

6. *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*

One of the persons to whom Ignatius addressed a letter was Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna in Asia Minor. Some 45 years later, around 155 CE, Polycarp himself was arrested, tried, and executed for being a Christian. The surviving account is the earliest “martyrology” (description of a martyrdom) to have survived from early Christianity outside of the New Testament (see Acts 7:56–60). It claims to be based on an eyewitness report and is embedded in a letter written soon thereafter by the church of Smyrna to the church in Philomelium, also in Asia Minor. Scholars have debated whether the account is authentic or, instead, was later written in such a way so as to appear to be based on an eyewitness report.

The author indicates that Polycarp’s death was “conformable to the Gospel,” and he has modeled his description on familiar traditions of Christ’s own death (for example, the betrayal, the officer named Herod, Polycarp’s prayer for God’s will to be done, his entry into the city on a donkey, etc.). In addition to such legendary accretions as the fragrant aroma arising from Polycarp’s body on the pyre, the story is important for showing that a Christian could be condemned simply for refusing to worship the state gods and could escape punishment by reverencing the divine spirit (genius) of the Emperor. As typically happens in the martyrologies, Polycarp steadfastly refuses, insisting that the tortures of the moment are far to be preferred to the eternal torments that await those who deny Christ.

Martyrdom of Saint Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna

The church of God that temporarily resides in Smyrna to the church of God that temporarily resides in Philomelium, and to all congregations of temporary residents everywhere, who belong to the holy and universal church. May the mercy, peace, and love of God the Father and of our Lord Jesus Christ be multiplied.

1 We are writing you, brothers, about those who were martyred, along with the blessed Polycarp, who put an end to the persecution by, as it were, setting a seal on it through his death as a martyr. For nearly everything leading up to his

death occurred so that the Lord might show us from above a martyrdom in conformity with the gospel.

2 For Polycarp waited to be betrayed, as also did the Lord, that we in turn might imitate him, thinking not only of ourselves, but also of our neighbors.¹ For anyone with true and certain love wants not only himself but also all the brothers to be saved.

2 Blessed and noble, therefore, are all the martyrdoms that have occurred according to the

¹ Phil 2:4.

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will of God. For we must be reverent and attribute the ultimate authority to God.

2 For who would not be astounded by their nobility, endurance, and love of the Master? For they endured even when their skin was ripped to shreds by whips, revealing the very anatomy of their flesh, down to the inner veins and arteries, while bystanders felt pity and wailed. But they displayed such nobility that none of them either grumbled or moaned, clearly showing us all that in that hour, while under torture, the martyrs of Christ had journeyed far away from the flesh, or rather, that the Lord was standing by, speaking to them.

not suffering

3 And clinging to the gracious gift of Christ, they despised the torments of the world, in one hour purchasing for themselves eternal life. And the fire of their inhuman torturers was cold to them, because they kept their eyes on the goal of escaping the fire that is eternal and never extinguished. And with the eyes of their hearts they looked above to the good things preserved for those who endure, which no ear has heard nor eye seen, which have never entered into the human heart,² but which the Lord revealed to them, who were no long humans but already angels.

4 In a similar way, those who were condemned to the wild beasts endured horrible torments, stretched out on sharp shells and punished with various other kinds of tortures, that, if possible, he³ might force them to make a denial through continuous torment.

NOT CHRISTIAN
Subversion of
old age & lack
of agency

3 For the devil devised many torments against them. But thanks be to God: he had no power over any of them. For the most noble Germanicus strengthened their cowardice through his endurance, and he fought the wild beasts impressively. For when the proconsul wanted to persuade him, saying "Take pity on your age," he forcefully dragged the wild beast onto himself, wanting to leave their unjust and lawless life without delay.

2 1 Cor 2:9.

3 I.e., the devil; see 3.1.

2 Because of this, the entire multitude, tounded by the great nobility of the godly and reverent race of the Christians, cried out, "Away with the atheists! Find Polycarp!"

4 But there was a person named Quintus, a Phrygian who had recently come from Phrygia, who was overcome with cowardice once he saw the wild beasts. This is the one who compelled both himself and several others to turn themselves in. But the insistent pleas of the proconsul convinced him to take the oath and offer a sacrifice. Because of this, brothers, we do not praise those who hand themselves over, since this is not what the gospel teaches.

5 Now when the most marvelous Polycarp first heard, he was not disturbed, but wanted to remain in the city. But most of the others were persuading him to leave. And so he left for a small country house not far from the city and stayed there with a few others, night and day doing nothing but pray for everyone and for the churches throughout the world, as was his custom.

2 Three days before he was arrested, while praying, he had a vision and saw his pillow being consumed by fire. Then he turned to those with him and said, "I must be burned alive."

6 While they continued searching for him, he moved to a different country house—just as those who were seeking him arrived at the other. Since they could not find him, they arrested two young slaves, one of whom made a confession under torture.

2 For it was impossible for him to keep in hiding, since the ones who betrayed him were members of his household. And the chief of police, who was called by the same name—for his name was Herod—was eager to lead him into the stadium, that he might fulfill his special destiny as a partner with Christ, while those who betrayed him might suffer the punishment of Judas himself.

