

Mystical Rose: Historical



Introduction to Church History

We are about to study the History of the Catholic Church. It is important for us to realize from the very beginning, that we cannot set about it quite in the same way that we set about the study of other subjects. In the study of the history of the Catholic Church, we study something that is not merely human but human and divine. The rules that aid us in studying profane history are therefore insufficient when we apply ourselves to the history of the Church. For although the providence of God rules the destiny of all nations, yet, to use the words of Pope Leo XIII, "the history of the Church shows forth this providential action much more than profane history." Nations rise and fall, empires pass away, but God has promised that His Kingdom, the Catholic Church, shall last even to the end of the world. His Providence is always supporting it and guiding it so that it may do the work for which it was founded.



Because she is human in her members, the Catholic Church is subject to the influences which bear upon every human society. She must live amid the uncertainties of human life and deal with the weakness and infidelity of her own children on the one hand, and the malice and persecution of the world on the other. But because she is sustained by the Holy Ghost dwelling within her, the Catholic Church cannot be destroyed. The strong hand of Providence will always be present, not merely to protect her, but to enable her to show forth to the world her divine character by triumphing over obstacles which, were she a merely human society, would be more than sufficient to crush her into extinction: “Behold I am with you all days.”

The World into which the Church was born

At the outset of our study of Church History therefore we are placed in presence of the great mystery which is the heavenly destiny of the human race. There are three clear chapters in the development of that mystery: (1) God the Creator in His Infinite Goodness planned from eternity that all men should share in His own Divine Life and Happiness by Sanctifying Grace; (2) Our first parents thwarted His plan by Sin; then (3) Our Divine Lord, Jesus Christ, came and restored it by the work of Redemption. It is at the third chapter that our study begins, since the Catholic Church is nothing else than the means instituted by Christ to bring the fruits of Redemption to the souls of men.

In the age into which the Church was born, four great forces were at work in the world: wealth, law, intellectual culture, and religion. First, it was an age of great economic security and material well-being, the three centuries between 40 B.C. and 260 A.D. being reckoned by historians as, in many respects, the most prosperous that men have ever known. It was, secondly, the age of “Roman peace”; Roman arms and Roman law had linked up the known world into a political unity which favored the Emperors in their attempt to suppress Christianity, it is true, but which, at the same time, helped it to spread rapidly. Thirdly, it was an age in which the high philosophy and exquisite art of the Greeks reigned supreme in the world of culture. Lastly, it was an age in which the high-priests of a thousand different religious systems struggled vainly to fill the great void in the hearts of men, and to give them the happiness for which they craved unceasingly.



Yet, in spite of its material well-being, its Roman peace, its brilliant culture and the variety of its religions, “the age in which Christ was born,” writes the great Scriptural scholar, St. Paul, “was one of unsurpassed wretchedness and degradation. It would be difficult to point to a time, when the sum total of human misery and the foulness of sin and despair, was greater.” The majority of human beings in the Roman Empire were slaves; the machinery of the State was designed to procure earthly happiness for the privileged. Appalling spectacles of blood were enacted in the public circus. Immorality of the most revolting type had eaten like a hungry cancer into the very heart of society, and the foulest abominations were glorified and masked, with the ritual of religious worship. “A wild desire for depraved pleasures raged in the hearts of men, for this life was their all.”

There was, however, in the world which we are considering, one nation which, by the Divine protection, had escaped in some degree, the universal corruption of humankind. To His chosen people, The Jews, God had given a revelation of Himself, and a *Torah*, or Religious Law by observing which they should preserve, that revelation incorrupt. He had watched over them with jealous care and in spite of their infidelity had so disposed their history that their influence had come to be extended from end to end of the Roman world.

It was upon this Jewish nation that God has set His seal: from it “when fullness of time was come” (Gal. 4:4), He chose to assume unto union with His Divinity the human nature which was that of the Redeemer Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man.

The Foundation and Nature of the Church

The earthly mission of Our Divine Lord Jesus Christ, might be summarized in three points: (1) He redeemed the world by His life death, and resurrection; (2) He established a society, the Catholic Church, which would put the fruits of Redemption at the disposal of all mankind until the end of time: (3) He left with this society a solemn command that it should proclaim itself as the one and *only way* instituted by God to undo the effects of Original Sin, to restore men to His friendship and open for them the way to His eternal happiness, and that it should make known to men the *conditions* upon which they might enter on this way. He left with this society a promise that no hostile power should ever triumph over it and that it should never fail in its mission, because He would always be with it.



