

February 23

A. *Holy Hieromartyr Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna*



St. Polycarp was the favorite disciple of Apostle John the Theologian and was installed bishop of Smyrna by him. He was glorified as a zealous and invincible defender of the true faith and loving father of Christians. He distributed all his estate to the poor. He himself ministered to the sick, disabled and aging, doing good not only for Christians but also for Jews and even Pagans. "The leader of all Asia (Minor)" as Blessed Jerome calls him; St. Polycarp not only enlightened it by his teaching and life, but was zealous about the enlightenment of the people of Gaul where he was sent on a mission during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. After the martyr's death of some Smyrnian Christians, the Pagans, angry about their firmness, furiously began to demand that the Bishop of Smyrna be sentenced to death. St. Polycarp, 85 years old, was led to the furnace for burning, but the flame did not touch the righteous man and the fire surrounded him like an arch. Seeing such a wonder, the Pagans pierced the holy elder with a sword in 167. Thus a new wonder occurred: the blood of the Hieromartyr extinguished the blazing fire. Christians wanted to take the body of the Hieromartyr, but the proconsul ordered him burned, and they could only collect his bones. He wrote an epistle to the Philippians.

Kontakion, tone 1

**Offering the verbal fruits of virtuous offerings to the Lord, O Wise Polycarp,
You are glorified by God as a worthy hierarch.**

**So today we who have been enlightened by your words,
Hymn your praiseworthy memory, glorifying the Lord.**

*Ven. John, Antiochus, Antoninus, Moses, Zebinas, Polychronius, another Moses
and Damian, ascetics of the Syrian desert in the fifth century*

Ven. John emulated the great Syrian ascetics, especially Ven. Limnaeus (see Feb. 22) in his asceticism. He carried heavy chains on his body. Having settled on the shore of a certain river, John long-sufferingly endured all changes of the weather in the open-air and in the cold areas. The hermit so towered over the natural needs of human nature that he was not satisfied with anything terrestrial and did not seek terrestrial comforts and pleasure. So, when one of his followers planted an almond branch near his dwelling and it grew into a large tree which began to deliver shade to the strict ascetic and to assuage his sight, the strict ascetic

ordered to cut down the tree, so that as the Blessed Theodoret says: “do not give yourself even such comfort”.

Antiochus, during the episcopate of Blessed Theodoret who already was aging, carried out all his life in a certain most deserted place sheltered by a small fence.

Antoninus during the episcopate of Theodoret was also in deep old age.

Moses practiced asceticism on a certain high mesa near the small place Ramah.

Blessed Theodoret said that all of them were identical in dress, food, standing, and prayer, both all-night and every-day labors. Neither passage of time nor old age nor weakness of nature slackened their patience. To the contrary all of them have in themselves the constantly strong love for labor.

Ven. Zebinas was father, teacher and paradigm of every virtue. He surpassed his contemporary ascetics especially in the "ascetic effort of prayer" and "patience" in prayer. He prayed day and night standing for the most part, and in old age, weakened in strength, leaning on a staff. The venerable one was adorned also with the virtue of hospitality and in general was the father, teacher and example of every virtue. He lived to a ripe old age bearing identical ascetic efforts during all his long life.

Ven. Polychronius began his asceticism in the company of Ven. Zebinas, who with his own hands put his first hair shirt on him. Polychronius carefully studied the way of life of Zebinas, having adopted his rules, moral qualities and virtues for himself. After leaving Zebinas, Polychronius began to practice the one and the same asceticism in the open-air, lived, and practiced asceticism in that way up to extreme old age when he settled in a very small house, which his earnest followers constructed for him. Burning with love for God, Polychronius continually remembered God and directed his mind and heart above the world. Being tied to his body, he inspired his soul and lifted it higher than the heavens and constantly abided in heavenly contemplation, never allowing himself to occupying his attention even during conversations with those who came to him. He spent the night in prayer and vigil. He always prayed standing and joined it to a special ascetic effort. He obtained a rather big heavy root of an oak tree, and placed it on his shoulder at night and prayed that way. The ascetic also did this during the day when he was alone. He tried to hide his ascetic efforts from everyone, from fear of becoming conceited and proud. Therefore this strict ascetic decided to carry chains. His humility was extraordinary; the simplicity of his transformation is amazing. Having shone with rays of divine grace, having succeeded in many diverse virtues and daily collecting the wealth of philosophy, the elder (starets) was so filled with humility that he embraced the feet of every one who came to him and bowed to the ground before each one of them. His disinterestedness was complete; the absence of any idea about his comfort was full. Diligence and love of Polychronius for asceticism were so strong that even illnesses and infirmities that frequently came to him, especially in old age, did not stop him. The Lord was abundantly generous

with his gifts of grace to him. He by the power of his prayers was able to accomplish various kinds of wonderful deeds.

