letter from Ignatius and he collected Ignatius' correspondence in order to make this available to others. Polycarp wrote a letter to the church in Philippi shortly after Ignatius had been there. Irenaeus writes that Polycarp wrote more, but this is the only letter of his that we have.<sup>10</sup>

Polycarp was deeply attached to maintaining the pure apostolic message. One time, when he met the arch-heretic Marcion in the street, Marcion asked Polycarp whether he recognized him. According to Irenaeus, Polycarp answered: 'Sure, I recognize you as the firstborn of Satan!'<sup>11</sup>

Toward the end of his life, Polycarp visited Rome to discuss certain ecclesial matters with bishop Anicetus. One issue was the date for the celebration of Easter. In Rome this was done on a set Sunday in the Roman solar calendar. In the East, the churches celebrated Easter on the Jewish date of 14 Nisan, in accordance with the lunar calendar. The brothers did not resolve their difference; Polycarp wanted to stick to the date that he had learned from the Apostle John. This matter did not fracture their Christian communion; before Polycarp went back to Smyrna, he was asked to celebrate Eucharist in Rome.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Jack N. Sparks (ed), *The Apostolic Fathers; New translations of these early Christian writings* (Nashville, 1989), p. 123.

<sup>11</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 3:3-4.

<sup>12</sup> Sparks, *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 123. J. Danielou, *Geschiedenis van de Kerk* Deel 1 (Hilversum, 1963), p. 122.

In ca. 155 AD Polycarp was martyred in Smyrna; he was 86 years old at that time.<sup>13</sup> We have no absolute certainty about the year but we know it occurred on 22 or 23 February, because the hagiographic *Martyrdom of Polycarp* says it happened ‘seven days before the Calends of March, a Great Sabbath, at 8 o’clock.’<sup>14</sup> This was under the reign of the Roman Emperor Antonius Pius (138-161 AD) who was responsible for much persecution of the Church. Maybe the concrete cause for the persecution of Polycarp was related to some earthquakes that had occurred in the region of Ephesus; the local population held the Christians responsible.<sup>15</sup>

## **4.2 Polycarp’s letter to the Church in Philippi**

### **4.2.1 Content of the letter**

Polycarp writes in his letter to the church in Philippi that one must ‘be obedient to the presbyters and deacons as to God and Christ.’ (Polycarp, Philippians, 5:3) This attitude concurs with the *milieu* of the letters of Ignatius, though Polycarp makes no mention of the role of the bishop.

The *docetist* belief that Ignatius countered so strongly is also attacked by Polycarp:

For everyone who does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is antichrist; and whoever does not acknowledge the testimony of the cross is of the devil; and whoever twists the sayings of the Lord to suit his own sinful desires and claims that there is neither resurrection nor judgment – well, that person is the firstborn of Satan. (Pol, Phil 7:1)

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<sup>13</sup> Jefford, *The Apostolic Fathers and the New Testament*, pp. 13-14. Jefford agrees to date the death of Polycarp around 155-156 AD. He disagrees with Eusebius who says Polycarp died under Marcus Aurelius. That would have meant around 167 AD. As Polycarp was 86 when he died, and as we know he was bishop around 110 AD, this would make him a very young bishop.

<sup>14</sup> *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, Appendix 1.

<sup>15</sup> Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity Vol 1). The First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, 1937, 1976), p. 143. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 272.

Polycarp calls the chains of the persecuted saints – he probably refers directly to Ignatius and his group – ‘suitable for saints, [...] the diadems of those who are truly chosen by God and our Lord.’ (Pol, Phil 1:1) In this context he stresses that Jesus Christ ‘endured for our sins, facing even death,’ but ‘God raised [him] up.’ (Pol, Phil 1:2) God ‘raised our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead and gave him glory and a throne at his right hand. [...] But the one who raised him from the dead will raise us also, if we do his will.’ (Pol, Phil 2:1-2) ‘If we please him in this present world, we will receive the world to come as well, inasmuch as he promised that he will raise us from the dead [...] if we continue to believe.’ (Pol, Phil 5:2)

