

# Revelation 2:8-11

- The crown of life - Smyrna -

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## Foreword

- ❖ The Christian church must be faithful to Christ under all circumstances, whether the context is
  - predominantly secular;
  - predominantly Islamic;
  - predominantly Hindu or Buddhist.
- ❖ The Christian church might face afflictions, poverty, slander.
- ❖ Jesus Christ promised the crown of life to all who are faithful witnesses.
  
- ❖ The context, form and structure, theological notes, technical and hermeneutical notes given in this sermon outline show some overlap with other sermon outlines taken from the Book of Revelation. This makes it possible to use this sermon outline as a “stand alone.”

## Context

- ❖ The message of Jesus Christ to the church of Smyrna is part of the Book of Revelation. The Book of Revelation is like a large painting. You need to look at the whole in order to understand the details.
- ❖ A brief outline of the Book of Revelation:<sup>1</sup>

<b>Introduction (Rev. 1:1-3)</b>	
	The origin and command to write this Revelation down.

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<sup>1</sup> This outline for sermons is very brief and does not discuss all the (many) different theories about the structures and outlines of the Book of Revelation. Beale (1999) provides a detailed outline. For discussion see Garrow (1997).

<b>The Book of Revelation (Rev. 1:4-22:21)</b>	
Rev. 1:4-8	The opening liturgical setting.
Rev. 1:9-3:22	PART 1
Rev. 4:1-22:11	PART 2
Rev. 22:12-21	The closing liturgical setting.

- PART 1: The risen and exalted Christ and his seven messages to the seven churches in the Roman Province Asia.
- PART 2: The heavenly courtroom and the judgment of God, ending with the descent of the new heaven and earth.

<b>Part 1 (Rev. 1:9-3:22)</b>	
Rev. 1:9-20	The risen and exalted Christ reveals himself to John and to the churches.
Rev. 2:1-3:22	The seven messages to the seven churches of Asia. Jesus Christ knows the deeds of each church and of each individual. He calls them to repent where necessary to prepare them for the things to come, which they need to overcome.

- ❖ There is much discussion about the date of writing of the Revelation.
  - Some commentators propose a date near the reign of Emperor Nero (AD 68).
  - Others propose a date during the reign of Emperor Domitian (AD 81-96).
    - In the case of the message to the Smyrnans, the outcome of this discussion is of lesser importance. The Smyrnans did not suffer persecution at the moment of writing. Their own faith was weak or lukewarm. They were not prepared for “the great tribulation” (Rev. 7:14).
- ❖ The socio-economical and historical-geographical context of 1<sup>st</sup> century Smyrna is also important. See below.

## Form and structure

- ❖ Each message to one of the seven churches has the same structure:

		reference
Commission to write	Rev 2:8	

Presentation of the exalted Christ	Rev 2:8	Rev 1:17, 18
Praises and commendations	Rev 2:9-10	
Call to repentance <sup>2</sup>		
Call to listen	Rev 2:11	
Promise (and warning)	Rev 2:11	Rev 20:8, 14; 21:8

## Theological notes

- ❖ The Book of Revelation is trinitarian (God – Holy Spirit – Jesus Christ; Rev. 1:4-5) in character.
  - God is the first and the last (Rev. 1:8) – Jesus Christ is the first and the last (Rev. 1:17).
  - Jesus Christ speaks to the churches (Rev. 2:1-6) and the churches are summoned to listen to what the Spirit (Rev. 2:7) says.
- ❖ The Book of Revelation is foremost a liturgical book with prayers, doxologies, confessions, prophecies and visions. It shows the heavenly liturgy in images and this liturgy affects the history of this world when the plagues of God strike this earth. Rev. 4:11 explains why: **“You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.”**
  - The first priority in the life of every human being is to glorify God.
  - This liturgical book reminds us of the liturgy in the tabernacle (especially) and the temple of the Old Testament. This explains the many references to the altars and the priestly appearances of Christ and some of his angels.
- ❖ The Book of Revelation is also a prophetic book about the past, the present and the future. It sheds light on the past, the present situation of the seven churches in Asia Minor, and the future, culminating in the promise of the new heaven and the new earth.
  - From chapter 4 onwards the judgment of God is the dominating theme. He will do justice (Rev. 4-5; Rev. 6:10; Rev. 21:1-15 and other passages).

