

St. Stephen: A saint for deacons

Everything we know about St. Stephen (d. 34), one of the first deacons and Christianity's first martyr, comes from chapters six and seven of the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament.

Stephen came from a family of Hellenists, Jews who had emigrated from Palestine to one of the Greek-speaking provinces of the Roman Empire. These Jews spoke Greek rather than Aramaic, and in their synagogues they heard the Scriptures read in Greek rather than Hebrew.

The sixth chapter of Acts tell us that tension arose between the Greek Jewish converts to Christianity and the Palestinian Jewish converts. The Greeks said that their widows and needy were being neglected in favor of the Hebrew poor. To resolve the problem, the apostles ordained seven men as deacons to serve the poor and preach the Faith. The first name on this list of seven is Stephen.

St. Luke, the author of Acts, tells us that Stephen was a handsome man with "the face of an angel ... full of grace and fortitude," who in his zeal for the Faith debated with members of four different Greek synagogues. When Stephen's eloquence got the better of the Hellenist Jews, his angry opponents seized him and dragged him off to the court of the Sanhedrin. There false witnesses charged him with blasphemy, denouncing the Temple sacrifices and reviling the Law of Moses.

The High Priest (perhaps Caiaphas, the same High Priest who tried Jesus) asked Stephen if he had anything to say: In answer to these accusations Stephen delivered a lengthy speech that traced the sacred history of the Jews from Abraham to

their own day. He concluded his discourse with a denunciation of his accusers and judges: "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always oppose the Holy Spirit; you are just like your ancestors. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They put to death those who foretold the coming of the righteous one, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become."

Oblivious to the commotion in the court, Stephen antagonized his audience further by characterizing them as "betrayers and murderers" who did not keep the Law of Moses. Then, suddenly filled with the Holy Spirit, he looked up to heaven and cried out, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

This was too much for the men in the court. They rushed upon Stephen, dragged him outside the city walls and stoned him to death. The man who watched the killers' clothes as they went about their brutal business was named Saul – known to us as St. Paul the Apostle.

As the stones struck him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then, when he was down on his knees and near death, he prayed again, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge."

After the mob had dispersed Christians took Stephen's body away for burial.

St. Stephen has always been venerated by deacons as their special patron. Today a network of deacon-intercessors who call themselves the Sons of St. Stephen pray daily for an end to abortion, the protection of families, the health of the Holy Father, and for all priests and bishops that they may be inspired by St. Stephen to be courageous in teaching and bearing witness to the truth.

St. Stephen is the patron saint of stonemasons, bricklayers and deacons. His feast day is Dec. 26.