BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Polycarp of Smyrna

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: February 23

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IN BRIEF

Saint Polycarp of Smyrna

2nd-century bishop of Smyrna, disciple of the apostle John according to tradition, Apostolic Father and martyr.

Feast day	February 23
Born	c. 69 (or c. 81)
Died	February 23, 155 (or 167), Smyrna (today Izmir, Turkey)
Canonized	immemorial cult
Era	2nd century

In this booklet

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Polycarp of Smyrna

Saint Polycarp was one of the very first bishops of the Church, at Smyrna, today's Izmir, on the western coast of Turkey. Presented by tradition as a disciple of the apostle Saint John, he knew the generation that had seen the apostles. He was burned alive at Smyrna at the age of eighty-six, probably in 155, and the account of his death is one of the oldest Christian texts devoted to a martyr. His feast day is February 23.

Who was Saint Polycarp?

Polycarp (in Greek *Polykarpos*, "bearing much fruit") belongs to the Apostolic Fathers, the Christian writers who were in contact with the apostles or with their close disciples. His origins, his youth and much of his life escape us. What we know of him comes from a few reliable witnesses: the letter Saint Ignatius of Antioch wrote to him, his own *Letter to the Philippians*, the memories of Saint Irenaeus of Lyon, who had heard him in his youth, and above all the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, a letter sent by the Church of Smyrna shortly after his death. A later *Life of Polycarp*, from the late 4th or early 5th century, is very fanciful and can hardly be used.

Key dates in the life of Polycarp

- **c. 69**: Probable birth, if 155 is taken as the year of his death; other calculations give a birth around 81.
- **Late 1st century**: According to Saint Irenaeus, he is taught by the apostle John and by other witnesses of the Lord.
- **Early 2nd century**: He is bishop of Smyrna.
- **c. 107-110**: Saint Ignatius of Antioch, taken to Rome to be martyred, stops at Smyrna and then writes him a letter.

- **Shortly after**: He writes to the Christians of Philippi a letter that has come down to us.
- **c. 154**: He travels to Rome to discuss the date of Easter with Pope Saint Anicetus.
- **February 23, 155 (or 167)**: Arrested and condemned, he is burned alive in the stadium of Smyrna.
- **Shortly after his death**: The Church of Smyrna writes the account of his martyrdom and gathers his bones, celebrating the anniversary every year.

The disciple of the apostles

Saint Irenaeus, who later became bishop of Lyon, remembered seeing Polycarp when he was a boy in Asia Minor. He recalled that the old bishop spoke of his conversations with John and with others who had seen the Lord, and that he repeated their words about the miracles and teaching of Jesus. For Irenaeus, Polycarp was therefore a precious link: he connected the communities of the 2nd century with the preaching of the apostles. That is why he called on him as a witness to the true faith against new doctrines, such as those of the Gnostics and of Marcion.

Saint Ignatius of Antioch, taken in chains to Rome, stopped at Smyrna and met Polycarp. Further along the road, he wrote him an affectionate letter, urging him to stand firm "like an anvil under the blows" and to care for everyone, especially the weak. Polycarp, for his part, gathered Ignatius's letters and sent them to the Christians of Philippi, together with his own letter. This simple, pastoral text calls for faithfulness, charity and the rejection of the love of money.

The meeting with Pope Anicetus

Around 154, already old, Polycarp made the long journey to Rome to meet Pope Saint Anicetus. The Churches of Asia celebrated Easter on the 14th of the Jewish month of Nisan, whatever the day of the week, while Rome kept it on Sunday. The two bishops could not agree, each wishing to remain faithful to the custom received from his predecessors. But they did not break communion: according to Irenaeus, Anicetus even let Polycarp preside at the Eucharist in Rome. This episode has remained an example of peace between Churches that do not share the same customs.

