

On this day in the year 155 a man who had been born a few years after Peter and Paul were martyred also witnessed to his faith in Jesus Christ by laying down his life. St. Polycarp was 86 years old on February 23rd 155. For many years, he had been the Bishop of Smyrna a town north of Ephesus. It is the second of the seven churches that has a letter addressed to it by our Lord in Revelation chapter 2, verses 8-11. To this Church Jesus gave this word of encouragement:

Be faithful until death and I will give you the crown of life.

Bishop Polycarp was obedient to the Lord's words.

At that time, Christians, because they refused to worship pagan gods, were known as atheists and condemned as such.

Brought into the arena in Smyrna Polycarp was interrogated by the proconsul who said:

"Have respect for your age, Polycarp. Swear by the fortune of Caesar; change your mind; say, 'Away with the Atheists!'" So, Polycarp, pointing to the pagan crowd in the stands, said "Away with the Atheists!" The proconsul was not amused.

He continued: "Take the oath and I will release you. Curse Christ!" Polycarp responded: "Eighty-six years I have served him, and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?... If you vainly suppose that I shall swear by the fortune of Caesar, as you say, and pretend that you do not know who I am, listen plainly: I am a Christian. But if you desire to learn the teaching of Christianity, appoint a day and give me a hearing." The proconsul replied, "I have wild beasts. I shall throw you to them, if you do not change your mind." Polycarp boldly retorted, "Call them." But the proconsul had a problem. The night had grown late, and all the beasts had been locked securely in their cages. The crowd suggested an impromptu method of execution in which they could participate. People began running to nearby shops to fetch firewood. They demanded Polycarp be burned alive. He was tied to the stake and we have recorded the prayer he uttered before the execution began:

Lord God Almighty, Father of thy beloved and blessed Servant Jesus Christ, through whom we have received full knowledge of thee, "the God of angels and powers and all creation" and of the whole race of the righteous who live in thy presence: I bless thee, because thou hast deemed me worthy of this day and hour, to take my part in the number of the martyrs, in the cup of thy Christ, for "resurrection to eternal life" of soul and body in the immortality of the Holy Spirit; among whom may I be received in thy presence this day as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, just as thou hast prepared and revealed beforehand and fulfilled, thou that art the true God without any falsehood. For this and for

everything I praise thee, I bless thee, I glorify thee, through the eternal and heavenly High Priest, Jesus Christ, thy beloved Servant, through whom be glory to thee with him and Holy Spirit both now and unto the ages to come. Amen.

This prayer is remarkable, for it is almost certainly an adaptation of the prayer that Polycarp had prayed over the Eucharist on each Lord's Day. It is valuable because it is one of the earliest examples of such a prayer and because it also makes clear that both martyrdom and the Eucharist

have something in common—they both put us in touch with the one sacrifice of Christ and invite us to enter into that sacrifice. A marvelous thing happened when the fire was lit. The flames, instead of burning Polycarp, fled outward, away from his body, forming a sort of chamber around him “like a ship’s sail filled by the wind.” Suddenly, the arena was filled with a sweet aroma, “as the breath of incense.” Since he could not apparently be killed by fire, someone was dispatched to run him through with a dagger. Such “a great quantity of blood came forth, so that the fire¹.

Polycarp’s life is an wonderful example of a man who understood he could not presume on the Lord’s mercy, an attitude represented by the voice of the person in our reading from Sirach, who asks:

“I have sinned, yet what has happened to me?”

He then arrogantly presumes:

“God’s mercy is great, he will forgive the multitude of my sins.”

In response to such presumption Sirach declares: “Do not delay, turn back to the Lord and do not postpone it from day to day.”

How easy it is to take the path represented by this person in Sirach. How much harder to follow in the deep commitment of Polycarp.

Let us never presume on the Lord’s merciful, loving kindness. Rather let us hear Jesus say to us:

Be faithful until death and I will give you the crown of life.

¹ D’Ambrosio, Marcellino. *When the Church Was Young: Voices of the Early Fathers* (p. 30-34). Franciscan Media. Kindle Edition.