Christ
destiny
3-5-50

7 And so, taking the young slave, on the Day of Preparation around the dinner hour, the

mounted police and horsemen went out with their usual weapons, as if running down a thief.⁴ And when the hour was late, they converged and found Polycarp lying down in a small room upstairs. He could have fled elsewhere even from there, but he chose not to, saying, "God's will be done."⁵

2 And so, when he heard them come in, he came downstairs and talked with them; and those who were there were astonished at how old and composed he was, and they wondered why there was so much haste to arrest an old man like him. Straight away he ordered them to be given everything they wanted to eat and drink, then and there. And he asked them for an hour to pray without being disturbed.

3 When they gave their permission, he stood and prayed, being so filled with God's grace that for two hours he could not be silent. Those who heard him were amazed, and many of them regretted coming out for such a godly old man.

8 Then he finished his prayer, having remembered everyone he had ever met, both small and great, reputable and disreputable, as well as the entire universal church throughout the world; and when it came time for him to leave, they seated him on a donkey and led him into the city. It was a great Sabbath.⁶

2 The chief of police Herod, along with his father Nicetas, met him and transferred him to their carriage. Sitting on either side, they were trying to persuade him, saying, "Why is it so wrong to save yourself by saying 'Caesar is Lord,' making a sacrifice, and so on?" He did not answer them at first; but when they persisted, he said, "I am not about to do what you advise."

3 Having failed to persuade him, they began speaking horrible words and hastily shoved him out, so that when he came down out of the carriage he scraped his shin. But he did not turn around, but

quickly walked on in haste as if he had not been hurt. And he was led into the stadium, where there was such an uproar that no one could be heard.

9 But as he entered the stadium a voice came to Polycarp from heaven: "Be strong, Polycarp, and be a man [Or: be courageous]."⁷ No one saw who had spoken, but those among our people who were there heard the voice. Finally, when he was brought forward, there was a great uproar among those who heard that Polycarp had been arrested. When he was brought forward the proconsul asked if he was Polycarp. When he said he was, the proconsul began trying to persuade him to make a denial, saying, "Have respect for your age," along with other related things they customarily say: "Swear by the Fortune of Caesar, repent, and say 'Away with the atheists.'" But Polycarp looked with a stern face at the entire crowd of lawless Gentiles in the stadium; and gesturing to them with his hand, he sighed, looked up to heaven, and said, "Away with the atheists."

3 The proconsul became more insistent and said, "Take the oath and I will release you. Revile Christ." But Polycarp responded, "For eighty-six years I have served him, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my king who has saved me?"

10 When the proconsul persisted and said, "Swear by the Fortune of Caesar," Polycarp answered, "If you are so foolish as to think that I will swear by the Fortune of Caesar, as you say, and if you pretend not to know who I am, listen closely: I am a Christian. But if you wish to learn an account of Christianity, appoint a day and listen."

2 The proconsul replied, "Persuade the people." Polycarp said, "I think you deserve an account, for we are taught to render all due honor to rulers and authorities appointed by God,⁸ in so far as it does us no harm. But as to those, I do not consider them worthy to hear a reasoned defense."

4 Matt 26:55. The Day of Preparation is Friday.

5 Acts 21:14; cf. Luke 22:42, Matt 6:10.

6 Cf. John 19:31.

7 Josh 1.6.

8 Rom 13:1; 1 Pet 2:13.

How
masculine
he
was

Resistance
to persuasion
loss of
composure

11 The proconsul said, "I have wild beasts, and I will cast you to them if you do not repent." He replied, "Call them! For it is impossible for us to repent from better to worse; it is good, though, to change from what is wicked to what is right."

2 Again the proconsul said to him, "If you despise the wild beasts, I will have you consumed by fire, if you do not repent." Polycarp replied, "You threaten with a fire that burns for an hour and after a short while is extinguished; for you do not know about the fire of the coming judgment and eternal torment, reserved for the ungodly. But why are you waiting? Bring on what you wish."

12 While he was saying these and many other things, he was filled with courage and joy, and his face was full of grace, so that not only did he not collapse to the ground from being unnerved at what he heard, but on the contrary, the proconsul was amazed and sent his herald into the center of the stadium to proclaim three times, "Polycarp has confessed himself to be a Christian."

2 When the herald said this, the entire multitude of both Gentiles and Jews who lived in Smyrna cried out with uncontrollable rage and a great voice, "This is the teacher of impiety, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our own gods, the one who teaches many not to sacrifice or worship the gods." Saying these things, they began calling out to Philip, the Asiarch, asking him to release a lion on Polycarp. But he said that he could not do so, since he had already concluded the animal hunts.

3 Then they decided to call out in unison for him to burn Polycarp alive. For the vision that had been revealed about the pillow had to be fulfilled; for he had seen it burning while he prayed. And when he turned he said prophetically to the faithful who were with him, "I must be burned alive."

13 These things then happened with incredible speed, quicker than can be described. The crowds immediately gathered together wood and kindling from the workplaces and the baths, with the Jews proving especially eager to assist, as is their custom.

2 When the pyre was prepared, Polycarp laid aside all his garments and loosened his belt. He was also trying to undo his sandals, even though he was not accustomed to do so, since each of the faithful was always eager to do it, to see who could touch his skin most quickly. For he was adorned with every good thing because of his exemplary way of life, even before he bore his testimony unto death.

3 Immediately the instruments prepared for the pyre were placed around him. When they were about to nail him, he said, "Leave me as I am; for the one who enables me to endure the fire will also enable me to remain in the pyre without moving, even without the security of your nails."