## Technical and hermeneutical notes

- ❖ Reading and understanding the Book of Revelation requires:
  - Profound knowledge of the Old Testament.
    - The books of Exodus and Numbers, Ezekiel and Daniel are of particular importance in this regard. These books bear relation to oppression and deliverance of the people of God (Egypt and Babylon).
  - Knowledge of the Greek-Roman world of the first century.

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<sup>2</sup> Jesus Christ didn't summon this church to repent from specific sins.

- Knowledge of figures of speech, because of all the metaphors and other figures of speech.
  - Knowledge of the structure of Revelation (see above).
  - (Elementary) knowledge of Hermeneutics.
- ❖ John received this Revelation from Jesus Christ and at the same time, this Revelation reveals the risen and exalted Christ, who holds the keys of (life and) death and Hades (Rev. 1:17). John understood the words he heard and the visions he saw, though sometimes they needed to be explained to him (Rev. 1:19-20).
- ❖ John wrote down what he heard and saw in this book and sent it to the seven churches in Asia Minor, an important province of the eastern part of the Roman Empire. In these seven messages to the churches of Asia, Jesus Christ addresses major aspects of church life. He praises and rebukes them and gives them promises of the life to come. Christians, members of these churches, understood these messages. Twice, people are mentioned by name and they were warned against a movement called the Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:6; 2:15), active among the churches. These Christians were far more familiar with the figures of speech used in the Revelation than we are nowadays.
- Figures of speech are not always easily understood by 21st-century readers. Sometimes they are explained, more often not. Figures of speech allow for more than one explanation and application. That explains the multitude of commentaries and theories.
  - In the process of explaining and applying the prophecies of this book, the interpreter should ask himself two questions:
    - To which exegetical tradition do I belong? There is a plethora of traditions, especially in the Anglo-American World. To mention only three:
      - Amillennialism;
      - Postmillennialism;
      - Premillennialism.
    - Secondly, the interpreter should be aware of his own situation and of the local Christian community. What is my own political-religious situation and how does this situation affect my reading and understanding of the Book of Revelation?

## Smyrna

- ❖ The city of Smyrna was situated at the site of modern Izmir, Turkey. It was one of the four centres of the provincial assembly, which was a sign that the Romans regarded Smyrna as one of the most important cities in the province (the others were Ephesus, Sardis, and Pergamum).



During the first centuries, there has been a conflict, including persecutions. Two of the most important early martyrologies, the Acts of Polycarp and the Acts of Pionius and his Companions, illustrate this tension between the growing Christian community, especially the very powerful local Jewish community. Polycarp was executed in A.D. 155, Pionius in A.D. 250; the former in a bitter local persecution in which the members of the synagogue played a prominent role, the latter after the edict of the emperor Decius (249–251) ordering all inhabitants of the empire to sacrifice.<sup>3</sup>

## Verse 9

- ❖ Slander = “**βλασφημία**”: speech that denigrates or defames, reviling, denigration, disrespect, slander, both of God and humans.

## Verse 10

- ❖ The devil = “**διάβολος**”:
  - 1. **pertaining to engagement in slander, slanderous.**
  - 2. substantive. **one who engages in slander** as title of the principal transcendent evil being *the adversary/devil*, already current in the Greek Old Testament as translation of Satan.<sup>4</sup>
- ❖ Test = “**πειράζω**”:
  - 2. **to endeavour to discover the nature or character of something by testing, try, make trial of, put to the test.**<sup>5</sup>
  - 3. **to attempt to entrap through a process of inquiry, test.** Jesus was so treated by his opponents, who planned to use their findings against him (Mt 16:1; 19:3; 22:18, 35; Mk 8:11; 10:2; 12:15; Lk 11:16; Jn 8:6).

