St. Polycarp was one of the immediate disciples of the Apostles, in particular St. John the Evangelist. He embraced Christianity very young and was named bishop of Smyrna. He was greatly respected by the faithful, wrote many letters and formed many holy disciples. His epistle to the Philippians - the only one to be preserved - demonstrates his apostolic spirit, his profound humility and meekness, and his great charity.

St. Polycarp fought against heresy. He also taught that Christians must walk in truth, do God’s will, keep all of His commandments, and love whatever He loved. Christians must refrain from all fraud, avarice, detraction, and rash judgment. They must repay evil with forgiveness and mercy. He taught that one must pray all the time, so as not to be led into temptation, fast, persevere and be joyful.

During his episcopate (time as Bishop), a violent persecution broke out in Smyrna against the Christians. During this time, though fearless, the bishop retreated to a neighboring village, spending most of his time in prayer.



A boy betrayed the bishop, and horsemen came by night to arrest him. He met his captors at the door, ordered them a supper, and prayed for two hours before he went with them.

He was led directly to the proconsul, who ordered him to blaspheme Christ. St. Polycarp refused and he was to be burned alive.

The executioners would have nailed him to the stake, but he convinced them that it wasn’t necessary. So they simple tied his hands behind his back. At the end of his prayer, the executioners set the fire, but the large flames formed into an arch, gently encircling but not burning his body. Exasperated, officials ordered a spearman to pierce him. Such a quantity of blood flowed from his left side that it put out the fire. The Christians wanted St. Polycarp’s body but the centurion burnt it to ashes. The bones were kept as relics.

1. What was Polycarp’s relationship to the Apostles?
2. Why was he arrested and killed?
3. What amazing thing happened at his execution?