14 So they did not nail him, but they tied him. And when he placed his hands behind his back and was tied, he was like an exceptional ram taken from a great flock for a sacrifice, prepared as a whole burnt offering that is acceptable to God. Looking up into heaven he said, "Lord God Almighty, Father of your beloved and blessed child Jesus Christ, through whom we have received knowledge of you, the God of angels, of powers, and of all creation, and of every race of the upright who live before you,

2 I bless you for making me worthy of this day and hour, that I may receive a share among the number of the martyrs in the cup of your Christ, unto the resurrection of eternal life in both soul and body in the immortality of the Holy Spirit. Among them may I be received before you today as a sacrifice that is rich and acceptable, just as you prepared and revealed in advance and now fulfilled—the true God who does not lie.

3 For this reason and for all things I praise you, I bless you, I glorify you through the eternal and heavenly high priest Jesus Christ, your beloved child, through whom be glory to you, with him and the Holy Spirit, both now and for the ages to come. Amen."

15 When he sent up the "Amen" and finished the prayer, the men in charge of the fire touched it off. And as a great flame blazoned forth

we beheld a marvel—we to whom it was granted to see, who have also been preserved to report the events to the others.

2 For the fire, taking on the appearance of a vaulted room, like a boat's sail filled with the wind, formed a wall around the martyr's body. And he was in the center, not like burning flesh but like baking bread or like gold and silver being refined in a furnace. And we perceived a particularly sweet aroma, like wafting incense or some other precious perfume.

16 Finally, when the lawless ones saw that his body could not be consumed by the fire, they ordered an executioner to go up and stab him with a dagger. When he did so, a dove came forth, along with such a quantity of blood that it extinguished the fire, striking the entire crowd with amazement that there could be so much difference between the unbelievers and the elect.

2 One of the latter was this most astounding Polycarp, who in our time was an apostolic and prophetic teacher and bishop of the universal church in Smyrna. For every word that came forth from his mouth was fulfilled and will be fulfilled.

17 But the jealous and envious Evil One, the enemy of the race of the upright, having seen the greatness of Polycarp's death as a martyr and the irreproachable way of life that he had from the beginning—and that he had received the crown of immortality and was awarded with the incontestable prize—made certain that his poor body was not taken away by us, even though many were desiring to do so and to have a share in *[Or: to commune with; or: to have fellowship with]* his holy flesh.

2 So he incited Nicetas, the father of Herod and brother of Alce, to petition the magistrate not to hand over his body, "Lest," he said, "they desert the one who was crucified and begin to worship this one." The Jews instigated and strongly urged these things, and kept watch when we were about to take him from the fire. For they did not realize that we are never able to abandon Christ, who suffered for

the salvation of the entire world of those who are being saved, the one who was blameless for sinners; nor are we able to worship any other.

3 For we worship this one who is the Son of God, but we love the martyrs as disciples and imitators of the Lord. And they are worthy, because of their unsurpassable affection for their own king and teacher. May we also become partners and fellow disciples with them!

18 When the centurion saw the contentiousness caused by the Jews, he placed Polycarp's body in the center and burned it, as is their custom.

2 And so, afterwards, we removed his bones, which were more valuable than expensive gems and more precious than gold, and put them in a suitable place.

3 There, whenever we can gather together in joy and happiness, the Lord will allow us to commemorate the birthday of his martyrdom, both in memory of those who have already engaged in the struggle and as a training and preparation for those who are about to do so.

19 Such are the matters pertaining to the blessed Polycarp, who along with those from Philadelphia was the twelfth martyr in Smyrna; but he alone is remembered by all, discussed even by the outsiders in every place. For he was not only an exceptional teacher but also a superb martyr. Everyone longs to imitate his martyrdom, since it occurred in conformity with the gospel of Christ.

2 Through endurance he overcame the unjust ruler and thus received the crown of immortality. And now he rejoices together with the apostles and all those who are upright, and he glorifies God the Father and blesses our Lord Jesus Christ, the savior of our souls, pilot of our bodies, and shepherd of the universal church throughout the world.

20 You had asked for a lengthier explanation of what took place, but for the present we have mentioned only the principal points through our brother Marcion. When you have learned these

Not every martyrdom is suffering. Superb. One of the best.

things, send our letter to the brothers who are further afield, that they may also glorify the Lord who selects his chosen ones from among his own slaves.

2 And now to the one who is able to lead us all by his grace and gift into his eternal kingdom, through his child, the unique one, Jesus Christ, be the glory, honor, power, and greatness forever. Greet all the saints. Those who are with us greet you, as does Evaristus, the one who is writing the letter, with his entire household.

21 But the blessed Polycarp bore his witness unto death on the second day of the new month of Xanthikos, February 23, on a great Sabbath, at 2:00 in the afternoon. But he was arrested by Herod while Philip of Tralles was high priest, Statius Quadratus was proconsul, and Jesus Christ was ruling as king forever. To him be the glory, honor, greatness, and eternal throne, from one generation to the next. Amen.

22 We bid you farewell, brothers, you who conduct yourselves in the word of Jesus Christ according to the gospel; with him be glory to God, both Father and Holy Spirit [*Or: God, and the Father, and the Holy Spirit*], for the salvation of his holy chosen ones, just as the blessed Polycarp bore witness unto death. May we be found to have followed in his footsteps in the kingdom of Jesus Christ!