<sup>3</sup> Potter, D. S. (1992, Vol. 6, pp. 73–75). Smyrna (Place). In D. N. Freedman (Ed.).

<sup>4</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000, p. 226).

<sup>5</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000, p. 792).

- 4. to entice to improper behavior, *tempt*.<sup>6</sup>
- ❖ Crown = “**στέφανος**”:
  - 1. a wreath made of foliage or designed to resemble foliage and worn by one of high status or held in high regard, *wreath, crown*;
  - 3. award or prize for exceptional service or conduct, *prize, reward*.<sup>7</sup>

## Exposition

### Verse 8

- ❖ **“To the angel of the church in Smyrna write”**: The identity of the angel is unknown. It might be a heavenly being, but also a human messenger as a representative of the church:
  - **“a human messenger serving as an envoy, an envoy, one who is sent.”**<sup>8</sup>
    - By humans or by God; prophets.
  - **“a transcendent power who carries out various missions or tasks, messenger, angel.”**<sup>9</sup>
    - By God.

The most obvious explanation is a messenger sent by John to the church of Smyrna, carrying not only this message but also a “copy” of the Book of Revelation in order to read it aloud in front of the congregation. So that the members of this church can “hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev. 3:22).

- ❖ **“These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.”**
  - John is passing on the Words of Jesus Christ.
  - The Lord Jesus introduces himself with a formula that the prophets in the Old Testament used to introduce prophetic sayings from God: “these things says the Lord Almighty”. This introduction occurs 21 times in the Minor Prophets. Similar words are used by Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Amos. This similarity demands that Revelation 2–3 should be seen as a group of prophetic messages rather than as mere letters.<sup>10</sup>
  - **“The First and the Last.”** See also Rev 1:17.
    - In Revelation 22:13 (21:6), “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End”, Christ identifies himself with God the almighty (Rev 1:8).

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<sup>6</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000, p. 793).

<sup>7</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000, p. 944).

<sup>8</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000), p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000), p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> Beale, G. K. (1999, p. 229). See also Wallace, D. B. (2008, p. 328).

- **“The First and the Last”**, evokes Christ’s eternal status, **as the one present at creation and the goal of the historical process.**<sup>11</sup> This theme is often overlooked in the study of the New Testament.
      - Present at the creation: Jn 1:1-5; Col 1:15-18.
      - Goal of the historical process: Dan 7:14; Mt 28:18; Eph 1:4.
      - God presents himself in the Old Testament: Isa 44:6; Isa 48:12.
    - Christ is in control.
  - **“Who died and came to life again.”** This is a very comforting message to the Christians in Smyrna, who were facing severe tribulations, “even to the point of death” (verse 10).
  - The resurrection **“came to life again”** indicates his victory over death. His life will never end.
    - “And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:6, 7).

#### Verse 9-10

- ❖ **“I know.”** Christ knows three things, 1. the afflictions, 2. the poverty and 3. the slander.
  - He is the Lord, who observes and sees the situation of the church. He hears the prayers. He is walking among the lampstands (Rev 1:13).
  - The descriptions become more specific. **“Afflictions”** is a general term. **“Poverty”** is more specified. **“Slander”** and its source are mentioned.
    - John shared the same afflictions (Rev 1:9).
- ❖ **“I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich!”**
  - Christ didn’t mention the “deeds” as he did in the other six prophetic messages but with the “afflictions.”
  - These afflictions are not specified.
    - Luke wrote, “They (Paul and his companions) preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. **“We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,”** they said (Acts 41:21, 22; 1 Tess 3:4).
    - *The afflictions are local and not widespread.*
  - **“your poverty”** is not spiritual, but material. This poverty might be a result of the afflictions. The poverty is extreme, like the poverty of beggar.<sup>12</sup>
    - This stands in sharp contrast to the message to the Laodiceans who said, “‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked” (Rev 3:17).
    - Economic oppression of Christians is a real threat within the context of Revelation, “he also forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, **so that no one**

<sup>11</sup> Boxall, I. (2006, p. 52, 53).

<sup>12</sup> See, Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000, p. 896).