That we have to read these statements as encouragement for the Philippians to stand strong in times of suffering, is clear:

Let us, therefore, become imitators of his patient endurance, and if we should suffer for the sake of his name, let us glorify him. For this is the example he set for us in his own person, and this is what we have believed. (Pol, Phil 8:2)

Polycarp urges the church to ‘obey the teaching about righteousness and to exercise unlimited endurance.’ As an example of this endurance, Polycarp points to ‘that which you saw with your own eyes not only in the blessed Ignatius and Zosimus and Rufus but also in others from your own congregation and in Paul himself and the rest of the apostles.’ (Pol, Phil 9:1) He says:

Be assured that all these did not run in vain but with faith and righteousness, and that they are now in the place due them with the Lord, with whom they also suffered. For they did not love the present world but the one who died on our behalf and was raised by God for our sakes. (Polyc, Phil 9:2)

Stand fast, therefore, in these things and follow the example of the Lord, firm and immovable in faith, loving the family of believers, cherishing one another, united in the truth, giving way to one another in the gentleness of the Lord, despising no one. When you are able to do good, do not put it off, because charity delivers one from death. All of you be subject to one another, and maintain an irreproachable standard of conduct among the Gentiles, so that you may be praised for your

good deeds and the Lord may not be blasphemed because of you. (Pol, Phil 10:1-2)

Polycarp asks the congregation in Philippi to pray for the saints, for kings and magistrates, for those who persecute the church in Philippi and for all enemies of the cross. It is interesting to note, in this context, that as the theme for these prayers Polycarp only mentions 'that your fruit may be evident among all people.' (Pol, Phil 12:3) In the midst of persecution the witness of the Church is his major concern.

Both the church in Philippi and Ignatius had asked Polycarp to make sure that the letter to the church in Philippi (the letter Ignatius wrote to that church?) should be delivered to the church of Ignatius in Antioch. Polycarp probably received this letter from the emissary of Philippi who also asked some questions related to the problems in his church. Polycarp's letter is an answer to this request. The emissary had also asked for copies of all letters of Ignatius that Polycarp had already collected; these he mailed to them as an attachment to his letter. (Pol, Phil, 13:1-2)

Polycarp encourages the Philippians to 'carefully study' the letters of St Paul. (Pol, Phil 3:2) He writes that he is 'convinced that [they] are all well trained in the sacred scriptures.' (Pol, Phil 12:1) He also recommends the letters of Ignatius: 'You will be able to receive great benefit from them, for they deal with faith and patient endurance and every kind of spiritual growth that has to do with the Lord.' (Pol, Phil 13:2)

#### **4.2.2 Assessment of Polycarp's attitudes in his letter**

Like Ignatius, Polycarp instructs the believers to be united under their proper leadership. He also fiercely attacks docetist views that minimize the physicality of Jesus' suffering.

Polycarp lays much stress on the need for a good Christian lifestyle and for endurance. The example of Jesus' death is often used, always combined with his resurrection. That promise of resurrection is held before the believers in Philippi. If by following Christ they suffer, they are also assured of resurrection and eternal life – if only they hold on to the faith.

Polycarp considers the letters of Ignatius, who suffered for the faith, an important tool for helping people to also show proper endurance and maintain the faith.

### ***4.3 The Martyrdom of Polycarp***

#### **4.3.1 Occasion of this *Martyrdom***

The letter *Martyrdom of Polycarp* was written by Evarestus of the church of Smyrna, where Polycarp had been the bishop, to the church in Philomelium. (Martyrdom of Polycarp, Salutation, 20:2) This church had asked for an account of the death of Polycarp. The *Martyrdom* was written with the assumption that churches elsewhere would also be interested in the document, as it is also addressed to ‘all the communities of the holy and catholic church sojourning in every place’. The letter was delivered to Philomenium by a certain Marcion with the request to also ‘send the letter on to the brothers and sisters who are farther away, in order that they too may glorify the Lord.’ (Mart 20:2)

The letter is most likely based on the testimony of one or more eyewitnesses, but it is not their primary testimony. The *Martyrdom* has clearly seen some careful literary and theological editing. Maybe Evarestus was this theological editor?<sup>16</sup>