2 Gaius transcribed these things from the papers of Irenaeus, a disciple of Polycarp; he also lived in the same city as Irenaeus. And I, Socrates, have written these things in Corinth from the copies made by Gaius. May grace be with everyone.

3 And I, Pionius, then sought out these things and produced a copy from the one mentioned above, in accordance with a revelation of the blessed Polycarp, who showed it to me, as I will explain in what follows. And I gathered these papers together when they were nearly worn out by age, so that the Lord Jesus Christ may gather

me together with his chosen ones into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory with the Father and Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.

Another Epilogue, From the Moscow Manuscript

Gaius transcribed these things from the writings of Irenaeus; he also lived in the same city with Irenaeus, a disciple of the holy Polycarp.

2 For this Irenaeus was in Rome when the bishop Polycarp was martyred, and he taught many people. And many of his writings—which are excellent and supremely true—are in circulation; in them he remembers Polycarp, because he studied under him. He powerfully refuted every heresy and passed on the ecclesiastical and universal rule of faith, as he received it from the holy one.

3 He also says that Marcion, from whom come those who are called Marcionites, once met the holy Polycarp and said, “You need to recognize us, Polycarp.” But he then replied to Marcion, “I do recognize you—I recognize the firstborn of Satan!”

4 This also its found in the writings of Irenaeus that on the day and hour that Polycarp was martyred in Smyrna, Irenaeus, who was in the city of the Romans, heard a voice like a trumpet saying, “Polycarp has been martyred.”

5 And so, as was indicated before, Gaius made a transcription from the writings of Irenaeus, as Isocrates did, in Corinth, from the copies of Gaius. And then I, Pionius, wrote a copy from those of Isocrates, in accordance with a revelation of the holy Polycarp, after seeking out these writings and gathering them together when they were nearly worn out by age, so that the Lord Jesus Christ may gather me together with his chosen ones into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory, with the Father and the Son and Holy Spirit, forever and ever. Amen.

The proconsul Saturninus said to Speratus: "Do you persist in remaining a Christian?"

Speratus said: "I am a Christian." And all agreed with him.

Saturninus the proconsul said: "You wish no time for consideration?"

Speratus said: "In so just a matter there is no need for consideration."

The proconsul Saturninus said: "What have you in your case?"

Speratus said: "Books and letters of a just man named Paul."

The proconsul Saturninus said: "You are granted a reprieve of thirty days: think it over."

Once again Speratus said, "I am a Christian!" And with him all the others agreed.

Saturninus the proconsul read his decision from a tablet: "Whereas Speratus, Nartzalus,

Cittinus, Donata, Vestia, Secunda, and the others have confessed that they have been living in accordance with the rites of the Christians, and whereas though given the opportunity to return to the usage of the Romans they have persevered in their obstinacy, they are hereby condemned to be executed by the sword."

Speratus said: "We thank God!"

Nartzalus said: "Today we are martyrs in heaven. Thanks be to God!"

The proconsul Saturninus had the following proclaimed by a herald: "Sperata, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Veturius, Felix, Aquilinus, Laetantius, Januaria, Generosa, Vestia, Donata, Secunda, are to be led forth to execution."

They all said: "Thanks be to God!" And straightway they were beheaded for the name of Christ.

9. *The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*

An account filled with gripping pathos, "The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas" records the arrest, imprisonment, trials, and execution of a young Roman matron, Perpetua, and her female slave, Felicitas. Remarkably, the first part of the account claims to be based on Perpetua's own diary, kept while she was in prison and edited by the anonymous author who provided the concluding story of the martyrdom itself. The action takes place in Carthage in 202–203 CE, during the reign of the emperor Septimius Severus. Among the notable features of the report are (a) Perpetua's familial relations, especially with her infant child whom she must relinquish, her anguished (non-Christian) father who begs her to relent, and her dead brother whom she sees twice in dreams; (b) her vivid night visions, which she narrates as divine predictions of her fate but which also reveal a good deal about her understanding of the world and her own internal struggles; and (c) the explicit details of her prison life and, especially, of the martyrdom she endures along with her slave, Felicitas, who herself has just recently given birth.

1 The deeds recounted about the faith in ancient times were a proof of God's favor and achieved the spiritual strengthening of people as well; and they were set forth in writing precisely that honor might be rendered to God and comfort to people by the recollection of the past through the written word. Should not then more recent examples be set down that contribute equally to both ends? For indeed these too will one day become ancient and needful for the ages to come, even though in our own day they may enjoy less prestige because of the prior claim of antiquity.

Let those then who would restrict the power of the one Spirit to times and seasons look to this: the more recent events should be considered the greater, being later than those of old, and this is a consequence of the extraordinary graces promised for the last stage of time. For "in the last days, God declares, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh and their sons and daughters shall prophesy and on my manservants and my maidservants I will pour my Spirit and the young men shall see visions and the old men shall dream dreams."¹ So too we hold in honor and acknowledge not only new prophecies but new visions as well, according to the promise. And we consider all the other functions of the Holy Spirit as intended for the good of the Church; for the same Spirit has been sent to distribute all his gifts to all, as the Lord apportions to everyone. For this reason we deem it imperative to set them forth and to make them known through the word for the glory of God. Thus no one of weak or despairing faith may think that supernatural grace was present only among men of ancient times, either in the grace of martyrdom or of visions, for God always achieves what he promises, as a witness to the non-believer and a blessing to the faithful.

