

The Martyrdom of St. Polycarp

Prologue

Choir:

The Church of God which dwells in Smyrna to the Church of God which dwells in Philomelium and to all the communities of the all-embracing church in every place. May the mercy, peace, and love of God the Father and of our Lord Jesus Christ be multiplied forever.

Marcion (from a pulpit to the side):

We write unto you, brethren, the story of the martyrs and of blessed Polycarp, who put an end to the persecution, setting his seal thereto by his martyrdom. For almost all that went before so happened, that the Lord might show forth anew an example of martyrdom conformable to the Gospel. For he tarried to be betrayed, as did also the Lord, that we also might be imitators of him, looking not only on our own well being, but also on the well being of others. For it is a mark of true and steadfast love to desire not our own salvation only but that of all.

Scene I

At the stadium

Crowd:

Blood! Blood! Give us blood!
We would see the atheists pay.
Loose the beasts and light the pyre!
We will worship Caesar's way,
And celebrate by tooth and fire.
Blood and death is our desire!
Blood and death is our demand!

Polycarp (seated at a desk in the foreground):

We are pleased, and I daresay
Our Lord is pleased to apprehend
How eagerly you move along the way,
How willingly you follow where He leads.

Crowd:

To win the favor of the gods
We would worship Caesar's way
Loose the beasts and light the pyre!
We will see the atheists pay.

Blood and death is our desire!
We celebrate by tooth and fire.
Blood and death is our demand!

Proconsul (to Quintus, with mock generosity):

Deny your Christ and live.
Forsake your blasphemy.

Bring just oblation to the jealous gods.
Deny the lie and live.

Quintus:

I may have rushed to meet your wrath,
But now I fear
That I have rashly, and in haste.
For what strange faith would call
Its supplicant to perish, and for naught?
What harm in pouring wine upon an idol's face?

Crowd:

Attend! The courage of the atheist!
Behold! The honor of their god!

Polycarp:

... the narrow way, how eagerly you move
along the narrow way, despite no small incentive
to do quite otherwise.

Proconsul (to Germanicus):

Deny the lie and live.
Forsake your blasphemy.
Bring just oblation to the jealous gods.
Deny your Christ and live.

Germanicus:

I have not hurried to this place,
But have complied.
I find my faith is suddenly grown strong
And that sweet grace has filled
With an unaccustomed courage from above.

Proconsul:

Take pity on your youth.
Have compassion for your parents.

Germanicus:

Sir, I have compassion for us all,
And pity in abundance.
Still, love for Love Himself
Will not permit my turning now away
From Him Who is my life.
Bring the beasts and I will see
That they are fed, and that they do your bidding quickly.
I will not do obeisance to a wooden god.

Crowd:

Outrage! The man must die!
Blasphemy! And all his kind!

Away with the atheists!
Their insult is unbridled!

Away with the atheists!
Their presumption is too much!

Bring us the author of this evil!
Bring their priests! Bring all.

Polycarp:

... and we are pleased to witness yet
in your calm diligence a joy

declining to assign to death
undue esteem, despite its grave proximity.

Can it be in Philippi
That even now you rest persuaded
Neither death nor life nor height nor depth
Has strength enough to move us from His love?
Nor things present, nor things to come.
Nor things present, nor things to come.

Crowd (erupting, drowning out Polycarp's epistle):

Seek Polycarp!
Bring us now this heretic.
Bring the impious old man.
Bring us this agent of lies,
Whose example has led to such blasphemy.
Crowd (continuing):

We will hear the pretender recant
Or redeem our hurt honor in making
Of the fool an exemplary light.
Seek Polycarp, and bring him to his fate.
Bring the impious old man.
Bring him to his end.

Scene II

A bedroom in a farmhouse outside of Smyrna

Marcion:

The excellent Polycarp, on hearing the news, was not dismayed, but wished to remain in the city; even so the greater number urged him to depart in secret. And so he did, to a little farm, not far from the city, and passed the time with a few companions, doing naught else but pray night and day for all and for the churches throughout the world, as was his custom.

Polycarp:

The day has as suddenly dimmed
As our courage and confidence
That we who now puzzled remain
Might not drink of death's bitterness.

For a season, His promise stood firm,
And served as assurance that He
Would return in a shout from the clouds,
Would gather his Body as one.

