

## Saint Stephen

Feastday: December 26

Patron: of Deacons, altar Servers, bricklayers, casket makers, & Stonemasons

Death: 34

Saint Stephen was one of the first ordained deacons of the Church. He was also the first Christian martyr. The Greek word from which we derive the English word martyr literally means witness. In that sense, every Christian is called to bear witness to Jesus Christ, in both their words and their actions. Not all are asked to shed their blood. Those who do shed their blood for the faith are the greatest of witnesses. They have been especially honoured since the very beginning of Christianity. Stephen was so conformed to Jesus in his holy life that his martyrdom was both a natural and supernatural sign of his love for the Lord. It also inspired the early believers as they faced the first round of brutal persecution.

His behaviour, even forgiving those who were taking his life while he was being stoned to death, was a beautiful reflection of how conformed he truly was to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is recorded in Chapter 7 of the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 7:54-60), which immediately follows the Gospels in the New Testament.

The 6th chapter of the Acts of the Apostles contains an account of the choice of the first seven deacons of the Church. As the Apostles worked to continue the ministry of Jesus Christ as his elders, some of the Greek-speaking widows were being neglected in their practical needs. The Twelve decided to ordain seven deacons to oversee their care. In doing so, the deacons extended the pastoral care of the Apostles, the first Bishops of the early Church, enabling them to attend more to teaching.

Of the seven ordained, Stephen was the oldest and given the title of "archdeacon," the chief among them. Little is known about him before this account. Like most of the early Christian leaders, he was Jewish, but may have come from among the Greek speaking or Hellenistic believers, the ones feeling slighted in the distribution of alms. Great preaching and miracles were attributed to Stephen. The Bible records that Stephen "full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people." Stephen's popularity created enemies among some Jews, members of the Synagogue of Roman Freedmen. They debated with him, to generate evidence against him in furtherance of their persecution of the early Church.

They accused him of blasphemy, of speaking against God and Moses. The charges inflamed the local populace which demanded he be tried and punished. When Stephen was put on trial, several false witnesses were brought forward by the Sanhedrin to testify that he was guilty of blasphemy. He was charged with predicting that Jesus would destroy the Temple and for preaching against Mosaic law.

Stephen was filled with wisdom from heaven. He responded by detailing the history of Israel and outlining the blessings God had bestowed upon his chosen people. He also explained how disobedient Israel had become, despite the goodness and mercy of the Lord. Stephen explained that Jesus had come to fulfil the law of Moses, not destroy it. He quoted extensively from the Hebrew scriptures to prove his case.

Finally, he admonished the Sanhedrin, saying, "You stubborn people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears. You are always resisting the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Can you name a single prophet your ancestors never persecuted? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Upright One, and now you have become his betrayers, his murderers. In spite of being given the Law through angels, you have not kept it." (Acts 7:51-53)

As Stephen concluded his defence, he looked up and saw a vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God. He said, "Look, I can see heaven thrown open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." That vision was taken as the final proof of blasphemy to the Jews who did not believe Jesus was the Messiah or Son of God. For them, Jesus could not possibly be beside the Father in Heaven. The crowd rushed upon Stephen and carried him outside of the city to stone him to death.

As Stephen was being brutally stoned, he spoke his last words, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Words which echoed the very words of Jesus on the Cross. Following those words, Stephen died, in the Lord.

Watching the trial and execution was a Rabbi named Saul of Tarsus, a virulent persecutor of the early Church. Shortly thereafter, that Rabbi would himself encounter the Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus and be dramatically converted. His encounter is recorded in the 9th chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. He took the name Paul as a sign of his new life in Jesus Christ and went on to become the great apostle to the Gentiles.

Stephen was buried by Christians, but the location of his tomb is not specified in the New Testament and may have been forgotten for a time. In 415 a Christian priest claimed he had a vision of the tomb and located Stephen's remains. A name inside the tomb confirmed the find.

St. Stephen is often depicted with stones, a Gospel Book, a miniature church and a martyr's palm frond. He is the patron saint of Altar Servers, bricklayers, casket makers and deacons and his feast day is celebrated on December 26.

"Lord Jesus, Receive my Spirit" (St. Stephen, Martyr)

#### **A Prayer by Deacon Keith Fournier**

Lord Jesus, you chose Stephen as the first deacon and martyr of your One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. The heroic witness of his holy life and death reveals your continued presence among us. Through following the example of his living faith, and by his intercession, empower us by your Holy Spirit to live as witnesses to the faith in this New Missionary Age. No matter what our state in life, career or vocation, help us to proclaim, in both word and in deed, the fullness of the Gospel to a world which is

waiting to be born anew in Jesus Christ. Pour out upon your whole Church, the same Holy Spirit which animated St Stephen, Martyr, to be faithful to the end, which is a beginning of life eternal in the communion of the Trinity.