And so, my brethren and little children, that which we have heard and have touched with our hands we proclaim also to you, so that those of you that were witnesses may recall the glory of the Lord and those that now learn of it through hearing may

¹ Acts 2:17-18.

have fellowship with the holy martyrs and, through them, with the Lord Christ Jesus, to whom belong splendor and honor for all ages. Amen.

2 A number of young catechumens were arrested, Revocatus and his fellow slave Felicitas, Saturninus and Secundulus, and with them Vibia Perpetua, a newly married woman of good family and upbringing. Her mother and father were still alive and one of her two brothers was a catechumen like herself. She was about twenty-two years old and had an infant son at the breast. (Now from this point on the entire account of her ordeal is her own, according to her own ideas and in the way that she herself wrote it down.)

3 While we were still under arrest (she said) my father out of love for me was trying to persuade me and shake my resolution. "Father," said I, "do you see this vase here, for example, or waterpot or whatever?"

"Yes, I do," said he.

And I told him: "Could it be called by any other name than what it is?"

And he said: "No."

"Well, so too I cannot be called anything other than what I am, a Christian."

At this my father was so angered by the word "Christian" that he moved towards me as though he would pluck my eyes out. But he left it at that and departed, vanquished along with his diabolical arguments.

For a few days afterwards I gave thanks to the Lord that I was separated from my father, and I was comforted by his absence. During these few days I was baptized, and I was inspired by the Spirit not to ask for any other favor after the water but simply the perseverance of the flesh. A few days later we were lodged in the prison; and I was terrified, as I had never before been in such a dark hole. What a difficult time it was! With the crowd the heat was stifling; then there was the extortion of the soldiers; and to crown all, I was tortured with worry for my baby there.

Then Tertius and Pomponius, those blessed deacons who tried to take care of us, bribed the soldiers to allow us to go to a better part of the prison to refresh ourselves for a few hours. Everyone then left that dungeon and shifted for himself. I nursed my baby, who was faint from hunger. In my anxiety I spoke to my mother about the child, I tried to comfort my brother, and I gave the child in their charge. I was in pain because I saw them suffering out of pity for me. These were the trials I had to endure for many days. Then I got permission for my baby to stay with me in prison. At once I recovered my health, relieved as I was of my worry and anxiety over the child. My prison had suddenly become a palace, so that I wanted to be there rather than anywhere else.

4 Then my brother said to me: "Dear sister, you are greatly privileged; surely you might ask for a vision to discover whether you are to be condemned or freed."

Faithfully I promised that I would, for I knew that I could speak with the Lord, whose great blessings I had come to experience. And so I said: "I shall tell you tomorrow." Then I made my request and this was the vision I had.

I saw a ladder of tremendous height made of bronze, reaching all the way to the heavens, but it was so narrow that only one person could climb up at a time. To the sides of the ladder were attached all sorts of metal weapons: there were swords, spears, hooks, daggers, and spikes; so that if anyone tried to climb up carelessly or without paying attention, he would be mangled and his flesh would adhere to the weapons.

At the foot of the ladder lay a dragon of enormous size, and it would attack those who tried to climb up and try to terrify them from doing so. And Saturus was the first to go up, he who was later to give himself up of his own accord. He had been the builder of our strength, although he was not present when we were arrested. And he arrived at the top of the staircase and he looked back and said to me: "Perpetua,

I am waiting for you. But take care; do not let the dragon bite you."

"He will not harm me," I said, "in the name of Christ Jesus."

Slowly, as though he were afraid of me, the dragon stuck his head out from underneath the ladder. Then, using it as my first step, I trod on his head and went up.

Then I saw an immense garden, and in it a grey-haired man sat in shepherd's garb; tall he was, and milking sheep. And standing around him were many thousands of people clad in white garments. He raised his head, looked at me, and said: "I am glad you have come, my child."

He called me over to him and gave me, as it were, a mouthful of the milk he was drawing; and I took it into my cupped hands and consumed it. And all those who stood around said: "Amen!" At the sound of this word I came to, with the taste of something sweet still in my mouth. I at once told this to my brother, and we realized that we would have to suffer and that from now on we would no longer have any hope in this life.

5 A few days later there was a rumor that we were going to be given a hearing. My father also arrived from the city, worn with worry, and he came to see me with the idea of persuading me.

"Daughter," he said, "have pity on my grey head—have pity on me your father, if I deserve to be called your father, if I have favored you above all your brothers, if I have raised you to reach this prime of your life. Do not abandon me to be the reproach of others. Think of your brothers, think of your mother and your aunt, think of your child, who will not be able to live once you are gone. Give up your pride! You will destroy all of us! None of us will ever be able to speak freely again if anything happens to you."

This was the way my father spoke out of love for me, kissing my hands and throwing himself down before me. With tears in his eyes he no longer addressed me as his daughter but as a

Expectation of suffering

Enemy will do no harm

Now Felicitas on ladder

woman. I was sorry for my father's sake, because he alone of all my kin would be unhappy to see me suffer.

I tried to comfort him saying: "It will all happen in the prisoner's dock as God wills; for you may be sure that we are not left to ourselves but are all in his power."

And he left me in great sorrow.

6 One day while we were eating breakfast we were suddenly hurried off for a hearing. We arrived at the forum, and straight away the story went about the neighborhood near the forum and a huge crowd gathered. We walked up to the prisoner's dock. All the others when questioned admitted their guilt. Then, when it came my turn, my father appeared with my son, dragged me from the step, and said: "Perform the sacrifice—have pity on your baby!"