I recall in confusion His agonized prayer
That the cup might be taken away.
I hear in His words a sudden dismay
That the Father might not deign to hear.

I recall how the Son was betrayed by a kiss,
How the Garden was torn by a sword,
I recall His great calm, that He did not resist,

That He gave Himself up, with a word.

And now I observe that His agony's come
A great distance to dwell with us now.
That the grove of Gethsemane flourishes,
Embraces us all with its bough.

Marcion:

And while praying he fell into a trance three days before he was taken, and saw his pillow being consumed by fire. And he turned and said to those with him, "I must be burned alive."

Polycarp (suddenly alert):

Am I fallen into Hell? And do these flames
tender my destruction, or do they move in kind caress?

Angels:

Taste and See.

Polycarp:

How does my face now burn, with what strange light?
I seem to see my person borne upon a flaming bed.

Angels:

Taste and See.

Cloud of Witnesses:

Taste and See.

Polycarp:

I seem to see my person bathed in fire, bathed in light.
I see, I think I see, the air is all of flame.

Angels and Cloud of Witnesses:

Taste and See. The Lord is good.

Polycarp:

And though my heart runs wild, though I fear,
I seem to see my person borne upon bright wings of flame.

John, Angels and Cloud of Witnesses:

Taste and See. The Lord is good.

John and Cloud of Witnesses:

The First and Last, the One Who was Dead and came to life
Has said, I know your works, I know your tribulation.

Angels:

Taste and see.

John and Cloud of Witnesses:

I know your poverty, how it has made you rich,
I know the blasphemy of those who approach you now.

Angels:

Taste and see.

John and Cloud of Witnesses:

Do not fear any of what you are to suffer.
Though you will be tested, be faithful unto death,
And I will give you the crown of life.

Hear what the Spirit says to the churches!
He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.

Angels and Cloud of Witnesses:

Taste and See that the Lord is good.

Polycarp:

The flame accepts the offering, the holocaust received.
And in such dire communion, the blessed
Become His element.

Angels and Cloud of Witnesses:

Taste and See. The Lord is good.

Polycarp:

According to the promise, we had known

We would be led, and that the ancient God
Would deign to make His hidden presence shown
By column of fire, and pillar of cloud.

We had come to suspect what fierce demand
Our translation to another land might bode,
But had not guessed He would insist our own
Brief flesh should bear the flame, become the cloud.

Angels and Cloud of Witnesses:

Taste and See. The Lord is good.

Scene III

The kitchen in another farmhouse nearby

Marcion:

While his pursuers were still waiting for him, he went away to another farm, and immediately they followed close upon him. Not finding him, they laid hands on two young slaves, one of whom confessed under the torture. The constables and horsemen, armed in the usual way, went out about the dinner hour "as against a thief" at a run. Coming up in a body, they found him lying in a cottage in an upper room; he could indeed have escaped from thence also elsewhere, but he refused, saying "The will of the Lord be done."

Polycarp:

Mercy, Lord, and speak to me.

I could flee, and I could justify my flight
Insisting that the Church -- the Very Body
Of our Lord -- would sooner have me whole

And serving some years further
Its trembling members, suffering.

I could remain in hiding, and I could conceive
Such cowardice as noble, and as necessary, meet.
I could lie upon the crest of exile, and from afar
Observe the flock's destruction, abandoned to the wolves.

Constables:

We seek Polycarp! Deliver him to us!

Polycarp:

Who comes now, and in whose name?

Who arrives to lead the famished sheep to slaughter?

Who desires even now the innocents' blood?

Constables:

We seek Polycarp, the leader in the lie.

Polycarp:

Who so fears the Holy Body
That he must pierce its flesh anew?

I raise my hand. I touch my face, and find
That I am weeping.

His people, huddled close, and trembling
Are my own. Their tears are mine.

By what strange call do I bid the tender lambs
To suffer?

By what wild madness do I lead them
To their deaths?

What is this meek example that I shape?
Is it fit and meet?

By what extreme example do I ask them
Follow me into the Kingdom?

Master, grant that I might know before I err
And lead your innocents to doom.

Angels:

Taste and See.

Constables:

Deliver the atheist Polycarp, lest all the household die.

Polycarp:

The will of the Lord be done. The will of the Lord be done.

