

Readings: Revelation 2: 8 – 11; Psalm. 30:3,4,6,8,16,17; John: 15: 18 – 21.

The account of Polycarp's suffering and death is one of the earliest records of Christian martyrdom. It is a letter to a neighbouring congregation from the Christians of Smyrna, describing the death of their bishop. He was born in about AD 69 and is said to have been a disciple of Saint John the Apostle. He became bishop of Smyrna (*now Izmir, in Asian Turkey*), where he was visited by Saint Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, on his way to martyrdom in Rome in 107.

He was also known to Saint Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons (*martyred about 203*), who describes his orthodoxy and his memories of those who knew the Lord Jesus by sight and had heard him teaching. He also tells of Polycarp's last visit to Rome to discuss the date of Easter with the Pope. They agreed to differ on how the date should be calculated, each continuing with local practice. In about AD 155, soon after Polycarp's return from Rome, an anti-Christian riot broke out in Smyrna. The crowd called out "Away with the atheists! Fetch Polycarp!" (*Christians were called 'atheists' because they would not worship the Roman gods*).

He was captured at a nearby farm and brought to trial before the proconsul, who tried to persuade him to renounce his faith and curse Christ. Polycarp's reply is one of the most memorable confessions: "Eighty-six years have I served him, and he has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my king who saved me?" The proconsul sent Polycarp to the stadium, where the crowd demanded that he should be burned alive. He was bound to a stake surrounded by firewood, and then prayed to be found a worthy sacrifice, and to have *a place among the martyrs in the cup of Christ*. The fire was lit and those who saw recorded that *the fire made the appearance of a vaulted roof, like a ship's sail filling with the wind, and it walled about the body of the martyr in a ring. It was not like flesh burning, but like a loaf baking, or gold or silver being refined in a furnace*. Seeing that Polycarp was still alive, an executioner stabbed him, and enough blood flowed to quench the fire. The authorities had the body burned. Christians gathered up the bones and preserved them. It seems likely that it was the annual observance of Polycarp's death which established the custom of keeping the heavenly birthday (*dies natalis*) of martyrs.