Hilarius the governor, who had received his judicial powers as the successor of the late proconsul Minucius Timinianus, said to me: "Have pity on your father's grey head; have pity on your infant son. Offer the sacrifice for the welfare of the emperors."

"I will not," I retorted.

"Are you a Christian?" said Hilarius.

And I said: "Yes, I am."

When my father persisted in trying to dissuade me, Hilarius ordered him to be thrown to the ground and beaten with a rod. I felt sorry for father, just as if I myself had been beaten. I felt sorry for his pathetic old age.

Then Hilarius passed sentence on all of us: we were condemned to the beasts, and we returned to prison in high spirits. But my baby had got used to being nursed at the breast and to staying with me in prison. So I sent the deacon Pomponius straight away to my father to ask for the baby. But father refused to give him over. But as God willed, the baby had no further desire for the breast, nor did I suffer any inflammation; and so I was relieved of any anxiety for my child and of any discomfort in my breasts.

7 Some days later when we were all suddenly while praying I spoke out and entered the name Dinocrates. I was surprised the name had never entered my mind until that moment. And I was pained when I recalled what had happened to him. At once I realized that I was privileged to pray for him. I began to pray for him and to sigh deeply for him before the Lord. That very night I had the following vision. I saw Dinocrates come out of a dark hole, where there were many others with him, very hot and thirsty, pale and dirty. On his face was the wound he had when he died.

Now Dinocrates had been my brother according to the flesh; but he had died horribly of cancer of the face when he was seven years old, and his death was a source of loathing to everyone. Thus it was for him that I made my prayer. There was a great abyss between us: neither could approach the other. Where Dinocrates stood there was a pool full of water; and its rim was higher than the child's height, so that Dinocrates had to stretch himself up to drink. I was sorry that, though the pool had water in it, Dinocrates could not drink because of the height of the rim. Then I woke up, realizing that my brother was suffering. But I was confident that I could help him in his trouble; and I prayed for him every day until we were transferred to the military prison. For we were supposed to fight with the beasts at the military games to be held on the occasion of the emperor Geta's birthday. And I prayed for my brother day and night with tears and sighs that this favor might be granted me.

8 On the day we were kept in chains, I had this vision shown to me. I saw the same spot that I had seen before, but there was Dinocrates all clean, well dressed, and refreshed. I saw a scar where the wound had been; and the pool I had seen before now had its rim lowered to the level of the child's waist. And Dinocrates kept drinking water from it, and there above the rim was a golden bowl full of water. And Dinocrates drew close and began to drink from it, and yet the bowl

remained full. And when he had drunk enough of the water, he began to play as children do. Then I awoke, and I realized that he had been delivered from his suffering.

9 Some days later, an adjutant named Pudens, who was in charge of the prison, began to show us great honor, realizing that we possessed some great power within us. And he began to allow many visitors to see us for our mutual comfort.

Now the day of the contest was approaching, and my father came to see me overwhelmed with sorrow. He started tearing the hairs from his beard and threw them on the ground; he then threw himself on the ground and began to curse his old age and to say such words as would move all creation. I felt sorry for his unhappy old age.

10 The day before we were to fight with the beasts I saw the following vision. Pomponius the deacon came to the prison gates and began to knock violently. I went out and opened the gate for him. He was dressed in an unbelted white tunic, wearing elaborate sandals. And he said to me: "Perpetua, come; we are waiting for you."

Then he took my hand and we began to walk through rough and broken country. At last we came to the amphitheater out of breath, and he led me into the center of the arena.

Then he told me: "Do not be afraid. I am here, struggling with you." Then he left.

I looked at the enormous crowd who watched in astonishment. I was surprised that no beasts were let loose on me; for I knew that I was condemned to die by the beasts. Then out came an Egyptian against me, of vicious appearance, together with his seconds, to fight with me. There also came up to me some handsome young men to be my seconds and assistants.

My clothes were stripped off, and suddenly I was a man. My seconds began to rub me down with oil (as they are wont to do before a contest). Then I saw the Egyptian on the other side rolling in the dust. Next there came forth a man of

marvellous stature, such that he rose above the top of the amphitheater. He was clad in a belted purple tunic with two stripes (one on either side) running down the middle of his chest. He wore sandals that were wondrously made of gold and silver, and he carried a wand like an athletic trainer and a green branch on which there were golden apples.

And he asked for silence and said: "If this Egyptian defeats her he will slay her with the sword. But if she defeats him, she will receive this branch." Then he withdrew.

We drew close to one another and began to let our fists fly. My opponent tried to get hold of my feet, but I kept striking him in the face with the heels of my feet. Then I was raised up into the air and I began to pummel him without as it were touching the ground. Then when I noticed there was a lull, I put my two hands together linking the fingers of one hand with those of the other and thus I got hold of his head. He fell flat on his face and I stepped on his head.

The crowd began to shout and my assistants started to sing psalms. Then I walked up to the trainer and took the branch. He kissed me and said to me: "Peace be with you, my daughter!" I began to walk in triumph towards the Gate of Life. Then I awoke. I realized that it was not with wild animals that I would fight but with the Devil, but I knew that I would win the victory. So much for what I did up until the eve of the contest. About what happened at the contest itself, let him write of it who will.

