

Polycarp's Letter to the Philippians

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1 Introduction

1.1 Polycarp

Bishop Ignatius of Antioch wrote a letter to Polycarp, in which he addressed him as bishop of the church of Smyrna. (Ignatius to Polycarp, Salutation).

All information about Polycarp (beside what we know through his *Letter to the Philippians* and his *Martyrdom*) comes from Irenaeus (born c. 120, /140, Asia Minor—died c. 200, /203, probably Lyon).

Irenaeus was a leading Christian theologian of the 2nd century. His work *Adversus Haereses* (Against Heresies), written in about 180, was a refutation of Gnosticism.

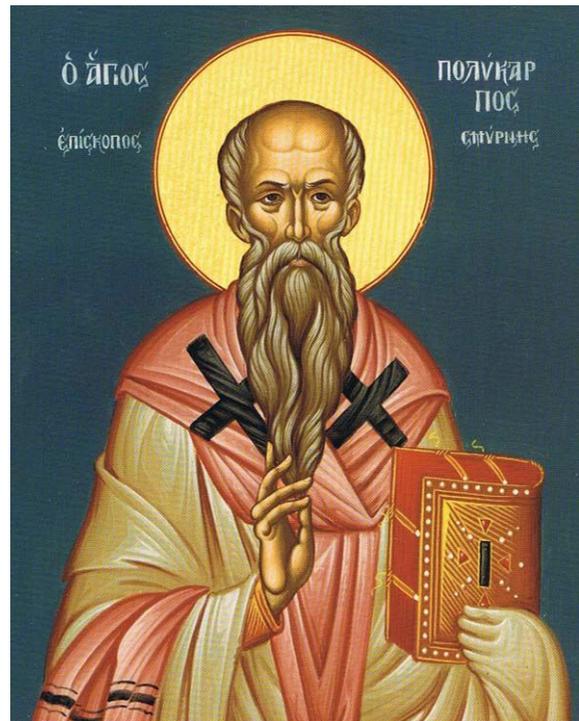
> Read and discuss.

From Irenaeus' *Adversus Haereses* III.3.4.

But Polycarp also was not only instructed by apostles, and conversed with many who had seen Christ, but was also, by apostles in Asia, appointed bishop of the Church in Smyrna, whom I also saw in my early youth, for he tarried [on earth] a very long time, and, when a very old man, gloriously and most nobly suffering martyrdom, departed this life, having always taught the things which he had learned from the apostles, and which the Church has handed down, and which alone are true.

To these things all the Asiatic Churches testify, as do also those men who have succeeded Polycarp down to the present time, 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.

He it was who, coming to Rome in the time of Anicetus caused many to turn away from the aforesaid heretics to the Church of God, proclaiming that he had received this one and sole truth from the apostles,



that, namely, which is handed down by the Church.

And Polycarp himself replied to Marcion, who met him on one occasion, and [Marcion] said, “Do you know me?” “I do know you, the first-born of Satan.” Such was the horror that the apostles and their disciples had against holding even verbal communication with any corrupters of the truth.

Irenaeus mentions Polycarp in his *Letter to Florinus*.

I can even describe the place where the blessed Polycarp used to sit and discourse. [...] Also how he would speak of his familiar talks with John, and with the rest of those who had seen the Lord; and how he would call their words to remembrance. Whatsoever things he had heard from them respecting the Lord, both with regard to His miracles and His teaching, Polycarp having thus received [information] from the eye-witnesses of the Word of life, would recount them all in harmony with the Scriptures.

Irenaeus mentions Polycarp (picture) in his *Letter to Pope Victor*.

And when the blessed Polycarp was sojourning in Rome in the time of Anicetus, [...] neither could Anicetus persuade Polycarp to forego the observance [of Easter on a certain date], inasmuch as these things had been always [so] observed by John the disciple of our Lord, and by other apostles with whom he had been conversant; nor, on the other hand, could Polycarp succeed in persuading Anicetus to keep [the observance in his way], for he maintained that he was bound to adhere to the usage of the presbyters who preceded him.

And in this state of affairs they held fellowship with each other; and Anicetus conceded to Polycarp in the Church the celebration of the Eucharist, by way of showing him respect; so that they parted in peace one from the other, maintaining peace with the whole Church, both those who did observe [this custom] and those who did not. [...]

In the presence of the proconsul holding court at Smyrna and all the people crying out against him in the Amphitheater, he was burned.

1.2 Documentary history of the letter

The text of this letter has been poorly preserved.

- We have nine late Greek manuscripts, all incomplete and all derived from the same defective source that stops after 9.2.
- Eusebius has a complete version of chapter 9 and almost all of chapter 13 in *Church History* III.36.13-15.

- There are also nine Latin manuscripts; these are based on a Greek text that is older and better than the source for the nine Greek manuscripts.
- We have some Syriac patristic quotations.

1.3 Date of the letter

The dating of this letter depends on when we date the death of St Ignatius.