The martyrdom at Smyrna

The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* tells how a persecution broke out at Smyrna. Several Christians, including the young Saint Germanicus, had already been thrown to the beasts when the crowd demanded the old bishop. His friends hid him in a house outside the city. He was found and arrested at night, and asked only for time to pray. Brought to the stadium, he was ordered by the proconsul to deny Christ. He answered with words that became famous: "Eighty-six years I have served him, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"

Condemned to the stake, he prayed one last time, thanking God for judging him worthy to share the cup of Christ. According to the account, the flames curved around him without consuming him, and an executioner had to finish him with a dagger. The text deliberately compares his passion with that of Jesus: he withdraws outside the city, he is betrayed by people close to him, the officer who arrests him is called Herod. Historians see in it a carefully composed work, but the substance of the account, written by witnesses shortly afterward, is considered sound.

The date of his death is debated: the clues in the text, a "great Sabbath" and the seventh day before the Kalends of March, lead many historians to February 23, 155, but Eusebius of Caesarea places it in 167, and other dates have been proposed.

The first cult of a martyr

The authorities wanted to prevent the Christians from honoring the martyr. Yet after the burning, the faithful were able to gather his bones, "more precious than costly stones", and lay them in a fitting place. They announced that they would gather there every year, in joy, to celebrate the day of his birth into heaven. This is one of the oldest testimonies to the cult of martyrs and their relics. The model of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* later inspired a great many accounts of martyrs.

In the 6th century, a Burgundian tradition made Polycarp the spiritual father of several evangelizers of Gaul, such as Saint Benignus of Dijon and Saint Andochius of Saulieu. These accounts are legendary, but they reflect the real links between the Churches of Asia Minor and the Church of Lyon, where Irenaeus, who had once listened to him, became bishop. Polycarp is shown as a bishop, with the pallium and crozier, a book in his hand, often with the palm of martyrdom or amid the flames of the stake.

What can we learn from Saint Polycarp?

Polycarp is first of all a witness. He faithfully kept what he had received from the apostles and handed it on without adding anything. He was able to remain at peace with the bishop of Rome while defending the custom of his own Church. And at the end of a long life, he preferred death to denial, with disarming simplicity: one does not betray the one who has done us nothing

but good. We can pray to him for faithfulness in the faith, for the unity of Christians, for bishops, and for elderly people who carry the memory of the Church.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Polycarp and the novena to Saint Polycarp.

Where to pray to Saint Polycarp

- **Izmir** (Turkey), the ancient Smyrna: the Catholic church of Saint Polycarp, in the city of his martyrdom.
- **Lyon** (France): the church of Saint-Polycarpe, on the slopes of the Croix-Rousse, in the city where his disciple Irenaeus was bishop.
- In any church on February 23, the day the Church keeps his memory.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Polycarp for Faithfulness in the Faith

Saint Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna and disciple of the apostles, kept the faith all the way to the stake, at eighty-six. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It draws on his answer to the proconsul and on the prayer of thanksgiving that the account of his martyrdom places on his lips. It entrusts to him faithfulness in the faith, the unity of Christians and those who are growing old.

Prayer to Saint Polycarp

Saint Polycarp,
you listened to the witnesses of the Lord
and faithfully kept their word.
Help me to receive the Gospel as the Church hands it on to me,
and to hand it on in turn without betraying it.

For eighty-six years you served Christ,
and you would not deny your King who had saved you.
When my faith is put to the test,
give me your simplicity and your courage,
so that I may prefer nothing to the love of the Lord.

You kept peace with the bishop of Rome
without giving up the customs of your Church:
pray for the unity of Christians.
Watch over our bishops, our elders and our sick,
and obtain for us the grace to give thanks to God in all things.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint Polycarp

- On his feast day, February 23.
- When you must stay faithful to your faith despite mockery or pressure.
- For the unity of Christians, and for dialogue between Churches of different traditions.
- For bishops and priests, that they may be good shepherds.
- For elderly people, and for yourself as you grow older.