11 But the blessed Saturus has also made known his own vision and he has written it out with his own hand. We had died, he said, and had put off the flesh, and we began to be carried towards the east by four angels who did not touch us with their hands. But we moved along not on our backs facing upwards but as though we were climbing up a gentle hill. And when we were free of the world, we first saw an intense light. And I said to Perpetua (for she was at my

side): "This is what the Lord promised us. We have received his promise."

While we were being carried by these four angels, a great open space appeared, which seemed to be a garden, with rose bushes and all manner of flowers. The trees were as tall as cypresses, and their leaves were constantly falling. In the garden there were four other angels more splendid than the others. When they saw us they paid us homage and said to the other angels in admiration: "Why, they are here! They are here!"

Then the four angels that were carrying us grew fearful and set us down. Then we walked across to an open area by way of a broad road, and there we met Jucundus, Saturninus, and Artaxius, who were burnt alive in the same persecution, together with Quintus who had actually died as a martyr in prison. We asked them where they had been. And the other angels said to us: "First come and enter and greet the Lord."

12 Then we came to a place whose walls seemed to be constructed of light. And in front of the gate stood four angels, who entered in and put on white robes. We also entered and we heard the sound of voices in unison chanting endlessly: "Holy, holy, holy!" In the same place we seemed to see an aged man with white hair and a youthful face, though we did not see his feet. On his right and left were four elders, and behind them stood other aged men. Surprised, we entered and stood before a throne: four angels lifted us up and we kissed the aged man and he touched our faces with his hand. And the elders said to us: "Let us rise." And we rose and gave the kiss of peace. Then the elders said to us: "Go and play."

To Perpetua I said: "Your wish is granted."

She said to me: "Thanks be to God that I am happier here now than I was in the flesh."

13 Then we went out and before the gates we saw the bishop Optatus on the right and Aspasius the presbyter and teacher on the left, each of them far apart and in sorrow. They threw themselves at our feet and said: "Make peace

between us. For you have gone away and left us thus."

And we said to them: "Are you not our bishop, and are you not our presbyter? How can you fall at our feet?"

We were very moved and embraced them. Perpetua then began to speak with them in Greek, and we drew them apart into the garden under a rose arbor.

While we were talking with them, the angels said to them: "Allow them to rest. Settle whatever quarrels you have among yourselves." And they were put to confusion.

Then they said to Optatus: "You must scold your flock. They approach you as though they had come from the games, quarreling about the different teams."

And it seemed as though they wanted to close the gates. And there we began to recognize many of our brethren, martyrs among them. All of us were sustained by a most delicious odor that seemed to satisfy us. And then I woke up happy.

14 Such were the remarkable visions of these martyrs, Saturus and Perpetua, written by themselves. As for Secundulus, God called him from this world earlier than the others while he was still in prison, by a special grace that he might not have to face the animals. Yet his flesh, if not his spirit, knew the sword.

15 As for Felicitas, she too enjoyed the Lord's favor in this wise. She had been pregnant when she was arrested, and was now in her eighth month. As the day of the spectacle drew near she was very distressed that her martyrdom would be postponed because of her pregnancy; for it is against the law for women with child to be executed. Thus she might have to shed her holy, innocent blood afterwards along with others who were common criminals. Her comrades in martyrdom were also saddened; for they were afraid that they would have to leave behind so fine a companion to travel alone on the same road to

hope. And so, two days before the contest, they poured forth a prayer to the Lord in one torrent of common grief. And immediately after their prayer the birth pains came upon her. She suffered a good deal in her labor because of the natural difficulty of an eight months' delivery.

Hence one of the assistants of the prison guards said to her: "You suffer so much now—what will you do when you are tossed to the beasts? Little did you think of them when you refused to sacrifice."

"What I am suffering now," she replied, "I suffer by myself. But then another will be inside me who will suffer for me, just as I shall be suffering for him."

And she gave birth to a girl; and one of the sisters brought her up as her own daughter.

16 Therefore, since the Holy Spirit has permitted the story of this contest to be written down and by so permitting has willed it, we shall carry out the command or, indeed, the commission of the most saintly Perpetua, however unworthy I might be to add anything to this glorious story. At the same time I shall add one example of her perseverance and nobility of soul.

The military tribune had treated them with extraordinary severity because on the information of certain very foolish people he became afraid that they would be spirited out of the prison by magical spells.

Perpetua spoke to him directly. "Why can you not even allow us to refresh ourselves properly? For we are the most distinguished of the condemned prisoners, seeing that we belong to the emperor; we are to fight on his very birthday. Would it not be to your credit if we were brought forth on the day in a healthier condition?"

The officer became disturbed and grew red. So it was that he gave the order that they were to be more humanely treated; and he allowed her brothers and other persons to visit, so that the prisoners could dine in their company. By this time the adjutant who was head of the jail was himself a Christian.

17 On the day before, when they had their last meal, which is called the free banquet, they celebrated not a banquet but rather a love feast. They spoke to the mob with the same steadfastness, warned them of God's judgment, stressing the joy they would have in their suffering, and ridiculing the curiosity of those that came to see them. Saturus said: "Will not tomorrow be enough for you? Why are you so eager to see something that you dislike? Our friends today will be our enemies on the morrow. But take careful note of what we look like so that you will recognize us on the day." Thus everyone would depart from the prison in amazement, and many of them began to believe.