> **Read:** Polycarp 1.1, 9.1 and 13.2

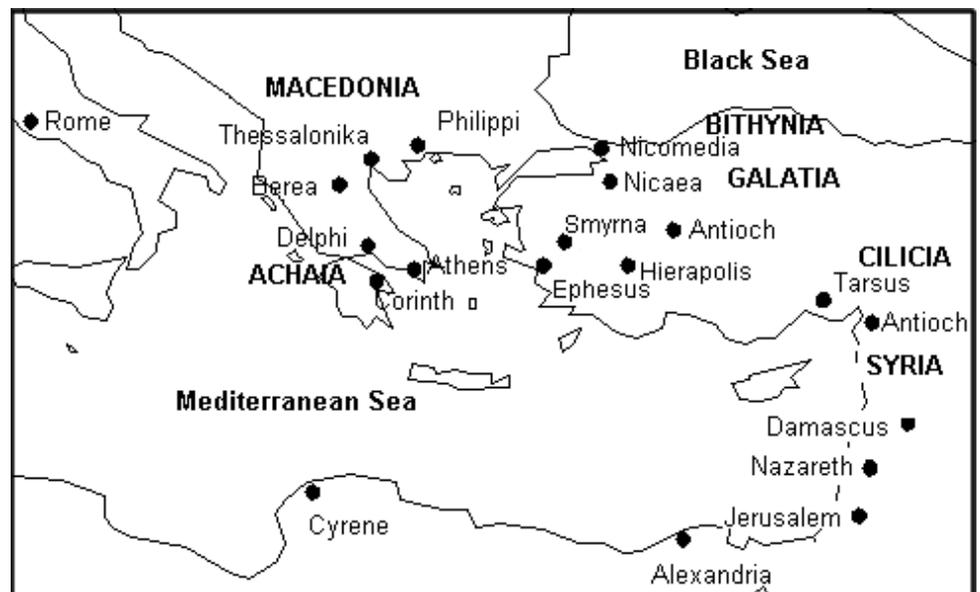
Polycarp knew that Ignatius has been traveling to Rome and maybe that he had been martyred there, but he had not heard the details yet. So this letter cannot be written later than a few weeks, maybe months, after Ignatius died in Rome.

According to Eusebius, Ignatius was martyred under emperor Trajan (98-117AD). We do not have reason to doubt this information and therefore it is safe to assume that Polycarp wrote his letter under Trajan.

1.4 Importance of the letter in the early Church

Irenaeus writes in *Adversus Haereses* III.3.4 (ca. 180AD) about this letter.

There is [...] a very powerful Epistle of Polycarp written to the Philippians, from which those who choose to do so, and are anxious about their salvation, can learn the



character of his faith, and the preaching of the truth.

Eusebius repeats this quote in his *Church History* IV.14.8. 9 (Ca. 340 AD) In IV.14.9 Eusebius mentions that this letter is still in existence.

In his *Letter to Pope Victor* (died 199), Irenaeus said of Polycarp:

He wrote a very valuable Epistle to the Philippians which is read to the present day in the meetings in Asia.

2 Content of the Polycarp's Letter

2.1 Why was this letter written?

> **Read and discuss:** Polycarp 1.1-2; 3.1; 11.1-4; 13.1-14.1

2.2 Right and wrong

> **Read and discuss:**

- a) 2.2-3.1; 3.3; 7.2; 10.1-3; 12.2-3
- b) 4.1-3
- c) 5.1-3
- d) 6.1-3

2.3 The Gospel according to Polycarp

> **Read and discuss:** 1.2-3; 2.1-2; 5.2b; 7.1; 8.1

2.4 Leadership issues

In Polycarp 4.1-6.3, we have read about the morality required from certain categories of Church leaders. These chapters remind us of how St Paul wrote to Timothy (1 Tim 3) about how deacons, widows and presbyters must behave. Because of this Pauline context and Polycarp 4.2 ('then instruct your wives'), I assume Polycarp 4.1 is addressing leaders in the first place. These are the categories of people in church that he addresses:

- Widows: a category of servants in Church. Mentioned in Polycarp 4.3.
- Deacons are mentioned in 5.2
- 'Younger men' and 'young women' are mentioned in 5.3

Note: the younger men and women must 'be obedient to the presbyters and deacons as to God and Christ'. (5.3)

Presbyters are mentioned in 6.1. On presbyters,

> **Read and discuss:** 11.1-4

Question: Do you miss any category of leadership?

2.5 Polycarp and the Trinity

What do we learn from Polycarp about the Church's view of the Trinity?

> **Read and discuss:** Salutation; 1.1; 5.2; 6.2-3; 12.2

2.6 Heresy

> **Read and discuss:** 6.3; 7.1-2.

What heresy does Polycarp speak about? Possibly the teaching of Valentinus and Marcion, mentioned by Irenaeus in his description of Polycarp.

2.7 Holy Scripture in Polycarp's letter

Polycarp says in 12.1 that the believers in Philippi were 'well trained in the sacred scriptures'. Polycarp quotes much from the Old Testament (LXX), especially Psalms, Proverbs, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezechiel and Tobit.

Polycarp showed wide knowledge of letters of Paul, and of 1 Peter and 1 John. 1 Clement is also quoted. It seems he also used Matthew, Mark and Luke. The New Testament sources are never called 'scripture', but they are quoted with similar authority.

> **Read:** 3.2.

2.8 Polycarp on suffering

When Polycarp wrote this letter, Ignatius and others had just been taken to Rome for martyrdom. It was a time of great suffering for the Church. This is, of course, reflected in the letter of Polycarp. A few decades later Polycarp was asked to practice what he preached.

> **Read and discuss:** 1.1; 2.3; 8.2-9.2; 12.3