Ven. Moses and Damian were disciples of Ven. Polychronius. At first they could not stand through the all-night vigil of Ven. Polychronius although the good elder (starets) persuaded them to give their bodies rest and get a night's sleep, but they already wanted to run away from him. But conscious that they were healthy and strong, they arranged to stay. They became accustomed to the way of life of the great ascetic and revealed his asceticism to his followers. Moses remained with the great Polychronius up to his most blessed death, reflecting in himself rays of his virtues. Damian, having learned the way of life and moral qualities of the elder and being zealous about pleasing God in full solitude, left for a small town Niarus and settled in a very small house near him. Here he practiced asceticism all his life, imitating Polychronius in everything and completely assimilating it. They both were the same in simplicity and meekness, humility, tenderness in words, softness in conversion, vigilance of soul, and reflection on God, standing, labor, vigil, food and evangelical poverty. The strictness of the asceticism of Damian was so great, that there was nothing in his dwelling, except a small vessel for soaking lentils in water.

Ven. Monk Alexander, First-leader of the Unsleeping Ones

Having received his education in Constantinople, he was first a monk in the monastery of St. Elias in Syria. After his departure to Bithynia, many adherents of piety gathered around him. He constructed nine monasteries for them and first established in them the order of the "unsleeping", i.e. the continuous day-night singing of psalms serially done by the monks. He died in peace after the year 431.

St. Gorgonia, Sister of St. Gregory the Theologian

She died about the year 372. According to St. Gregory the Theologian, she was chaste, having combined the virtue of virginity with matrimony and therefore showed that neither virginity nor matrimony entirely unites or divides us with God or the world. Having served the world and nature in the little and the many things demanded by the law of flesh, she completely devoted herself to God. She combined the fruit of the body, i.e. her children and grandchildren, with the fruit of the spirit. For all of them were cleansed and acquired God. She liked the color red as the color of bashfulness, and the color white, occurring from abstinence. But the scrubbing and re-coloring she presented as a woman distinguished her from those in the shows and at the cross-roads. Distinguished by prudence and piety, she was a female adviser for everyone and her house was the common haven for the poor.

Ven. Martyr Damian

He came from the village of Richovo, Diocese of Agrapha, and in his youth accepted tonsure on Mount Athos. Soon, on suggestion from God, he left the holy mountain and began going from village to village calling Christians to repentance, keeping the commandments of God and doing good deeds. Slandered before the

ruler of Larissa of inciting Christians against the Turks, Ven. Damian was subjected to cruel torture and was burned in Larissa in 1568.

Ven. Damian of Esphigmenou

He practiced asceticism in the Esphigmenou Scete on Mount Athos, was the friend of St. Cosmas of Zographos (see September 22), strictly carried out all the commandments of the elders and died in peace in the 14th century. A great sweet fragrance arose from his tomb within 40 days after his death.

Ven. Moses of Belozersk (White Lake)

According to the writings of the Belozersk saints, he practiced asceticism in the 15th century in the Belozersk Trinity Monastery and for his holy life he was awarded by the Lord with the gift of foresight.

Ven. Polycarp of Briansk

He was the founder and Hegumen of the Savior Monastery in Briansk (abolished in 1764 and converted into a cathedral), who died after a long ascetic life, according to some in 1499, to others in 1492. His relics are in a hidden place in the city cathedral.

Sokolka Icon of the Mother of God is in former Sokolsky Transfiguration (Preobrazhensky) Monastery (now the small place of Sokolka on the shore of the Vorskla River, 18 versts (about 12 miles) to the south of Kobeliaki, Poltava Province.). She was glorified in 1731.

*S. V. Bulgakov, Handbook for Church Servers, 2nd ed., 1274 pp. (Kharkov, 1900) pp 0092-0094.
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