Irenaeus, who had been a student of Polycarp, possessed a copy of the *Martyrdom*. This attests to its genuineness and antiquity. We know this, because those who later copied the letter added their own short appendix to it:

Gaius (who lived in the same city as Irenaeus) transcribed this account from the papers of Irenaeus, a disciple of Polycarp. And I, Socrates, wrote it down in Corinth from the copies of Gaius. (Mart 22:2)

#### **4.3.2 Accusation against Polycarp and his death**

Polycarp was the last of a group of twelve Christians put to death in and around Smyrna. (Mart 19:1) His death ‘put an end to the persecution, as though he was setting his seal upon it.’ (Mart 1:1) Some people were torn apart by whips, others were burned, and others again were eaten by wild beasts. (Mart 2:2-4) When a large

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<sup>16</sup> Jefford, *The Apostolic Fathers and the New Testament*, pp. 23-24.

crowd in the stadium of Smyrna saw Germanicus eaten by the beasts, the crowd asked for Polycarp to be killed as well. 'Away with the atheists! Find Polycarp!' (Mart 3:1-2)

When Polycarp was caught, the officers asked him: 'Why, what harm is there in saying, "Caesar is Lord," and offering incense?' (Mart 8:2) This was the normal manner by which people could prove that they were not Christians; it showed their loyalty to the State and its religion.<sup>17</sup> Somewhat later the Roman officers tried it again: 'Swear by the genius of Caesar; repent; say: "Away with the atheists!" [...] Swear the oath, and I will release you; revile Christ.' (Mart 9:2-3) Polycarp refused:

For eighty-six years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me? (Mart 9:3)

After the proconsul had questioned Polycarp he sent his herald to the stadium to proclaim three times: 'Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian.' (Mart 12:1). Being a Christian was enough for being put to death. The crowd enthusiastically shouted, 'This is the teacher of Asis, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our gods, who teaches many not to sacrifice or to worship.' (Mart 12:2)

Polycarp was then killed by fire. Evarestus describes a miracle: Polycarp did not burn, but he was baked like bread. The executioners therefore also stabbed his body; a dove came out of Polycarp and he shed so much blood that the fire was extinguished.' (Mart 15:2-16:1) His corpse was then cremated. (Mart 18:1)

#### **4.3.3 Martyrdom 'according to the Gospel'**

The death of Polycarp was a lesson for the church: 'For nearly all the preceding events happened in order that the Lord might show us once again a martyrdom that is in accord with the gospel'. (Mart 1:1) The writer then suggests what proper martyrdom is:

For he waited to be betrayed, just as the Lord did, in order that we too might be imitators of him, looking not only to our own interests but to our neighbors' interests as well. For it is the mark of true and steadfast

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<sup>17</sup> Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 298.

love to desire that not only oneself be saved but all the brothers and sisters as well. (Mart 1:2)

Evarestus taught that martyrdom should not be pursued because Christians have a role to play in life, namely, helping others to be saved. As an example of how not to behave, a certain Phrygian man, Quintus, is mentioned. He had arrived shortly before Polycarp's martyrdom. He had 'forced himself and some others to come forward voluntarily' for becoming martyrs. This was not right: 'We do not praise those who hand themselves over, since the gospel does not so teach.' The fact that Quintus turned coward when he saw the wild beasts, and that he swore the oath and sacrificed to the genius of the Emperor, only underlined that such voluntary martyrdom is not blessed by God. (Mart 4) Polycarp, however, when he knew that he was being sought, moved from house to house. (Mart 5:1, 6:1)

The letter praises as 'blessed and noble' all martyrdoms that were in accordance with the will of God, and though it recognizes that the devil is the one behind persecution, it defends the idea that God also plays a role in it: 'We must reverently assign to God the power over all things.' The *Martyrdom* speaks of the 'nobility and patient endurance and loyalty to the Master' of some people who had shortly before been martyred in or around Smyrna. (Mart 2:2) With their example they showed true martyrdom: 'Not one of them uttered a cry or a groan, [...] showing to us all that at the very hour when they were being tortured the martyrs of Christ were absent from the flesh, or rather that the Lord was standing by and conversing with them.' (Mart 2:2)