Marcion:

Hearing then that they were come, he went down and talked with them, those present marveling at his great age and his constancy, and at their excessive eagerness to take a man so old. So he bade food and drink to be set before them at that hour, as much as they wanted; and besought them to give him an hour to pray undisturbed. On leave being given, he stood and prayed, remembering all that ever had dealings with him, great and small, well known and unknown, and the whole Church throughout the world, being so full of the grace of God that for two hours he could not once be silent, and the hearers were astonished, and many repented for having assailed an old man so godlike.

Scene IV
On the road to Smyrna

Marcion:

The time having now come for his departure, they set him on an ass and brought him to the city. He was met by Herodes, the High Sheriff, and by Herodes' father, Nicetes, who, having transferred him to the carriage, sat down beside him, and strove to persuade him with these words:

Nicetes:

What is the harm of saying "Caesar is Lord,"
Offering poor incense
To save your precious life?

What harm in pouring honeyed wine
Upon a carven face
That you might live to serve your living god?

Won't you pour a simple cup of grain
Upon the pedestal
That you might save your people?

Polycarp:

I will not do as you advise me.
Your words are not your own, but come
Welling from the Evil One.

Please, stand aside, or better
Get behind me
That I might find what my Lord prepares.

Marcion:

Failing to persuade him, they reviled him, and made him descend with so much haste that in getting down from the carriage he hurt his shin. He, as though nothing had happened, paid no heed, but went on with much eagerness on his way to the stadium, where the din was so great that none could be so much as heard.

Crowd:

Polycarp is taken! Polycarp is taken!
The atheist is here. Polycarp is ours!

Angels:

Taste and see. Faithful. Faithful unto death for the One who brings us life.

Crowd:

Polycarp is taken! Polycarp is taken!
The atheist is here. Polycarp is ours!

Scene V At the stadium

Proconsul (after quieting the crowd):

We must be mistaken. You cannot be Polycarp. Are you that man? Correct us in a word and leave.

Polycarp (calmly and quietly):

You are not mistaken. I am that servant of God. I am Polycarp.

Proconsul (with amusement):

Come now. We are both reasonable men. Have respect to your age. Assuage this mob and swear by the Fortune of Caesar, repent, say "Away with the atheists."

Polycarp (sighing, then gesturing to the crowd and gazing heavenward):

Away with the atheists.

Proconsul (quietly, but insistently, to Polycarp alone):

Don't press them any further, old man.

Swear and I set you free. Curse Christ, and live.

Polycarp (freely, within himself):

How will I deny Him now? The One
Whose Presence has attended me
So faithfully along the Way?

The truth? I have denied Him.
A thousand times or more, and in a thousand ways,
In what I think, in what I say, in what I do
Or leave undone, I deny Him every day.

Polycarp (continuing):

He has been my breath, my heart, my very pulse
These scores of years. And still, I have denied Him.

Strangely, this maddened mob has helped me know
I will not deny Him now.

Angels:

The pillar of cloud by day
And the pillar of fire by night
Did not depart from before the people.

Polycarp (to the proconsul):

Eighty and six years have I served him, and He did me no wrong.
How can I blaspheme my King, who saved me?

Crowd:

Hear him! Hear him! He blasphemes!
We have no King but Caesar!
Have done with him, and now!

Proconsul (shouting):

Swear by the Fortune of Caesar.

Polycarp (calmly):

If you vainly imagine that I shall swear by the Fortune of Caesar,
As you say, and suppose that I know not what I am,

hear my answer plainly: I am a Christian.
If you wish to learn the Christian's reason, give me a day, and hear.

Proconsul (evenly):

It is the people you must convince.

Crowd:

We have no king but Caesar.

Blood! Blood!

Away with the atheist!

Polycarp:

I would have counted you worthy to be reasoned with; for we have been taught to give honor as is fit, where we can without harm, to governments, to powers ordained by God, but a people clamoring for blood I do not deem able to hear any defense from me.

Proconsul:

I have beasts, and you will be theirs, unless you repent.

Polycarp:

Bring them in, for repentance from the better to the worse is no change to be desired, but it is good to run from cruelty to justice.

Proconsul:

If you despise the beasts, I will have you consumed by fire, unless you repent.

Polycarp:

You threaten me with the fire that burns for an hour and is speedily quenched; for you know nothing of the fire of the judgment to come and of eternal punishment which is reserved for the wicked. Why delay? Bring what you will.

