

Fifth Sunday of Lent
March 22, 2026
Year of the Church in History

“And coming up in a body late in the evening, they found the man himself in bed in an upper chamber in a certain cottage; and though he might have departed thence to another place, he would not, saying, The will of God be done.”
(On the Martyrdom of Saint Polycarp, circa A.D. 155-156)

The account of the martyrdom of Saint Polycarp was written shortly after the saint’s death A.D. 155 or 156. Although it was written as a letter addressed to the Church in Philomelium from the Church in Smyrna, the document was distributed to the wider Christian church community. Later Church Fathers and other historians would refer directly to this account in their own writings.

“And he was met by Herod the captain of police and his father Nicetes, who also removed him to their carriage and tried to prevail upon him, seating themselves by his side and saying, ‘Why what harm is there in saying, Caesar is Lord, and offering incense’, with more to this effect, ‘and saving thyself?’ . . . But when the magistrate pressed him hard and said, ‘Swear the oath, and I will release thee; revile the Christ,’ Polycarp said, ‘Fourscore and six years have I been His servant, and He hath done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?’”
(Martyrdom of Saint Polycarp)

“How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” This question of Saint Polycarp offers much for our reflection. Let us begin by imagining the scene within our minds. Saint Polycarp stands a venerable old man before his accusers. They are joined by an accompanying crowd of onlookers desirous for a glimpse from the upcoming spectacle. Mingled within the crowd, Christians are praying that God would be merciful and spare their beloved shepherd any harm. Before him are the instruments which will be used to construct the pyre upon which he would be burned. Despite those seeking his death, their questions and the means of torture, Saint Polycarp responds to all with this beautiful question. How could he turn away from Jesus? How could he reject the Son of God who had surrendered Himself to agony and torture for love of Polycarp and those he held so dear?

The account would continue, stating Saint Polycarp instructed those who would carry out this task of his willingness to remain upon the pyre. There would be no need to nail him to the stake. He would readily embrace it. They in turn

bound him to the stake for, as they thought, who would choose to remain in the fire? The letter would recount a miraculous event which took place within the fire. As Saint Polycarp stood there, the flames seemed to part around him and not consume him. Dismayed, an executioner was tasked to take a dagger and stab Saint Polycarp until he was dead. After this deed was fulfilled, his body would be burned. Once all of this had taken place, the Christians would gather his bones which they held as more precious than any jewels or precious metals.

My family, Saint Polycarp met his death with courage. It requires a great deal of courage to know what is set before you to both harm you and rob you of your life, and still remain committed to following Jesus without an ill word or gesture directed toward those who carry out this task. It is my belief that we must display this same courage if we are to enter into Heaven. We must be willing to count everything and everyone we love a distant second compared to our love of God. I pray we can be Christians who display this level of fortitude. I also pray we can forgive ourselves who have rejected Jesus for much smaller reasons than the loss of our lives. Lent is a great time to return to Jesus with a humble, contrite heart. We pray we always will.