- ❖ **“Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer.”**
  - **“Afraid.”** The Christians were already afraid about what was happening and what might happen.
  - Jesus told his disciples, “So do not be afraid of them. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. **Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.** Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. **Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven.** But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven” (Mt 10:26-33).
  - “But before all this, they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. This will result in your being witnesses to them. **But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves.** For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death” (Lk 21:12-16).
- ❖ **“I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days.”**
  - **“The devil.”** He is engaged in slander, just as the opponents of the Christian church! He is not only active in Smyrna, but in the whole world (Rev 12:9). “He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short” (Rev 12:12). The devil is the adversary of Christ.
  - **“The devil will put some of you in prison”** = “the Devil will cause your enemies to throw some of you into prison”<sup>15</sup> It is not the devil in person putting some of the Christians in prison but the magistrates. He is acting behind the scenes.
    - “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your **stand against the devil’s schemes**” (Eph 6:10, 11).
  - **“Ten days.”** This is a number of fullness and at the same time, a relatively short period compared to the 1,260 days of oppression and persecution (Rev 12:6).
    - **This period of time has been set by God!**
  - **“In prison.”** **“The warning of prison is a serious one,** for prisons in the ancient world were not primarily long-stay institutions, but places where prisoners were detained to await trial, which often meant awaiting death.”<sup>16</sup>
  - **“To test you.”** All the believers in Smyrna will be tested by the jailing of some of them, and not only those who would actually be thrown into prison.”<sup>17</sup>
    - Christ had defeated the devil already (Mt 4:1-11).
- ❖ **“Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.”**
  - **“Be faithful.”** Christ is the faithful witness (Rev 1:5).

<sup>15</sup> Bratcher, R. G., & Hatton, H. (1993, p. 48).

<sup>16</sup> Boxall, I. (2006, p. 56).

<sup>17</sup> Bratcher, R. G., & Hatton, H. (1993, p. 48).

- James, the brother of Christ wrote: “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him” (Jas 1:12; also, 1 Pet 5:4).
  - “To the point of death.” Antipas, a member of the church of Pergamum, had already died because of his faithful witness (Rev 2:13). “They overcame him (the devil) by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death” (Rev 12:11). DON’T GIVE UP.
  - “I will give.” Christ himself(!) will give the crown of life.
    - The martyrs will participate in the first resurrection (Rev 20:1-6).
    - Christ is Victor (Heb 12:1-3).
- ❖ Bratcher and Hatton suggest the following translation of verse 10, “Don’t be afraid of the suffering you will most certainly undergo. Listen! The Devil is about to cause (have) your enemies to arrest some of you and put you in prison in order that they may test you. You will experience big troubles for ten days. But don’t ever give up believing in me even if you are killed (must die), because I will give you eternal life as your victory prize just like a crown (garland).”<sup>18</sup>

### Verse 11

- ❖ **“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”**
  - This message is not only meant for this church, but for all the churches. These are words of the Spirit, who is the Spirit of Christ and of the Father. These things might occur to your church also.
  - Christ calls for obedience to the teaching of the Spirit.
    - “Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near” (Rev 1:3).
  - There is a strong connection between the risen and glorified Christ and the Spirit:
    - “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you” (Jn 14:26).
  - Matthew 11:15; 13:9, 43. This is also an indication that not all will respond positively.
- ❖ **“He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.”**
  - There is the first death (“Be faithful, even to the point of death”) and there is the second death. “The first death is defined as the separation of the soul from the body, whereas the second death is the separation of the soul from God and its confinement in the place the Bible denominates as hell.”<sup>19</sup>
  - “Smyrnan Christians would certainly have read this promise as a two-edged sword.”<sup>20</sup>
  - The martyrs will be vindicated: “Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years” (Rev 20:6).

<sup>18</sup> Bratcher, R. G., & Hatton, H. (1993, p.49).

<sup>19</sup> Patterson, P. (2012, p. 99).

<sup>20</sup> Patterson, P. (2012, p. 99).