Proconsul (formally, to the left of the crowd):

Polycarp has confessed himself to be a Christian.

Polycarp:

Faithful

Proconsul (formally, to the right of the crowd):

Polycarp has confessed himself to be a Christian.

Polycarp:

Faithful unto death

Proconsul (formally, to the center of the crowd):

Polycarp has confessed himself to be a Christian.

Polycarp:

Faithful to the One who offers life.

Crowd:

Fire! Fire!

Fire take the atheist!

This is the teacher of Asia,

the father of the Christians,

the destroyer of our Gods,

who teaches many to scorn fit sacrifice, many to loathe right worship.

Burn him alive! Burn him alive! Give him to the flame!

Marcion:

This then was brought about with great speed, the crowd gathering together forthwith from the shops and baths wood and fuel. When the pyre was ready, he put off all his upper garments and undid his girdle. He was immediately girded with the robe devised for his burning; but when they were about to nail him to the stake as well, he said:

Polycarp:

Leave me as I am; for he that enabled me to abide the fire will also enable me to abide at the stake unflinching without your nails.

Polycarp and Cloud of Witnesses (praying):

Lord God Almighty, Father of Thy well-beloved and blessed Son, Jesus Christ, through whom we have received the knowledge of Thee, God of Angels and Powers and of the whole creation and of all the race of the righteous who live before Thee,

Polycarp, Cloud of Witnesses and Angels:

I bless Thee that Thou didst deem me worthy of this day and hour, that I should take a part among the number of the martyrs in the cup of Thy Christ in the resurrection of life eternal of soul and body in incorruption of the Holy Spirit: among whom may I be accepted before Thee today, a rich and acceptable sacrifice, as Thou didst foreordain and foreshow and fulfill, God faithful and true. For this above all I praise Thee, I bless Thee, I glorify Thee through the Eternal and Heavenly High Priest Jesus Christ, Thy well-beloved Son, through whom to Thee with Him and the Holy Spirit be glory now and forevermore. Amen.

Marcion:

When he had offered up the Amen, and finished his prayer, those who had charge of the fire set light to it. And a great flame blazing forth, we to whom it was given to behold, who were indeed preserved to tell the story to the rest, beheld a marvel. For the fire forming a sort of arch, like a ship's sail bellying with the wind, made a wall about the body of the martyr, which was in the midst, not like burning flesh, but like bread in the baking, or like gold and silver burning in a furnace. For we caught a most sweet perfume, like the breath of frankincense or some other precious spice.

Polycarp and Cloud of Witnesses:

Abba Moses heard the Voice of fire from a bush
The fire roared; the bush was not consumed.

Angels:

The pillar of cloud by day
And the pillar of fire by night
Did not depart from before the people.

Polycarp and Cloud of Witnesses:

Three companions met the flame
While yet among them stood a Fourth.
And as their captors crumpled from the heat and fell,
The three companions stood amid the flames,
And with their Lord communed.

Angels:

The pillar of cloud by day
And the pillar of fire by night

Did not depart from before the people.

Polycarp, Cloud of Witnesses and Angels:

According to the promise, we had known
We would be led, and that the ancient God
Would deign to make His hidden presence shown
By column of fire, and pillar of cloud.

We had come to suspect what fierce demand
Our translation to another land might bode,
But had not guessed He would insist our own
Brief flesh should bear the flame, become the cloud.

Angels and Cloud of Witnesses:

The pillar of cloud by day
And the pillar of fire by night
Did not depart from before the people.

Marcion:

At last when the impious people saw that his body could not be consumed by the fire they gave orders that a slaughterer should go and thrust a dagger into him. This being done there came forth a dove and such a gush of blood that it put out the fire, and all the throng marveled that there should be so great a difference between the unbelievers and the elect; one of whom was the most admirable martyr, Polycarp, an apostolic and prophetic teacher of our time, and bishop of the church in Smyrna. For every word that he uttered from his mouth was fulfilled then and shall be fulfilled hereafter. . . . Having vanquished by his patience the unjust ruler, and thus received the crown of immortality, he rejoices greatly with the Apostles and with all the just, and glorifies the Almighty God and Father, and praises our Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour of our souls, the Pilot of our bodies, and the Shepherd of the church throughout the world.

Angels and Cloud of Witnesses (welcoming Polycarp into heaven):

Taste and See. The Lord is good.

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