An invocation

You can take up, in your own way, the words of Saint Polycarp:

> *Lord Jesus, for so many years I have served you, and you have done me nothing but good.*
> *Keep me faithful to the end.*
> *Saint Polycarp, pray for us. Amen.*

To prepare for his feast, you can pray the novena to Saint Polycarp from February 15 to 23, and read the life of Saint Polycarp.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Polycarp of Smyrna

Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It follows the life of Saint Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna and martyr, as told by Saint Irenaeus, by the letter of Saint Ignatius of Antioch and by the account of his martyrdom written by the Church of Smyrna. To finish it on his feast day, February 23, begin on February 15. You can also pray it at any other time of the year.

How to pray this novena

Each day, begin with the Sign of the Cross and entrust your intention to God. Read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. End with: "Saint Polycarp, pray for us." The act suggested each day helps you live the novena concretely.

Day 1: Listening to the witnesses

According to Saint Irenaeus, Polycarp had heard the apostle John and other witnesses of the Lord. He loved to repeat what they had told him about Jesus. Faith reaches us through faces and voices.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for those who spoke to me about you. Give me a heart attentive to your word.

Act of the day: Slowly read a passage from the Gospel of Saint John.

Day 2: A shepherd for his people

Bishop of Smyrna for many years, Polycarp watched over a community surrounded by a pagan world. Saint Ignatius asked him to care for everyone, and first of all for the weak.

Prayer: Lord, bless our bishops and our priests. Make them shepherds close to those who suffer.

Act of the day: Pray by name for the bishop of your diocese and for your parish priest.

Day 3: The friendship of saints

Saint Ignatius, led in chains toward Rome, stopped with Polycarp and later wrote to him. Two bishops supported each other in faith, one walking toward martyrdom, the other remaining at his post.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the friends who support me on your path. Teach me to encourage others.

Act of the day: Write a message of support to someone going through a trial.

Day 4: A simple letter

In his letter to the Philippians, Polycarp recalls simple things: to love, to forgive, to serve the poor, to beware of the love of money. Holiness passes through faithfulness in small things.

Prayer: Lord, free me from attachment to possessions and make me generous toward the poor.

Act of the day: Give a gift, even a modest one, to a charity.

Day 5: Peace between Churches

In Rome, Polycarp and Pope Anicetus could not agree on the date of Easter. Yet they remained in communion, and Anicetus let him preside at the Eucharist.

Prayer: Lord, grant all Christians to seek unity in charity, despite their differences.

Act of the day: Pray for Christian unity, or meet a Christian of another tradition.

Day 6: Keeping the faith received

Faced with the new doctrines of his time, Polycarp remained attached to what he had received from the apostles. Irenaeus saw in him a guardian of the true faith.

Prayer: Lord, keep me in the faith of your Church and make me grow in the knowledge of your love.

Act of the day: Slowly recite the Creed, weighing each phrase.

Day 7: Time to pray

When they came to arrest him at night, Polycarp had food served to the soldiers and asked only for time to pray. He entrusted to God everyone he had known.

Prayer: Lord, when trials come, teach me to turn first to you and to pray for others.

Act of the day: Take time to pray for all the people who have mattered in your life.

Day 8: Eighty-six years of service

To the proconsul who asked him to deny Christ, Polycarp answered that he had served him for eighty-six years without receiving the slightest harm. How could he betray such a King?

Prayer: Lord, I thank you for all the good you have done me. Keep me faithful to the end.

Act of the day: Write down three blessings received from God in your life, and thank him for them.

Day 9: An offering pleasing to God

At the stake, Polycarp gave thanks for sharing in the cup of Christ. The Church of Smyrna gathered his bones and celebrated each year the day of his birth into heaven.

Prayer: Lord, make my life an offering. Through the intercession of Saint Polycarp, grant me the grace I ask of you in this novena, if it is your will.

Act of the day: Attend Mass, and pray for Christians persecuted today.

Closing prayer

> *Saint Polycarp,*
> *disciple of the apostles and shepherd of Smyrna,*
> *you kept the faith and sealed it with your blood.*
> *Present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you.*
> *Obtain for me faithfulness in small things*
> *and courage in great ones,*
> *and pray for the unity of all Christians.*
> *Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

You can also pray the prayer to Saint Polycarp at any time, and read the life of Saint Polycarp.

Credits and sources

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