

Church History and Evidences
Notes: Church "Fathers": Polycarp

I. Church "fathers" and their writings: Polycarp

A. Polycarp of Smyrna

1. Polycarp of Smyrna (c. 69 – c. 155) was a Christian bishop of Smyrna (now İzmir in Turkey).
2. According to Eusebius (260-340AD) supposedly quoting Irenaeus (130-202AD), Polycrates of Ephesus (130-196AD) cited the example of Polycarp in defense of local practices during the Quartodeciman Controversy. Polycarp supposedly tried and failed to persuade Pope Anicetus to have the West celebrate Passover on the 14th of Nisan, as in the Eastern calendar.
3. Around A.D. 155, the Smyrnans of his town demanded Polycarp's execution as a Christian, and he died a martyr. The story of his martyrdom describes how the fire built around him would not burn him, and that when he was stabbed to death, so much blood issued from his body that it quenched the flames around him. Polycarp is recognized as a saint in both the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches.
4. Both Irenaeus, who as a young man heard Polycarp speak, and Tertullian recorded that Polycarp had been a disciple of John the Apostle.
5. There are two chief sources of information concerning the life of Polycarp: the letter of the Smyrnaeans recounting the martyrdom of Polycarp and the passages in Irenaeus' *Adversus Haereses*. Other sources are the epistles of Ignatius, which include one to Polycarp and another to the Smyrnaeans, and Polycarp's own letter to the Philippians. In 1999, some third to 6th-century Coptic fragments about Polycarp were also published.
6. According to Irenaeus, Polycarp was a companion of Papias, another "hearer of John" as Irenaeus interprets Papias' testimony, and a correspondent of Ignatius of Antioch. Ignatius addressed a letter to him and mentions him in his letters to the Ephesians and to the Magnesians.
7. Irenaeus regarded the memory of Polycarp as a link to the apostolic past. He relates how and when he became a Christian, and in his letter to Florinus, a fellow student of Polycarp who had become a Roman presbyter and later lapsed into heresy. Irenaeus stated that he saw and heard Polycarp personally in lower Asia. Irenaeus wrote to Florinus:
 - a) "I could tell you the place where the blessed Polycarp sat to preach the Word of God. It is yet present to my mind with what gravity he everywhere came in and went out; what was the sanctity of his deportment, the majesty of his countenance; and what were his holy exhortations to the people. I seem to hear him now relate how he conversed with John and many others who had seen Jesus Christ, the words he had heard from their mouths."
8. In particular, he heard the account of Polycarp's discussion with John and with others who had seen Jesus. Irenaeus also reports that Polycarp was converted to Christianity by apostles, was consecrated a bishop, and communicated with many who had seen Jesus. He repeatedly emphasizes

the very great age of Polycarp. Polycarp kissed the chains of Ignatius when he passed by Smyrna on the road to Rome for his martyrdom.

9. In the Martyrdom, Polycarp is recorded as saying on the day of his death, "Eighty and six years I have served Him, and He has done me no wrong", which could indicate that he was then eighty-six years old or that he may have lived eighty-six years after his conversion. Polycarp goes on to say "How then can I blaspheme my King and Savior? You threaten me with a fire that burns for a season, and after a little while is quenched; but you are ignorant of the fire of everlasting punishment that is prepared for the wicked." Polycarp was burned at the stake and was pierced with a spear for refusing to burn incense to the Roman Emperor. On his farewell, he said, "I bless you Father for judging me worthy of this hour, so that in the company of the martyrs I may share the cup of Christ."

10. Polycarp occupies an important place in the history of the early Christian Church. He is among the earliest Christians whose writings survived. Jerome wrote that Polycarp was a "disciple of the apostle John and by him ordained bishop of Smyrna". He was an elder of an important congregation which was a large contributor to the founding of the Christian Church. He is from an era whose orthodoxy is widely accepted by Eastern Orthodox Churches, Oriental Orthodox Churches, Church of God groups, Sabbatarian groups, mainstream Protestants and Catholics alike. According to David Trobisch, Polycarp may have been the one who compiled, edited, and published the New Testament. All of this makes his writings of great interest.

11. Irenaeus, who as a young man had heard Polycarp preach, said of him: "a man who was of much greater weight, and a more steadfast witness of truth, than Valentinus, and Marcion, and the rest of the heretics". Polycarp had learned from apostle John to flee from those who change the divine truth. One day he met in the streets of Rome the heretic Marcion who, resenting that Polycarp did not greet him, said: "Do you know me?" Polycarp replied: "Yes, I know you, the first-born of Satan."

12. Polycarp lived in an age after the deaths of the apostles, when a variety of interpretations of the sayings of Jesus were being preached. His role was to authenticate orthodox teachings through his reputed connection with the apostle John: "a high value was attached to the witness Polycarp could give as to the genuine tradition of old apostolic doctrine", Wace commented, "his testimony condemning as offensive novelties the figments of the heretical teachers". Irenaeus states (iii. 3) that on Polycarp's visit to Rome, his testimony converted many disciples of Marcion and Valentinus.

B. Writings

1. The sole surviving work attributed to him is Polycarp's letter to the Philippians, a mosaic of references to the Greek Scriptures. It, and an account of The Martyrdom of Polycarp form part of the collection of writings Roman Catholics and some Protestants term "The Apostolic Fathers." This title emphasizes the writings' particular closeness to the apostles in Church traditions. After the Acts of the Apostles, which describes the death of

Stephen, the Martyrdom is considered one of the earliest genuine accounts of Christian martyrdom and is one of the earliest-known Christian documents of this kind.

2. The **Letter to the Philippians** (often simply called *Philippians*) is an epistle composed around AD 110 to 140 by Polycarp of Smyrna, from Antioch to the early Christian church in Philippi. The letter is described by Irenaeus as follows:

a) "There is also a forceful epistle written by Polycarp to the Philippians, from which those who wish to do so, and are anxious about their salvation, can learn the character of his faith, and the preaching of the truth."

3. The letter is one of a number believed to have been written by Polycarp but is the only extant document. The letter was composed in Greek, but the Greek text has not been preserved in its entirety; there is also a Latin translation of the letter. Moreover, a few quotations of it are preserved in Syriac.

4. The letter warns against a number of disorders in the church and against apostasy and encourages the Christians to persevere in good works. It also acted as a covering letter for a collection of writings by Ignatius of Antioch, whose works were being collected by the church at Philippi after Ignatius' visit there.

5. This is one quotation from the epistle: "Stand fast, therefore, in this conduct and follow the example of the Lord, 'firm and unchangeable in faith, lovers of the brotherhood, loving each other, united in truth,' helping each other with the mildness of the Lord, despising no man."

6. One of the letter's more important features is its use and citation of other early Christian writings, many of which later came to be part of the New Testament.