At the beginning of His public ministry Our Lord made the first announcement of the forthcoming foundation of His Church: “Do penance, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand,” (Math.4:17). He foretold that there should be “one fold and one shepherd,” designating the future pastor in the words of promise addressed to St. Peter (Math.16:18-19), and promising to the other Apostles a share in the exercise of the power confided in its fullness to St. Peter. (Matt. 18:18-19). At the Last Supper Our Lord instituted first the Eucharistic

Sacrifice as the unbloody continuation of the redemptive Sacrifice of Calvary and the central act of worship in the New Law, and secondly the sacred priesthood, through which, by the power of Holy Orders, the Eucharistic Sacrifice is perpetuated. The final chapter of the Church’s mission is contained in those words of extraordinary solemnity, addressed by Our Lord to the Apostles: “As the Father has sent Me, I also send you, (John 20:21). “All power is given to Me in Heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, teach all nations; baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you. And behold I am with you all days, even unto the consummation of the world”. (Math. 28: 18-20).

The Church was finally *born* as St. Augustine says, at Pentecost, nine days after Our Lord’s ascension into heaven.

From these texts, studied together with the metaphors and parables used by Our Lord to describe His Church, it is clear that the Church is to be *a society with seven characteristic and unmistakable properties.*

A society is “a number of men united for a common object to be attained by common means and under a common authority.” The number of men in the Church is to be limitless, the common object is eternal salvation; the common means are faith, the sacraments, and the Eucharistic Sacrifice; the common authority, the apostles and their successors to the end of time.

With seven characteristic properties.—the first three are properties of such a nature that the society which lacks them or does not claim them cannot be the true Church of Jesus Christ. The last four are *positive* marks by which it will always be possible to distinguish the true Church of Christ from false sects, for these marks require special miraculous aid from God, and God could not give such aid to any but His own Church. The seven properties of the Church of Jesus Christ are as follows:

Visibility—“Christ established the Church as a visible society, that is, as a society which stood out plainly before the eyes of men as an organized body consisting of teachers and taught, rulers and subjects, who joined in public worship and made open profession of their belief.” Members are admitted to this society by the public rite of the sacrament of Baptism.



Imperishability—since the Church’s mission is to all men it must exist without interruption to the end of the world. Because Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost are with it, it cannot perish nor suffer any loss or change in itself.

Infallibility—the true Church is empowered to speak in the name of God. It cannot err therefore nor lead others into error, in carrying out this charge. Its pastors, by the assistance of the Holy Ghost, will be preserved from error in defining doctrines of faith and morals. Its faithful will be preserved from error in believing so long as they adhere to their lawful pastors and their lawful teachings.

Unity—this Church is to be one. (Math. 28:18-20). Its members will be united by a triple bond—by professing the same faith; by partaking of the same sacraments; by assisting at the same sacrifice; and by obeying the same authority, which has always come from God. This unity will be a characteristic found in the Church alone, and one by which it will be possible to distinguish the true Church from false sects. It is a sign predetermined by Our Lord; (John 17:11-23); and as it is to exist in a society extended over the whole world and unsupported by force or arms it will demand miraculous aid from heaven.

Sanctity—this Church is to be characterized by a radiant holiness. It will be holy in the *means* which it will use to lead the faithful to holiness—holy in its doctrine, its sacraments, and sacrifice, and its authority. It will be holy in its *members*; it will lead many of these to ordinary sanctity, and at least some (who will never be wanting in the Church) to the heroic holiness of the saints. The Church, thirdly, will manifest its sanctity by miracles and by certain extraordinary signs or *charismata*. These charismata, as well as the heroic holiness of the saints, since they demand the special favor and miraculous aid of God, will be another unmistakable sign by which it will be possible to distinguish the true Church of Christ from false sects.

Note, however, that Our Lord did not say that there would not be sinners in His Church: He leaves His children free to accept sin or reject His gifts. Some will reject them and hence the fish-net of the Church catches worthless fish as well as good; the cockle grows up side by side with the wheat. (Math.13).

Catholicity—this Church will be Catholic, universal, or world-wide. It will be built, as it were, to cover the whole earth; shortly after its first beginnings it will be universal by embracing a vast number of men of many nationalities; and finally by a gradual and steady growth over the world, it will reach all nations. (Math. 24:14). The Catholicity of the Church taken together with its unity, *i.e.*, considered as the universal diffusion of one and the same undivided society, will again demand



miraculous aid from on high and will therefore be a third mark by which the true Church can be distinguished from false sects.

Apostolicity—the true Church will always hold and profess the doctrine preached by the Apostles; it will always be ruled by the apostles or their lawful successors; it will always be the continuation of that visible society which the apostles are to plant. The apostolic succession of its pastors and its identity with the society planted by the apostles will be the fourth unmistakable sign by which it will be possible to distinguish the true Church from false sects.

