

Fourth Sunday of Lent
March 15, 2026
Year of the Church in History

“Knowing then that God is not mocked, we ought to walk worthily of His commandment and His glory.” (Saint Polycarp, Epistle to the Philippians, circa A.D. 120-140)

Saint Polycarp was the Bishop of Smyrna and a personal friend of Saint Ignatius of Antioch. His Epistle to the Philippians was written as a reply from a request he had received from the Church community. They had asked him to send any letters from Saint Ignatius of Antioch. There was a great desire expressed by these early Christians to hear from those who had known the Apostles. They further wanted Saint Polycarp to write to them encouraging and reproving those of the community who needed to hear either approach. Saint Polycarp will remind them of what Saint Paul had previously written and the fame their Church had gained due to Saint Paul's Epistle.

“I was exceedingly grieved for Valens, who aforesaid (formally) was a presbyter among you, because he is so ignorant of the office which was given unto him. I warn you therefore that ye refrain from covetousness, and that ye be pure and truthful. Refrain from all evil. But he who cannot govern himself in these things, how doth he enjoin this upon another? . . . Therefore I am exceedingly grieved for him and for his wife, unto whom may the Lord grant true repentance. Be ye therefore yourselves also sober herein, and hold not such as enemies, but restore them as frail and erring members, that ye may save the whole body of you”
(paragraph #11).

Saint Polycarp offers an insight into the life of the early Christian Church with his addressing of the situation concerning the priest Valens. Although it may seem odd at first, celibacy was not a rule of the Christian Church at this time in her history. Priestly celibacy will not become the norm of the Latin Rite Catholic Church until Pope Gregory VII in the eleventh century. The issue which grieved Saint Polycarp concerned the actions of Valens and his wife which had sullied the good name of the Church. They had been found guilty of the sin of greed through some form of fraud or dishonesty. Although mentioned little, their actions genuinely distressed Saint Polycarp.

Let us ask ourselves the famous one-word question: “Why?” Why did their actions affect Saint Polycarp? Allow me to pose this for our reflection. Saint Polycarp is, firstly, grieving the loss of a dear friend in Saint Ignatius of Antioch. Secondly, Valens is dishonoring the name Christian; while Saint Ignatius and others are dying for this name. Lastly, the scandal associated with the actions of Valens has hurt the Christian community. Saint Polycarp offers a beautiful response for them to consider. He does not defend a fellow presbyter, rather he speaks strongly against the immorality of those who call themselves Christian. A Christian must avoid sin and the temptations which may lead someone to sin. However, once it is known that Valens and his wife have sinned, Saint Polycarp asks the Church community to treat them not as enemies, but as frail and

erring members. This is an important lesson for all Christians of any time. Christians are not different from other people. All must struggle against sin and all will not always be successful. We will all fall away from God due to sin. The important point is to pray for sinners and encourage their return. We should want all to be reconciled with the Father, Son and Spirit. The offenses committed may wound us deeply, but never as deeply as they would the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Lent is a wonderful time to practice penances, spend more time in prayer and develop virtuous traits all for love of God and as a means of expressing to Him our own sorrow for the times when we have fallen away. God wants His children to come to know and love Him. It is our part, as Christians, to both pray and work that this may be accomplished.