



Study Guide

Living Wisely with the Church Fathers – Chapter 1

“They Looked like Flaming Angels.”

by Chris Hall

Martyrdom has marked the life of the church from its very beginning. In the time of the church fathers, it occurred sporadically in the first three centuries of the church’s history. From 303-311, intense and widespread persecution broke out across the Roman Empire under Diocletian. Martyrdom continues today. The 20th century was the bloodiest for the church. More martyrs died in the 20th century than in any other century of the church’s history.

Did you find it surprising that for Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of the best-known martyrs of the 20th century, the church father Cyprian was a special encouragement? You might consider getting to know Cyprian better. His letters are a good place to start. In fact, as you read *Living Wisely with the Church Fathers* (LWCF), you might piggy back on the church fathers mentioned there and start reading them in longer selections. You’ll find Cyprian, for instance, published in such series as *Ancient Christian Writers* (Paulist Press) and *The Fathers of the Church* (Catholic University Press).

Review and ponder the questions I raise on p. 31:

- What are the implications of the ancient church’s suffering for Christ’s suffering church today?
- What are the implications of the ancient church’s suffering for Christians living in the West or in other largely persecution-free zones? How might the church’s suffering—ancient and modern—speak to those who are encountering a time of relative peace and prosperity, one with its own blessings and temptations?

It’s important for us to grasp that the church fathers believed normal, healthy Christian experience to be cruciform. They were not surprised when Christians suffered and took very seriously Jesus’ command to deny oneself, take up one’s cross, and follow him (Mark 8:34).

You might well want to get to know Polycarp better. You can read the entire account of Polycarp’s martyrdom in *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Michael W. Holmes, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), pp. 306-333

Obstinacy: Read this section very carefully. The Roman government simply could not understand why Christians were so exclusive in their faith claims. In all likelihood, Rome would have tolerantly welcomed Christianity into its broad fold of approved religions, if only the Christian community had been willing to consider their faith as one of many religious options.



This the Christians would not do, and they paid the price. Why this Christian refusal to be tolerant and open-minded toward the deities most Romans worshiped? And, as the years passed, why the Christians' stubborn refusal to acknowledge the Roman emperor's deity? This new faith was seen by many Romans as subversive of basic Roman values. Hence, the severe persecutions that sporadically occurred.

- Ponder **the central role the resurrection** of Jesus played in the martyr's lives. As you do so, ask yourself the question: "How deeply has the reality of the resurrection of Jesus formed my mind and behavior?" The martyrs were admired in the ancient church both for their willingness to die in accordance with the cruciform pattern of Jesus' own life and for their joy in the resurrection of Jesus. *They willingly died because they believed Jesus had conquered death.*
- Ignatius of Antioch, one of the earliest martyrs of the church (I don't mention him in this chapter), represents well ancient Christian thinking on martyrdom. Ignatius wrote seven letters to different churches (the Ephesians, the Magnesians, the Trallians, the Romans, the Philadelphians, and the Smyrnaeans) as he traveled to Rome to be killed by wild beasts in the arena. You might want to meditate on his thoughts. He died in the last first or early second century AD.
 - "Just pray that I will have strength both outwardly and inwardly so that I may not just talk about it [martyrdom], but want to do it, *so that I may not merely be called a Christian but actually prove to be one.* For if I prove to be one, I can also be called one, and then I will be faithful when I am no longer visible to the world." (Ignatius, *Letter to the Romans*, 3.2)
 - "I am writing to all the churches and am insisting to everyone that I die for God of my own free will—unless you hinder me. I implore you: do not be unseasonably kind to me. Let me be food for the wild beasts, through whom I can reach God. I am God's wheat, and I am being ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, so that I may prove to be pure bread. Better yet, coax the wild beasts, so that they may become my tomb and leave nothing of my body behind, lest I become a burden to anyone once I have fallen asleep [the cost of burial]. *Then I will truly be a disciple of Jesus Christ,* when the world will no longer see my body. Pray to the Lord on my behalf, so that through these instruments I may prove to be a sacrifice to God." (Ignatius, *Letter to the Romans*, 4.1-2)
 - "Bear with me—I know what is best for me. *Now at last I am beginning to be a disciple.* May nothing visible or invisible envy me, so that I may reach Jesus Christ. Fire and cross and battles with wild beasts, mutilation, mangling,



wrenching of bones, the hacking of limbs, the crushing of my whole body, cruel tortures of the devil—let these come upon me, only let me reach Jesus Christ!” (Ignatius, *Letter to the Romans*, 5.3)

Ignatius’s concern for genuine discipleship is striking. The pattern he offers seems to be this:

- **Jesus calls us to be his disciples.**
- **The pattern Jesus gives us to follow is cruciform.**
- **We can embrace the cruciform pattern because of the resurrection.**
- **Though martyrs die, they will live forever.**

When I first submitted the chapter on martyrdom to IVP, they asked me to revise it. “The example of the ancient martyrs surely speaks to people experiencing severe danger and persecution in the world today. But what of people in the West? What of the Christians whose lives are not threatened when they profess their faith in Christ? Can you add a section showing the relevance of martyrdom for the relatively rich, comfortable Christian who may never actually experience it?”

It was in response to this request from IVP that I added the closing meditation on allegiance (pp. 54-57). Whether rich or poor, safe or in danger, the allegiance of the Christian must be to the risen Christ, the Lord of every nation.

The question of allegiance relates to almost every chapter in *Living Wisely with the Church Fathers*. You might want to peruse Matthew W. Bates new book, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017). Chapters include “Loyalty and the Full Gospel,” “Faith as Allegiance,” and “Practicing Allegiance.”

As we bring the first chapter to a close, **examine your own allegiances.**

“*What does my life demonstrate about what I truly believe?*” is always a good question to ask.