The Church's Mission in the World

We shall see these seven characteristic properties of the Catholic Church gradually taking form and feature as we follow her through the pages of history in pursuit of her mission. That mission is but the continuation of the mission of Christ: "As the Father has sent Me, I also send you" (John 20:21). Our Lord was sent by the Father a Prophet (or Teacher), Priest, and King. He came as a Prophet to *teach* men the way of salvation; as a Priest to *sanctify* them, to cleanse them from their sins, making them His children and heirs to His kingdom by the sacrifice of Calvary and the institution of the holy Sacraments; as a King to *rule* and guide their thoughts and actions towards the goal of Eternal Life. So, too, in carrying out the last solemn command of Christ, her Founder, the Church exercises the same three-fold role. On the one hand her pastors, through the power of Holy Orders and jurisdiction (government), carry on the three-fold work of preaching the Gospel, administering the Sacraments, and making laws for the good of souls: "Teach ye all nations, baptizing them...teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you"(Math. 28:19-20). On the other hand, the faithful, for their part, carry out Christ's command by believing the Gospel as it is taught by His Church, receiving the Sacraments and obeying the Church's lawfully constituted authority: "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." (Mark 16:16). "He that will not hear the true Church of Jesus Christ let him be as the heathen and the publican."

The Church, the Mystical Body of Christ

How appropriate, then, and how full of meaning, are the words of Holy Scripture telling us that the Church is the Mystical Body of Christ and that He is its Head. As Head, He gives to the Mystical Body of the faithful *vital energy* by the Divine Grace which they receive mainly through the ministrations of the priesthood; and in this way Our Lord lives on in the world as *Priest*. Again, just as the head guards the body by showing where danger lies and pointing out the sure path, so does Christ protect His Mystical Body through the *teaching* power of the Hierarchy; in this way, He continues to live in the world as *Teacher* or *Prophet*. Lastly, as the head rules and directs the movements of the members for the good of the whole body, so Our Lord rules the Church



through the *governing* power of the bishops, who have power to make laws for the good of the faithful and can command firm assent to their religious teaching and absolute obedience to their decrees; this is the work of Christ the *King*.

Just as in the natural body, so too in the Mystical Body, it is fitting that the members abide in union with the Head, and also with each other.

This spiritual unity, strikingly evident in the history of the Catholic Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, is frequently referred to by St. Paul: “We being many are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another” (Rom. 12:4-5). The members of the Church one common life—the life of Sanctifying Grace: “I live, now not I; but Christ liveth in me” (Gal.2:20). They have one common interest: “The eye cannot say to the hand: I need not thy help” (1Cor. 12:21). They are, as St. Paul says, “Mutually careful one for another. And if one member suffers anything, all the members suffer with it.” (1Cor. 12:25-26).

When we realize that in the Catholic Church the same Divine Person lives and acts in a mystical way the same as He did on earth two thousand years ago in the Sacred Humanity of Christ, the history of the Church immediately becomes filled for us with a new meaning. In the first place, it becomes the continuation of the life story of a Divine Person whom we all know and love. Again, since we are members of that Person’s Mystical Body, it holds for us an intimate interest from which we cannot be detached; it is the story of our own mystical family. Lastly, we begin to see how it repeats, in a most remarkable way, the various phases of Our Lord’s life on earth.

In it we shall see the Roman Emperors strive to take away the life of Christ in His Church as Herod tried to take it away by the massacre of the Holy Innocents. We shall see the Mystical Christ grow “in wisdom and age and grace” (Luke 2:52). We shall see Him in His Church lead a hidden life of contemplation; we shall see Him going about doing good, and healing those oppressed by the devil. We shall hear the rising murmurs of opposition and hate. The Catholic Church, Christ’s other self, will be paraded in bonds and mocked amid derisive laughter. As age succeeds age she will seem to be put to death, only to rise and conquer by being conquered. It must be so. For in the Catholic Church we today have the living Christ as truly as Palestine had Him two thousand years ago. And around the Church we have the same world that surrounded Our Divine Lord, with its pride, its ambitions, its blindness, its weaknesses, and its perversity: “So far as Jesus Christ was accepted or rejected then by the world into which He came, so will He be accepted or rejected now, and by the same kind of people for the same kind of reasons.” Jesus Christ, yesterday, and today; and the same forever.” (Heb. 13:18).



The World-wide Spread of the Faith: The Miracle of Diffusion from Pentecost to the fall of the Roman Empire (30 A.D.-460 A.D.)

1. The Jewish and Greco –Roman World.

Introductory Note: To appreciate the miraculous spread of the Church from the beginning, it is important that we should first note the obstacles—humanly speaking, insurmountable—which rose up to impede it.