- “But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—their place will be in **the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death**” (Rev 21:8).
  - The words “**the fiery lake of burning sulfur**” (or “**lake of fire**”) are used four times for four different adversaries of the Christian church.

<b>“lake of fire”</b>	<b>Prepared for:</b>
1) Rev 19:20	The beast (anti-Christian political power) and the false prophet (false religion).
2) Rev 20:10	The devil.
3) Rev 20:15	Death, Hades and whose name was not found written in the book of life.
4) <b>Rev 21:8</b>	The cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars.

- **The fourth group** (Rev 21:8) is important with regard to this promise of Christ. They are those Christians who compromised their faith in order to escape oppression and persecution. There must have been a real danger that the Christians in Smyrna were susceptible to compromise their Christian lifestyle and faith.
- “**Be hurt**” (= “to torment”; Rev 9:10). The second death will not bring the end of existence but cause pain. An illustration is the parable of Lazarus and the rich (Lk 16:19-31).

## Application

- ❖ **“The first and the last”:** Christ is Lord
  - This should bring the Christian Church to worship the glorious Christ.
    - “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; **all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.** And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy” (Col 1:15-18).
- ❖ **“Who died and came to life again.”**
  - Death has not the last word. Christ has all power.
  - The Christian life is founded on the fact and reality of the living Christ.
    - “But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give

yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Cor 15:57, 58).

❖ **“Afflictions.”**

- The Apostle Paul wrote, “Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that **suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.** And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (Rom 5:3-5).  
“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?” (Rom 8:35).
- “Be joyful in hope, **patient in affliction,** faithful in prayer. Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality. **Bless those who persecute you;** bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited” (Rom 12:12-16).
  - Again the Apostle Paul, “**Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you,** and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church” (Col 1:24).
- The Apostle Peter wrote, “For this very reason, **make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance;** and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love” (2 Pet 1:5-7).
  - Afflictions call for self-control and self-control will result in perseverance.
- Not underestimate what oppression and persecution can do to individual Christians and the church.
  - “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Pet 1:6, 7).

❖ **“Yet you are rich!”**

- “Although sometimes difficult for humans to appreciate adequately, the Scriptures seem to make clear that for every injustice and evil suffered by believers on the earth, there is significant reward in heaven. Here is a promise that because of the conditions of poverty and tribulation through which Smyrnaeans believers were walking, their value in God’s eyes was exponentially increasing.”<sup>21</sup>

❖ **“Slander”** might take different forms, depending on the context, predominantly Hindu or Muslim, Buddhist, secularist.

❖ When the pastor of a congregation reads these words in front of a congregation, he is at the same time the voice of the Christ and of the Spirit. He is not reading from a book, but being an angel, a messenger of the heavenly Jesus.

- Therefore, when the pastor is applying these words to the actual situation of any congregation, he should know the spiritual needs of the individual members and the congregation as a whole.

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<sup>21</sup> Patterson, P. (2012, p. 96).

- And the congregation should be aware of the fact that the cosmic Christ is in their midst when they gather in his name (Rev. 3:19-20; Matt. 20:18).

## Quotes

- ❖ Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna and a disciple of the apostles, was burned at the stake about the year 155. His feast day is February 23. This is the prayer he prayed before he died:

Lord, almighty God, Father of your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, through whom we have come to the knowledge of yourself, God of angels, of powers, of all creation, of all the race of saints who live in your sight, I bless you for judging me worthy of this day, this hour, so that in the company of the martyrs I may share the cup of Christ, your anointed one, and so rise again to eternal life in soul and body, immortal through the power of the Holy Spirit. May I be received among the martyrs in your presence today as a rich and pleasing sacrifice. God of truth, stranger to falsehood, you have prepared this and revealed it to me and now you have fulfilled your promise.

I praise you for all things, I bless you, I glorify you through the eternal priest of heaven, Jesus Christ, your beloved Son. Through him be glory to you, together with him and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Online, C. (n.d.). Saint Polycarp Prayers - Prayers. Retrieved September 06, 2017, from <http://www.catholic.org/prayers/prayer.php?p=107>

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