18 The day of their victory dawned, and they marched from the prison to the amphitheater joyfully as though they were going to heaven with calm faces, trembling, if at all, with joy rather than fear. Perpetua went along with shining countenance and calm step, as the beloved of God, as a wife of Christ, putting down everyone's stare by her own intense gaze. With them also was Felicitas, glad that she had safely given birth so that now she could fight the beasts, going from one blood bath to another, from the midwife to the gladiator, ready to wash after childbirth in a second baptism.

They were then led up to the gates and the men were forced to put on the robes of priests of Saturn, the women the dress of the priestesses of Ceres. But the noble Perpetua strenuously resisted this to the end.

"We came to this of our own free will, that our freedom should not be violated. We agreed to pledge our lives provided that we would do no such thing. You agreed with us to do this."

Even injustice recognized justice. The military tribune agreed. They were to be brought into the arena just as they were. Perpetua then began to sing a psalm: she was already treading on the head of the Egyptian. Revocatus, Saturninus, and Saturus began to warn the onlooking mob. Then when they came within sight of Hilarianus, they suggested by their notions and gestures: "You

have condemned us, but God will condemn you" was what they were saying.

At this the crowds became enraged and demanded that they be scourged before a line of gladiators. And they rejoiced at this that they had obtained a share in the Lord's sufferings.

19 But he who said, "Ask and you shall receive,"² answered their prayer by giving each one the death he had asked for. For whenever they would discuss among themselves their desire for martyrdom, Saturninus indeed insisted that he wanted to be exposed to all the different beasts, that his crown might be all the more glorious. And so at the outset of the contest he and Revocatus were matched with a leopard, and then while in the stocks they were attacked by a bear.

As for Saturus, he dreaded nothing more than a bear, and he counted on being killed by one bite of a leopard. Then he was matched with a wild boar; but the gladiator who had tied him to the animal was gored by the boar and died a few days after the contest, whereas Saturus was only dragged along. Then when he was bound in the stocks awaiting the bear, the animal refused to come out of the cages, so that Saturus was called back once more unhurt.

20 For the young women, however, the Devil had prepared a mad heifer. This was an unusual animal, but it was chosen that their sex might be matched with that of the beast. So they were stripped naked, placed in nets, and thus brought out into the arena. Even the crowd was horrified when they saw that one was a delicate young girl and the other was a woman fresh from childbirth with the milk still dripping from her breasts. And so they were brought back again and dressed in unbelted tunics.

First the heifer tossed Perpetua and she fell on her back. Then sitting up she pulled down the tunic that was ripped along the side so that it covered her thighs, thinking more of her modesty

² John 16:24.

than of her pain. Next she asked for a pin to fasten her untidy hair: for it was not right that a martyr should die with her hair in disorder, lest she might seem to be mourning in her hour of triumph.

Then she got up. And seeing that Felicitas had been crushed to the ground, she went over to her, gave her her hand, and lifted her up. Then the two stood side by side. But the cruelty of the mob was by now appeased, and so they were called back through the Gate of Life.

There Perpetua was held up by a man named Rusticus who was at the time a catechumen and kept close to her. She awoke from a kind of sleep (so absorbed had she been in ecstasy in the Spirit) and she began to look about her. Then to the amazement of all she said: "When are we going to be thrown to that heifer or whatever it is?"

When told that this had already happened, she refused to believe it until she noticed the marks of her rough experience on her person and her dress. Then she called for her brother and spoke to him together with the catechumens and said: "You must all stand fast in the faith and love one another, and do not be weakened by what we have gone through."

21 At another gate Saturus was earnestly addressing the soldier Pudens. "It is exactly," he said, "as I foretold and predicted. So far not one animal has touched me. So now you may believe me with all your heart: I am going in there and I shall be finished off with one bite of the leopard." And immediately as the contest was coming to a close a leopard was let loose, and after one bite Saturus was so drenched with blood that as he came away the mob roared in witness to his second baptism: "Well washed! Well washed!" For well washed indeed was one who had been bathed in this manner.

Then he said to the soldier Pudens: "Goodbye. Remember me, and remember the faith. These things should not disturb you but rather strengthen you."

And with this he asked Pudens for a ring from his finger, and dipping it into his wound he gave it back to him again as a pledge and as a record of his bloodshed.

NOT
suffering

Back to
femininity

READING 9. The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas

Shortly after he was thrown unconscious with the rest in the usual spot to have his throat cut. But the mob asked that their bodies be brought out into the open that their eyes might be the guilty witnesses of the sword that pierced their flesh. And so the martyrs got up and went to the spot of their own accord as the people wanted them to, and kissing one another they sealed their martyrdom with the ritual kiss of peace. The others took the sword in silence and without moving, especially Saturus, who being the first to climb the stairway was the first to die. For once again he was waiting for Perpetua. Perpetua, however, had yet to taste more pain. She screamed as she was struck on the bone; then she took the trembling hand

of the young gladiator and guided it to her throat. It was as though so great a woman, feared as she was by the unclean spirit, could not be dispatched unless she herself were willing.

Ah, most valiant and blessed martyrs! Truly are you called and chosen for the glory of Christ Jesus our Lord! And any one who exalts, honors, and worships his glory should read for the consolation of the Church these new deeds of heroism which are no less significant than the tales of old. For these new manifestations of virtue will bear witness to one and the same Spirit who still operates, and to God the Father almighty, to his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom is splendor and immeasurable power for all the ages. Amen.

suffering
& action