On the one hand:

A, The *Founder* of Christianity bore the name of one who had died the death of a malefactor—“despised and the most abject of men,” unto the Jews a stumbling-block, and unto the Gentiles foolishness” (1 Cor. 1:23)—His immediate followers were men of the humblest origin.

b. The sublime *teaching* of Christianity in matters of faith and morality was something entirely new to the people of the age in which it was preached.

c. the set *attitude* of Christianity was one of refusal to compromise or come to terms with the non-Christian world: “He who is not with Me is against Me. He who gathereth not with Me scattereth.”

On the other hand:

a. The *Jews* falsely interpreting the prophecies of the Old Testament, had built up expectations of a Messiah who would come in power and majesty to free their nation from political bondage and make them rulers of the world; they hated the Gentiles and were fiercely intolerant of religious ideas other than their own; they were completely controlled by the all-powerful Scribes and Pharisees.

b. The *Gentiles*, or non-Jewish peoples, were deeply rooted in the superstition of their pagan religions, so intimately bound up with their respective national traditions and history; they, too, were swayed by the influence of their priests and philosophers whose social position depended on the preservation of paganism.

c. The followers of *mixed-religions*—half pagan, half-Christian (e.g. the Gnostics, of whom we shall treat later)—by their evil practices exposed the Christians to terrible calumnies, spread for the most part by their Jewish enemies.

These difficulties should be borne well in mind and constantly referred to in this chapter: with the cruel persecutions and the long struggle against heresy and schism they show forth the completely miraculous nature of the Church’s growth.



Phase I—The Mission of the Jews

Immediately after the Ascension of Our Lord, the Apostles repaired to Jerusalem, where after ten days spent in prayerful preparation, they received the promised Paraclete. For the next few days Peter and his fellow-apostles preached in Jerusalem to the great throngs of Jews gathered into the Holy City for the Feast of Pentecost—“Devout men out of every

nation...Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and parts of Lybia about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome” (Acts II:9-10), in other words, to the pilgrim Jews of the Dispersion who were destined in God’s Providence, as we shall see, to carry the Gospel tidings to the most obscure frontiers of the Roman world.

So great was the effect of the first sermons of St. Peter and the many signs and wonders wrought among the people by the hands of the Apostles that in a short time the converts numbered many thousands. Arrested, ill-treated, and threatened by the alarmed leaders of the Jews, the Apostles would have paid the death-penalty were it for a respected doctor of the Jewish law called Gamaliel: “*If this council or this work be of men, it will come to nought, but if it be of God, you cannot overthrow it, lest perhaps you be found even to fight against God.*” They were prophetic words. Scourged by the Jews but rejoicing that they had been found worthy to suffer reproach for their Master, the Apostles, in spite of a direct prohibition from the Sanhedrin, continued to preach: “And the multitude of men and women who believed in the Lord Jesus was more increased.” (Acts5:14). Soon they were compelled to elect seven worthy helpers to assist them in the work of the ministry (Acts6:3). These were the first seven Deacons. One of them, Stephen, soon began to attract the angry attention of the enemies of the Faith: by his great wonders and signs among the people” (Acts6:8) and the overpowering wisdom of his words. He was arrested and stoned to death: “And the witness laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.” (Acts7:57). This young man was afterwards to become in turn a persecutor of the Church, a convert and as Apostle, the great St. Paul. (Acts:9).

The death of St. Stephen, the Protomartyr, was the signal for a more active persecution raised against the Church at Jerusalem. The immediate result of this persecution was the dispersal of the believers “through the countries of Judea and Samaria” and the Sacred Text records that “They therefore were dispersed went about preaching the Word of God” (Acts 8:4). Numbers travelled to Phoenicia (north of Palestine), where some took sail for the island of Cyprus, others continuing by land to Antioch (Acts 11:19). The Apostles remained in Jerusalem, visiting the faithful in the outlying cities as occasion offered (Acts 8:14) and watching over the interests of their growing flocks. The pilgrim Jews who had been converted at Pentecost had long since returned to their



distant homes bringing with them the glad tidings of the Gospel and preparing the way for the increased.

Phase II: Transition

Such was the first phase in the life of the early Church. So far it had been concerned only with the Jews: “Now they that had been dispersed...went about...speaking the word to none but to the Jews only.” (Acts II:9). It was accepted that to become a Christian one had first to become a Jew and adopt the customs laid down for the Jews in the Old

Law. The customs had ceased to be binding with the death of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Regarding their abandonment, however, God chose to enlighten the minds of the Apostles and the first Christians *only gradually*, so that conversion to Christianity might be made easier for the Jews, and so that the New Law might be shown to be the fulfillment of the Old Law.