Turning their thoughts to the grace of Christ they despised the tortures of this world, purchasing at the cost of one hour an exemption from eternal punishment. And the fire of their inhuman torturers felt cold to them, for they set before their eyes the escape from that eternal fire which is never extinguished, while with the eyes of their heart they gazed upon the good things that are reserved for those who endure patiently [...] that were shown to them by the Lord, for they were no longer humans, but angels (Mart 2:3)

Polycarp considered the fire of torture small compared to eternal damnation. He refused to be scared by the threats of torture: 'You threaten me with a fire that burns only briefly and after just a little while is extinguished, for you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment...' (Mart 11:2)

The *Martyrdom* describes how the pile for the fire was prepared, and how Polycarp was placed on top of it, 'his hands behind himself and having been bound, like a splendid ram chosen from a great flock for a sacrifice, a burnt offering prepared and acceptable to God'. (Mart 14:1) Polycarp prayed before the pile was lighted. It is unlikely that his exact words are used in the *Martyrdom*, but we do learn how the church viewed his death. The prayer was clearly Eucharistic; the death of Polycarp was seen as related to the death of Christ and the body and blood of Christ in Eucharist:<sup>18</sup>

O Lord God Almighty, Father of your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, through whom we have received knowledge of you, the God of angels and powers and of all creation, and of the whole race of the righteous who live in your presence,

I bless you because you have considered me worthy of this day and hour, so that I might receive a place among the number of the martyrs in the cup of your Christ, to the resurrection to eternal life, both of soul and of body, in the incorruptibility of the Holy Spirit.

May I be received among them in your presence today, as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, as you have prepared and revealed beforehand, and have now accomplished, you who are the undecieving and true God.

For this reason, indeed for all things, I praise you, I bless you, I glorify you, through the eternal and heavenly high priest, Jesus Christ, your beloved Son, through whom be glory to you, with him and the Holy Spirit, both now and for the ages to come. Amen. (Mart 14:1-3)

It is also likely that this sacrificial and Eucharistic aspect of Polycarp's death was what the author had in mind when he spoke of

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<sup>18</sup> This prayer of Polycarp is very interesting as it is most likely modeled on existent liturgical prayers that were used in the early church. Jack N. Sparks had footnoted this prayer to show many parallelisms to and quotes from Biblical and early Christian literature. Sparks (ed), *The Apostolic Fathers*, pp. 145-147.

martyrdom in accord with the gospel. Maybe the fact that Polycarp was baked like bread must also be seen in this Eucharistic context.

The story of Polycarp is told in a manner that suggests that the editor wanted to use as many parallelisms as he could to the suffering and death of Jesus Christ.<sup>19</sup> His persecutor is called Herod, he is seen as riding on a donkey, he died on a Friday, etc. The parallelisms are not perfectly worked out; this makes Clayton Jefford conclude that we can therefore believe that not all facts around the arrest, court case and death of the bishop have been adapted.<sup>20</sup> What the *Martyrdom* does underline with its literary approach is that true martyrs are in fact doing nothing but following their Master.

#### 4.3.4 Veneration of the saints

The *Martyrdom* was not written with our modern views of scientific historiography. It was intended to venerate Polycarp and to educate the readers. Though the actual death by fire of Polycarp is not doubted, we cannot be sure that all aspects of the story are 'historically correct', like a dove coming out of the corpse of Polycarp, or his blood quenching the fire.

The *Martyrdom* is our oldest example of how the early Church began to venerate its martyred saints, and the letter also became the standard for how later hagiography would be written.<sup>21</sup> The letter itself is a form of veneration, but it also describes how the believers in Smyrna venerated Polycarp, even before he died:

[A]ll the faithful were always eager to be the first to touch his flesh. For he had been honored in every respect on account of his holy life even before his martyrdom. (Mart 13:2)

After Polycarp had died, the enemies of the Church wanted his body to be cremated, 'or else [the Christians] may abandon the crucified one and begin to worship this man.' (Mart 17:2) The author of the *Martyrdom* comments with a lesson for the readers:

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<sup>19</sup> Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 299-9. Jefford sums up these parallelisms in *The Apostolic Fathers and the New Testament*, pp. 122-123.

