

FIRST MARTYR

Charity and proclamation always go together: the lesson of St Stephen

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St Stephen is the most representative of a group of seven companions. Tradition sees in this group the seed of the future ministry of "deacons", although it must be pointed out that this category is not present in the Book of Acts. In any case, Stephen's importance is

due to the fact that Luke, in his important book, dedicates two whole chapters to him.

Luke's narrative starts with the observation of a widespread division in the primitive Church of Jerusalem: indeed, she consisted entirely of Christians of Jewish origin, but some came from the land of Israel and were called "Hebrews", while others, of the Old Testament Jewish faith, came from the Greek-speaking Diaspora and were known as "Hellenists". This was the new problem: the most destitute of the Hellenists, especially widows deprived of any social support, ran the risk of being neglected in the daily distribution of their rations. To avoid this problem, the Apostles, continuing to devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word, decided to appoint for this duty "seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" to help them (*Acts 6: 2-4*), that is, by carrying out a social and charitable service.

To this end, as Luke wrote, at the Apostles' invitation the disciples chose seven men. We are even given their names. They were: "Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolaus. These they set before the Apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands upon them" (cf. *Acts 6: 5-6*).

The act of the laying on of hands can have various meanings. In the Old Testament, this gesture meant above all the transmission of an important office, just as Moses laid his hands on Joshua (cf. *Nm 27: 18-23*), thereby designating his successor. Along the same lines, the Church of Antioch would also use this gesture in sending out Paul and Barnabas on their mission to the peoples of the world (cf. *Acts 13: 3*).

The two Pauline Letters addressed to Timothy (cf. *I Tm 4: 14*; *II Tm 1: 6*) refer to a similar imposition of hands on Timothy, to confer upon him an official responsibility. From what we read in the *First Letter to Timothy*, we can deduce that this was an important action to be carried out after discernment: "Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor participate in another man's sins" (5: 22).

Thus, we see that the act of the laying on of hands developed along the lines of a sacramental sign. In the case of Stephen and his companions, it was certainly an official conferral of an office by the Apostles, but at the same time an entreaty for the grace to carry it out.

The most important thing to note is that in addition to charitable services, Stephen also carried out a task of evangelization among his compatriots, the so-called "Hellenists". Indeed, Luke insists on the fact that Stephen, "full of grace and power" (*Acts 6: 8*), presented in Jesus' Name a new interpretation of Moses and of God's Law itself.

He reread the Old Testament in the light of the proclamation of Christ's death and Resurrection. He gave the Old Testament a Christological reinterpretation and provoked reactions from the Jews, who took his words to be blasphemous (cf. *Acts* 6: 11-14).

For this reason he was condemned to stoning. And St Luke passes on to us the saint's last discourse, a synthesis of his preaching. Just as Jesus had shown the disciples of Emmaus that the whole of the Old Testament speaks of him, of his Cross and his Resurrection, so St Stephen, following Jesus' teaching, interpreted the whole of the Old Testament in a Christological key. He shows that the mystery of the Cross stands at the centre of the history of salvation as recounted in the Old Testament; it shows that Jesus, Crucified and Risen, is truly the goal of all this history.

St Stephen also shows that the cult of the temple was over and that Jesus, the Risen One, was the new, true "temple". It was precisely this "no" to the temple and to its cult that led to the condemnation of St Stephen, who at this moment, St Luke tells us, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and seeing heaven, God and Jesus, St Stephen said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God" (cf. *Acts* 7: 56).

This was followed by his martyrdom, modelled in fact on the passion of Jesus himself, since he delivered his own spirit to the "Lord Jesus" and prayed that the sin of those who killed him would not be held against them (cf. *Acts* 7: 59-60).

The place of St Stephen's martyrdom in Jerusalem has traditionally been located outside the Damascus Gate, to the north, where indeed the Church of Saint-Étienne [St Stephen] stands beside the famous *École Biblique* of the Dominicans. The killing of Stephen, the first martyr of Christ, unleashed a local persecution of Christ's disciples (cf. *Acts* 8: 1), the first one in the history of the Church. It was these circumstances that impelled the group of Judeo-Hellenist Christians to flee from Jerusalem and scatter. Hounded out of Jerusalem, they became itinerant missionaries: "Those who were scattered went about preaching the word" (*Acts* 8: 4).

Their persecution and consequent dispersion became a mission. Thus, the Gospel spread also to Samaria, Phoenicia and Syria, as far as the great city of Antioch where, according to Luke, it was proclaimed for the first time also to the pagans (cf. *Acts* 11: 19-20), and where, for the first time the name "Christians" was used (*Acts* 11: 26).

In particular, Luke noted that those who stoned Stephen "laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul" (*Acts* 7: 58), the same man who from

being a persecutor was to become an outstanding Apostle of the Gospel.

This means that the young Saul must have heard Stephen's preaching and must therefore have been acquainted with its principal content. And St Paul was probably among those who, following and listening to this discourse, "were enraged and... ground their teeth against him" (Acts 7: 54).

And at this point, we can see the marvels of divine Providence. After his encounter with the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus, Saul, a relentless enemy of Stephen's vision, took up the Christological interpretation of the Old Testament made by the First Martyr, deepening and completing it, and consequently became the "Apostle to the Gentiles".

The Law is fulfilled, he taught, in the Cross of Christ. And faith in Christ, communion with Christ's love, is the true fulfilment of all the Law. This is the content of Paul's preaching. He showed in this way that the God of Abraham had become the God of all. And all believers in Jesus Christ, as children of Abraham, shared in the promises. St Stephen's vision was brought about in St Paul's mission.

Stephen's story tells us many things: for example, that charitable social commitment must never be separated from the courageous proclamation of the faith. He was one of the seven made responsible above all for charity. But it was impossible to separate charity and faith. Thus, with charity, he proclaimed the crucified Christ, to the point of accepting even martyrdom. This is the first lesson we can learn from the figure of St Stephen: charity and the proclamation of faith always go hand in hand.

Above all, St Stephen speaks to us of Christ, of the Crucified and Risen Christ as the centre of history and our life. We can understand that the Cross remains forever the centre of the Church's life and also of our life. In the history of the Church, there will always be passion and persecution. And it is persecution itself which, according to Tertullian's famous words, becomes "the seed of Christians", the source of mission for Christians to come.

I cite his words: "We multiply wherever we are mown down by you; the blood of Christians is seed..." (*Apology* 50, 13): *Plures efficimur quoties metimur a vobis: semen est sanguis christianorum*. But in our life too, the Cross that will never be absent, becomes a blessing.

And by accepting our cross, knowing that it becomes and is a blessing, we learn Christian joy even in moments of difficulty. The value of witness is irreplaceable,

because the Gospel leads to it and the Church is nourished by it. St Stephen teaches us to treasure these lessons, he teaches us to love the Cross, because it is the path on which Christ comes among us ever anew.