But the hour had now come for the conversion of the Gentile world. Shortly after the close of the first persecution, St. Peter, the Prince of the Apostles, acting on light received in a divine revelation, baptized a Roman Centurion, Cornelius, at Caesarea; for the first time there was in the Church a Gentile who had not first become a “naturalized” Jew: and the faithful of the circumcision (i.e. the Jewish converts), who came with Peter, were astonished, for that the grace of the Holy Ghost was poured out upon the Gentiles also.” (Acts 10:45).

It was about this time that St. Peter also established his See at Antioch on the borders of Asia Minor and Syria. The queen city of the east, linking the old world of the Jews with the new world of the Gentiles, Antioch was to be of great importance for the future of the faith. In a very short time this great city became the center of active missionary work among the Gentiles, and it was clear that Providence had singled it out to be the cradle of Christianity in the pagan world. It was here that converts were called Christians for the first time; from here too, St. Paul, the champion of the Gentiles, accompanied by Barnabas, set out on the first of his three missionary journeys recorded in detail in the Acts of the Apostles. Opposition on the part of the converts from Judaism to the new Gentile apostolate was bitter, and even among the most sincere there were conflicting opinions until at the Council of Jerusalem which was called about 49A.D. St. Peter, speaking with all the dignity and power of the Primacy and guided by the Holy Ghost, decided the case once and for all in favor of the Gentiles; the Jewish ceremonial law was no longer obligatory.

Thus ended the phase of transition in the movement of the Church towards the fulfillment of her universal mission. Peter’s Ship was cutting the rope that bound it to port and was gaining the high seas where, without doubt, there were waiting storms, but also miraculous draught of fishes. It was during this period that Herod Agrippa launched the second minor persecution (42-44A.D.) which gave to the Church its first Apostle-martyr—St. James the Greater, brother of St. John.



It was about this time too that St. Peter journeyed to Rome, where he established his Papal See, and where, as Bishop of Rome, he was martyred, along with St. Paul, about the year 67A.D.

Three years later, 70 A.D., Jerusalem, the Holy City of the Old Law, was surrounded by the Roman army commanded by Titus, son of the emperor Vespasian. After a siege—so fearful that Titus declared he had been but the instrument of divine vengeance—the stronghold of Judaism was utterly destroyed, the Temple which had been hallowed by the Divine Presence being pillaged by the soldiers and consumed by fire. Of the inhabitants who

did not perish by disease or famine, hundreds of thousands were put to the sword, numbers sold into slavery, and the remnant scattered over the face of the earth, a nation without a home. The awful prophecy of Jesus was fulfilled to the very letter. The once Chosen People upon whom God had lavished such loving care had rejected Him and crucified the Lord of Glory: for their terrible crime the Divine Justice visited upon them a terrible penalty. A new Jerusalem, the Catholic Church, no longer despising the Gentile but welcoming to her bosom all nations of the earth, takes the place of the old. Henceforth it is the Catholic Church which is to be the tabernacle and dwelling-place of God with men.

Phase III: The Mission to the Gentiles

The third phase in the expansion of the infant Church, the mission to the Gentiles, opened actually with the baptism of Cornelius, officially, as we have seen, with the Council of Jerusalem, in 49 A.D. The central figure of this phase, at least in its early stages, is St. Paul, whose missionary journeys should be studied step by step, as they are recorded by the inspired pen of St. Luke in the Acts of the Apostles. There are very few pages of Holy Writ that will be found to be of such intensely human interest. Within the short space of twenty-four to thirty years, St. Paul was used by the Lord to lead into the Church the Gentiles of Syria, Asia Minor, Macedonia, Greece, Italy, and even (according to many reliable authorities) Spain; in all these places he was, moreover, God's instrument in building up the government of the Church. He exercised a profound interior influence on the Church too. Before his time the Apostles had added little to the discourses and parables they had learned from the lips of Our Lord; St. Paul, inspired by the Holy Ghost, explained and developed them in such a way that "Christian revelation took on a more precise form, becoming a body of doctrine so powerfully constructed that it lasts today as the base work of all our theology." (St. Jerome: *De Scriptoribus Ecclesiasticis*).



St. Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna; Martyr, 156

January 26th; Dbl. Bishop, Martyr

St. Polycarp was known as one of the most famous of the little group of early bishops known as “the Apostolic Fathers,” who, being the immediate disciples of the Apostles, received instruction directly from them, as it were from the fountainhead. Polycarp embraced Christianity very young; was a disciple of St. John the Evangelist; and was appointed by him to be the bishop of Smyrna, probably before his banishment to Patmos, about the year 96 A.D. He may have been the bishop of Smyrna who was commended above all the bishops of Asia by Christ Himself in the Apocalypse, and the only one without reproach. This saint was respected by the faithful to the point of profound veneration. He trained many holy disciples, including St. Irenaeus and Papias. When Florinus, who had often visited Polycarp, had broached certain heresies, St. Irenaeus wrote to him as follows: “These things were not taught to you by the bishop who preceded us. I could tell you of the place where Polycarp sat to preach the word of God. It is yet present to my mind with what gravity he everywhere came in and went out; what was the sanctity of his deportment, the majesty of his countenance, and of his whole exterior; what were his holy exhortations to the people. I seem to hear him now relate how he conversed with John and many others who had seen Jesus Christ; the words he had heard from their mouths. I can protest before God that if this holy bishop had heard of any errors like yours, he would have immediately stopped up his ears and cried out, according to his custom, ‘Good God! that I should be reserved to these times to hear such things!’ That very instant he would have fled out of the place in which he had heard such doctrine.” St. Jerome mentions that St. Polycarp met at Rome the heretic Marcion in the streets, who, resenting the fact that the holy bishop did not take notice of him which he expected, said to him: “Do you not know me, Polycarp?” “Yes,” answered the saint, “I know you to be the first born of Satan.” He had learned this abhorrence of the authors of heresy, who knowingly and willingly adulterate the divine truths, from his master St. John, who fled from the bath at the sight of Cerinthus. St. Polycarp kissed with respect the chains of St. Ignatius when he passed by Smyrna on the road to his martyrdom and Ignatius in turn recommended to our saint the care of his distant church of Antioch, supplementing this charge later on by a request that he would write in his name to those churches of Asia to which he had no leisure to write himself. St. Polycarp addressed a letter to the Philippians shortly after, which is highly commended by St. Irenaeus, St. Jerome, Eusebius, Photius, and others, and is still extant. This letter, which in St. Jerome’s time was publicly read in the Asiatic churches, is justly admired both for the excellent instructions it contains and for the eloquence and clarity of the style. In it he calls a heretic, as above, the eldest son of Satan. About the year 154 A.D. St. Polycarp undertook a journey of charity to Rome to confer with Pope Anicetus about certain points of discipline, especially at the time of keeping Easter, for the Asiatic



churches kept it on the fourteenth day of the vernal equinoctial moon, as the Jews did, on whatever day of the week it fell; whereas Rome, Egypt, and all the West observed it on the Sunday following. It was agreed that both might follow their custom without breaking the bonds of charity. St. Anicetus, to testify his respect, yielded to him the honor of celebrating the Eucharistic Sacrifice in his own papal church. We find no further particulars concerning our saint recorded before his martyrdom.

In the sixth year of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, Statius Quadratus being Proconsul of Asia, a violent persecution broke out in that province, in which the faithful gave heroic proof of their courage, to the astonishment of the infidels. When they were torn to pieces with scourges till their very entrails were laid bare, amidst the tears of the spectators, who were moved with pity at the sight of their torments, no one of them, it seems, uttered so much as a groan, so little regard had they for their own flesh in the cause of God. No form of torture, no invention of cruelty, was spared to force them to take part in pagan worship; but all efforts failed. Germanicus, who had been brought to Smyrna with eleven or twelve other Christians, singled himself above the rest, and animated the most fearful to suffer. The Proconsul in the amphitheatre appealed to him compassionately to have some regard for his youth when life had so much to offer, but he with a holy impatience provoked the beasts to devour him, the sooner to quit this wicked world. One Quintus, a Phrygian, who had presented himself to the judge, quailed at the sight of the beast let loose upon him, and consented to sacrifice. The authors of these Acts justly condemn to presumption of those who offered themselves to suffer, and say that the martyrdom of St. Polycarp was conformable to the gospel, because he did not expose himself to temptation, but waited till the persecutors laid hands on him, as Christ Our Lord taught us by His own example. The same venerable authors observe that the martyrs by their constancy demonstrated to all men that, while their bodies were tormented, they were in spirit estranged from the flesh and impervious to suffering—or rather that Our Lord was present and assisted them—for the fire of the barbarous executioners seemed as if it had been a cooling refreshment. The splendid courage of Germanicus and his companions only whetted the spectator's appetite for blood. A cry was raised: "Away with the atheists; let search be made for Polycarp." The holy man, though fearless, had been prevailed upon by his friends to withdraw and conceal himself in a neighboring village during the storm, spending most of his time in prayer. Three days before his martyrdom he in a vision saw his pillow on fire, from which he understood, and foretold to his companions, that he should be burnt alive. When the persecutors came in search of him he changed his retreat, but was betrayed by a boy, who was threaten with the rack unless he at once disclosed Polycarp's whereabouts. Herod, the Irenarch, whose office it was to maintain public order, and to arrest offenders, sent horsemen by night to surround his lodging. The saint was upstairs in bed, but refused to make his escape saying:



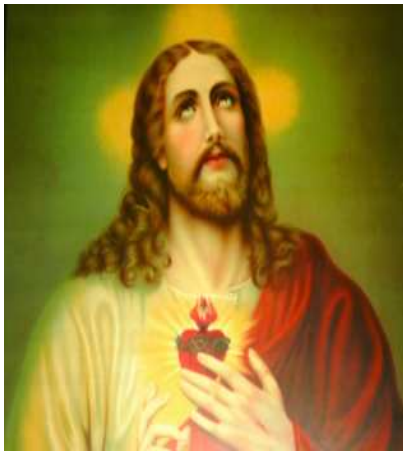
“God’s will be done.” He went down, met them at the door, ordered them a substantial supper, and desired only some time for prayer before he went with them. This was granted, he began his prayer standing, which he continued in that posture for two hours, recommending to God his own flock and the whole Church with such intense devotion that some of those who had come to seize him repented of their errand. They set him on an ass, and were conducting him towards the city, when he was met on the

road by Herod and Herod’s father Nicetes, who took him into their chariot and endeavored to persuade him to show some compliance. “What harm,” they urged, “is there un saying Lord Caesar, or even in offering incense, to escape death?” The word Lord, however, was not as innocent as it sounded, and implied recognition of the divinity of the Emperor. The bishop at first was silent in the imitation of Our Savior, but being pressed, he gave this resolute answer: “I am resolved not to do what you counsel me.” At these words, throwing off the mask of their friendship, they treated him with scorn, and thrust him out of their chariot with such violence that his leg was bruised by the fall. The holy man went forward cheerfully to the place where the people were assembled. Upon his entering it a voice from heaven was heard by many: “Be strong Polycarp and play the man,” He was led directly to the tribunal of the Proconsul, who exhorted him to have regard for his age, and to swear by the genius of Caesar, and to say, “Away with the atheists,” meaning the Christians. The saint, turning towards the crowd of ungodly people in the stadium, said, with a stern countenance, “Away with the atheists,” meaning by this either a wish that they might forsake their evil courses, or possibly foretelling the earthquake which was to hit Smyrna in 177A.D. and destroy the city. The Proconsul repeated: “Swear by the genius of Caesar, and I will discharge you; blaspheme Christ.” Polycarp replied: “Four score and six years have I served Him and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior? If you require of me to swear by the genius of Caesar, as you call it, hear my confession: I am a Christian; but if you desire to learn the doctrines of Christianity, appoint a time and hear me.” The Proconsul said: “Persuade the people.” The martyr replied: “I addressed my discourse to you; for we are taught to give due honor to princes, so far as is consistent with religion. But the populous is not a competent tribunal before which I can justify myself.” Indeed, rage, rendered them incapable of hearing him. The Proconsul, then assuming a tone of severity, said: “I have wild beasts.” “Call for them,” replied the saint, “for we are unalterably resolved not to change from good to evil. It is only right to pass from evil to good.” The Proconsul aid: “If you desire the beasts, I will cause you to be consumed by fire.” Polycarp answered: “You threaten me with fire which burns for a season and after a little while is quenched; but you are ignorant of the judgment to come, and of the fire of everlasting punishment which is prepared for the wicked. Why do you delay? Bring against me what you please.” While he said this, and many other things, he appeared in a transport of joy and



confidence, and his countenance shone with a certain heavenly grace, insomuch that the Proconsul himself was struck with admiration. However, he ordered a crier to make public proclamation three times in the middle of the stadium, which was the Roman custom in capital cases. “Polycarp has confessed himself a Christian.” At this proclamation the whole multitude of Jews and Gentiles gave a great shout and then cried out: “This is the great teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the