<sup>20</sup> Jefford, *The Apostolic Fathers and the New Testament*, p. 123.

<sup>21</sup> Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 298.

They did not know that we would never be able either to abandon the Christ who suffered for the salvation of the whole world of those who are saved, the blameless on behalf of sinners, or to worship anyone else. For we worship this one, who is the Son of God, but the martyrs we love as disciples and imitators of the Lord, as they deserve, on account of their matchless devotion to their own King and Teacher. May we also become their partners and fellow disciples! (Mart 17:2-3)

What was left of Polycarp were his bones. These were later collected by the church of Smyrna as they were considered to be 'more valuable than precious stones and finer than refined gold', and they were deposited 'in a suitable place': (Mart 18:1-2)

There, when we gather together as we are able, with joy and gladness, the Lord will permit us to celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom in commemoration of those who have already fought in the contest and also for the training and preparation of those who will do so in the future. (Mart 18:3)

There were altogether twelve martyrs in the area of Smyrna, but Polycarp was especially remembered as a distinguished teacher and 'as an outstanding martyr whose martyrdom all desire to imitate since it was in accord with the pattern of the gospel of Christ.' (Mart 19:1) Until today he is remembered in the liturgy of most churches on 23 February:

By his endurance he defeated the unrighteous magistrate and so received the crown of immortality; now he rejoices with the apostles and all the righteous, and glorifies the almighty God and Father, and blesses our Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of our souls and Helmsman of our bodies and Shepherd of the catholic church throughout the world. (Mart 19:2)

#### **4.3.5 Assessment of the *Martyrdom's* views**

The Martyrdom was based on eyewitness accounts, but it has been theologically edited. It shows the radical devotion of Bishop Polycarp to Jesus Christ, even in the face of death. He is not prepared to recant his faith.

The letter was intended for the edification of the worldwide Church, to know what true martyrdom entails. It makes clear that

Christians must not seek for martyrdom but, when it comes, they ought to face it bravely.

Martyrs are in fact a sacrifice to God, in the line of Jesus Christ and his Holy Eucharist. This very close unity with Jesus Christ in death guarantees salvation. In the hour of need, God supports martyrs by his very close presence. The short pains faced in the last hour are only small compared with the fire of hell, and perseverance leads to eternal salvation.

The Church at the time of Polycarp showed great love for its martyrs. Martyrs were not forgotten, but they were commemorated as examples for the living Church, even in the liturgy of the Church.

### **5 Lessons from the early church about suffering for Christ**

What must be taught and practiced in churches in an environment of potential suffering and martyrdom is, among other things, the following:

1. When Christians are asked to give up their faith and recognize other religions or ideologies as true, in opposition to the Christian faith, they must not compromise. This is not negotiable.
2. Suffering must never be sought but, when it comes, it must be seen as something of great value for God. It is being a sacrifice for God, in participation with Jesus Christ and the Eucharist. It is the highest form of discipleship, the *grand finale* of following Jesus Christ. It is therefore something to be proud of.
3. A strong focus in the church is needed on the physicality of Jesus Christ, on his physical death and resurrection, on the eternal blessing of the saints and on eternal punishment for those who do not hold on to Christ. The physicality of this should be underlined.
4. The Church must celebrate Eucharist often as this connects believers with Jesus Christ and his physical suffering and

his physical resurrection, and therefore with eternal salvation.

5. People who suffer are entitled to know what they suffer for, so the leadership of the Church must proclaim the orthodox faith with absolute clarity as eternal truth that is worth dying for. Heresy is named and rejected.
6. Stories of ancient and contemporary martyrs help the present Church to endure persecutions because they prepare the Church for suffering; they also encourage those who suffer that, if they die, they are not forgotten by the Church but treated as heroes. Therefore, there is a need for modern hagiography of those who suffer and die for the faith.
7. In the liturgies of the Church, both ancient and contemporary martyrs should be mentioned, for the same reasons as mentioned under 6.