Imagine being able to sit at the feet of the apostles and hear their stories of life with Jesus from their own lips. Imagine walking with those who had walked with Jesus, seen him, and touched him. That was what Polycarp was able to do as a disciple of Saint John the Evangelist.

But being part of the second generation of Church leaders had challenges that the first generation could not teach about. What did you do when those eyewitnesses were gone? How do you carry on the correct teachings of Jesus? How do you answer new questions that never came up before?

With the apostles gone, heresies sprang up pretending to be true teaching, persecution was strong, and controversies arose over how to celebrate liturgy that Jesus never laid down rules for.

Polycarp, as a holy man and bishop of Smyrna, found there was only one answer -- to be true to the life of Jesus and imitate that life. Saint Ignatius of Antioch told Polycarp "your mind is grounded in God as on an immovable rock."
When faced with heresy, he showed the "candid face" that Ignatius admired and that imitated Jesus' response to the Pharisees. Marcion, the leader of the Marcionites who followed a dualistic heresy, confronted Polycarp and demanded respect by saying, "Recognize us, Polycarp." Polycarp responded, "I recognize you, yes, I recognize the son of Satan."

On the other hand when faced with Christian disagreements he was all forgiveness and respect. One of the controversies of the time came over the celebration of Easter. The East, where Polycarp was from, celebrated the Passover as the Passion of Christ followed by a Eucharist on the following day. The West celebrated Easter on the Sunday of the week following Passover. When Polycarp went to Rome to discuss the difference with Pope Anicetus, they could not agree on this issue. But they found no difference in their Christian beliefs. And Anicetus asked Polycarp to celebrate the Eucharist in his own papal chapel.

Polycarp faced persecution the way Christ did. His own church admired him for following the "gospel model" -- not chasing after martyrdom as some did, but avoiding it until it was God's will as Jesus did. They considered it "a sign of love to desire not to save oneself alone, but to save also all the Christian brothers and sisters."

One day, during a bloody martyrdom when Christians were attacked by wild animals in the arena, the crowd became so mad that they demanded more blood by crying, "Down with the atheists; let Polycarp be found." (They considered Christians "atheists" because they didn't believe in their pantheon of gods.) Since Polycarp was not only known as a leader but as someone holy "even before his grey hair appeared", this was a horrible demand.

Polycarp was calm but others persuaded him to leave the city and hide at a nearby farm. He spent his time in prayer for people he knew and for the Church. During his prayer he saw a vision of his pillow turned to fire and announced to his friends that the dream meant he would be burned alive.

As the search closed in, he moved to another farm, but the police discovered he was there by torturing two boys. He had a little warning since he was upstairs in the house but he decided to stay, saying, "God's will be done."

Then he went downstairs, talked to his captors and fed them a meal. All he asked of them was that they give him an hour to pray. He spent two hours praying for
everyone he had every known and for the Church, "remembering all who had at any time come his way -- small folk and great folk, distinguished and undistinguished, and the whole Catholic Church throughout the world." Many of his captors started to wonder why they were arresting this holy, eighty-six-year-old bishop.

But that didn't stop them from taking him into the arena on the Sabbath. As he entered the arena, the crowd roared like the animals they cheered. Those around Polycarp heard a voice from heaven above the crowd, "Be brave, Polycarp, and act like a man."

The proconsul begged the eighty-six-year-old bishop to give in because of his age. "Say 'Away with the atheists'" the proconsul urged. Polycarp calmly turned to the face the crowd, looked straight at them, and said, "Away with the atheists." The proconsul continued to plead with him. When he asked Polycarp to swear by Caesar to save himself, Polycarp answered, "If you imagine that I will swear by Caesar, you do not know who I am. Let me tell you plainly, I am a Christian."

Finally, when all else failed the proconsul reminded Polycarp that he would be thrown to the wild animals unless he changed his mind. Polycarp answered, "Change of mind from better to worse is not a change allowed to us."

Because of Polycarp's lack of fear, the proconsul told him he would be burned alive but Polycarp knew that the fire that burned for an hour was better than eternal fire.

When he was tied up to be burned, Polycarp prayed, "Lord God Almighty, Father of your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, through whom we have received knowledge of you, God of angels and powers, of the whole creation and of the whole race of the righteous who live in your sight, I bless you, for having made me worthy of this day and hour, I bless you, because I may have a part, along with the martyrs, in the chalice of your Christ, to resurrection in eternal life, resurrection both of soul and body in the incorruptibility of the Holy Spirit. May I be received today, as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, among those who are in your presence, as you have prepared and foretold and fulfilled, God who is faithful and true. For this and for all benefits I praise you, I bless you, I glorify you, through the eternal and heavenly High Priest, Jesus Christ, your beloved Son, through whom be to you with him and the Holy Spirit glory, now and for all the ages to come. Amen."
The fire was lit as Polycarp said Amen and then the eyewitnesses who reported said they saw a miracle. The fire burst up in an arch around Polycarp, the flames surrounding him like sails, and instead of being burned he seemed to glow like bread baking, or gold being melted in a furnace. When the captors saw he wasn't being burned, they stabbed him. The blood that flowed put the fire out.

The proconsul wouldn't let the Christians have the body because he was afraid they would worship Polycarp. The witnesses reported this with scorn for the lack of understanding of Christian faith: "They did not know that we can never abandon the innocent Christ who suffered on behalf of sinners for the salvation of those in this world." After the body was burned, they stole the bones in order to celebrate the memory of his martyrdom and prepare others for persecution. The date was about February 23, 156.

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