destroyer of our gods, who teaches the people not to sacrifice or to worship.” They appealed to Philip the Asiarch to let a lion loose upon Polycarp. He told them that it was not in his power, because he had brought the sports to a close. Then with one accord they clamored that he should be burnt alive. Their request was no sooner granted but everyone ran with all speed to fetch wood from the baths and the workshops. The Jews were particularly active and busy on this occasion. The pile of wood being prepared, Polycarp put off his garments, untied his girdle, and endeavored to take off his shoes; but this was difficult for him because the Christians had always vied with one another in rendering him this service, regarding it as a happiness to be permitted to touch him. The wood and other combustibles by this time were heaped all around him. The executioners would have nailed him to the stake, but he said to them: “Suffer me to be as I am. He who gives me the grace to endure the fire will enable me to remain at the pile unmoved.” They therefore contented themselves with tying his hands behind his back, and in this posture, looking up towards heaven, he prayer as follows: “ O Almighty Lord God, Father of Thy beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, through whom we have received the knowledge of Thee, God of angels, and powers, and of all creation, and of the whole race of the just who live in Thy presence! I bless Thee for having been pleased in Thy goodness to bring me to this hour, that I may receive a portion among the number of Thy martyrs, and partake of the chalice of Thy Christ, unto resurrection of eternal life, both of soul and body, in the incorruptibleness of the Holy Ghost. Among whom grant me to be received this day as a pleasing sacrifice, such a one as Thou O True and Faithful God, has foreshown. Wherefore, for all things I praise, bless, and glorify Thee, through the eternal High Priest Jesus Christ, Thy beloved Son, with whom to Thee and the Holy Ghost be glory now and forever, Amen.” He had scarcely finished saying the word Amen when fire was set to the pile, which increased to a mighty flame. But behold a wonder, says the authors of these Acts, seen by us who were preserved to attest it to others. The flames forming themselves into an arch, like the sails of a ship swelling with the wind, gently encircled the body of the martyr, which stood in the middle, resembling not roasted flesh, but purified gold or silver, appearing bright through the flames, while his body emitted such a fragrance as if it were the wafted odor of frankincense, and precious spices. The blind infidels were only exasperated to see that his body could not be consumed, and ordered a spearman to pierce him through, which he did, and such a quantity of blood gushed forth as to



quench the fire. The malice of the devil did not end here: he endeavored to prevent the relics of the martyr being carried off by the Christians, for many were eager to obtain possession of them, to show their respect to his body. Therefore, by the suggestion of Satan, Nicetes advised the Proconsul not to give up the body to the Christians, lest, said he, abandoning the crucified man, they should adore Polycarp. The Jews suggested this, “not knowing,” say the authors of the Acts, “that we can never forsake Christ, nor adore any other, though we love the martyrs as

His disciples and imitators, for the great love they bore their King and Master.” The centurion, seeing the contest raised by the Jews, placed the body in the middle and burned it to ashes. “We afterwards took up the bones,” they said, “more precious than the richest jewels or gold, and laid them decently in a place at which, we hope, God grant us to assemble with joy to celebrate the birthday of a martyr.” Thus wrote these disciples and eye-witnesses. It was at two o’clock in the afternoon, which the authors of the Acts call the eighth hour, in the year 156 A.D., that Polycarp received his crown. His tomb was long venerated at Smyrna in a small chapel. St. Irenaeus speaks of St. Polycarp as having lived to a great age.

The epistle of St. Polycarp to the Philippians, which is the only one among those he wrote that has been preserved, is a standing proof of the apostolic spirit with which he was animated, and of that same humility, meekness, charity, and zeal of which his life was an example. The beginning is an outburst of spiritual joy, giving thanks for their conversion to God and their fervor of divine love. His extreme abhorrence of heresy leads him straightway to refer to that of the Docetae, against which he puts the faithful on their guard, by proving that Christ was truly made man, died, and rose again. The terms used are such as reflect, unmistakably, his own humble and affectionate devotion to our divine Redeemer in these great mysteries of love. Besides walking in truth, he takes notice that, to be raised with Christ in glory, we must also do His will, keep His Commandments, and love whatever He loved; refraining from all fraud, avarice, detraction, and rash judgment; repaying evil with good; forgiving and showing mercy to others, that we ourselves may find mercy. “These things,” says Polycarp, “I write to you because you invite me; for neither I, nor any other such as I, can attain to the wisdom of the blessed and glorious Paul. You have his epistles, and if you study them you may raise your spiritual fabric by strengthening faith, which is our mother, hope following, and the love of God, of Christ, and of our neighbor going before. He who has charity is far from all sin.” The saint gives a short instruction for each particular way of life, and then adds: “Everyone who has not confessed that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is antichrist; and he who confesses not the suffering of the cross is the devil; and whosoever shall pervert the oracles of the Lord to his own lusts, and shall say that there is neither resurrection nor judgment, that man is the first-born of Satan.” He exhorts us to watch always in prayer, lest we be led into



temptation; to be constant in fasting, persevering, joyful in hope, and in the pledge of our justice, which is Christ Jesus, imitating His patience; for, by suffering for His Name, we glorify Him. To encourage them to suffer, he reminds them of those who have suffered before their eyes: Ignatius, Zosimus, and Rufus, and some of their own congregation, “who are now,” says the saint, “in the place which they have earned, in the company of our Savior, with whom they also suffered.”

(Butler's Lives of the Saints; Volume I-January: Nihil Obstat &Imprimatur, 9/14/1925)