

Saint Stephen's Day/I Christmas 2021  
Sermon – Saint Joseph Parish  
Father Craig Looney  
*Acts 7.55-60 St. Matthew 23.34.39*



It's still the Christmas Season. In fact, today is the second of the Twelve Days of Christmas. This is also Saint Stephen's Day. He was the Church's first deacon and its first martyr.

When there was a quarrel in the Jerusalem Church between native and Greek-speaking Jews over equitable distribution of funds, the Apostles called the whole congregation together. They didn't want to neglect preaching God's word by becoming over-involved in Church finances.

The Apostles chose seven men filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom. They prayed and placed their hands on them and ordained them deacons. Stephen was the first of the seven ordained...the oldest but still a very young man.

What little we know about Stephen's background comes from Acts. He was Greek-speaking Jew and that gave him a special "wisdom"...he understood the Good News about Jesus Christ was to be taken out into the world beyond Jerusalem.

What is a deacon? The word *deacon*, from the Greek word *diákonos*, means *servant*, *waiter of tables* and *messenger*. Stephen fulfilled all those roles. He *served* through his charitable work in the Jerusalem Church. He helped at the Liturgy by helping to prepare and clean up...by *waiting* at the Lord's Table. He was a *messenger* whose words eventually got him killed.

Deacons are one of the three orders of the ordained ministry in Catholic Christianity. They share in the Apostolic Succession. A deacon sometimes wears a vestment called a *maniple* over his left wrist that looks like the towel a waiter at an upscale restaurant might wear. Priests and bishops also wear maniples...to remind them they are still deacons committed to serving the people.

Stephen is the patron saint of deacons, acolytes (servers guilds are often named after him) and stone masons...the latter because of the way he was martyred.

The Christmas Season might seem like a strange time to talk about the Church's first martyr...we're still thinking about presents under the Christmas Tree, yesterday's Sung Mass of the Nativity and family and friends. This is, in fact, the perfect time to talk about Stephen, the Church's first deacon and martyr.

The word martyr...from the Greek word *mártys*...means *witness*. In that sense, we are all martyrs...we are all witnesses for Jesus Christ. Stephen paid the ultimate price for his witnessing for Jesus. It is unlikely any of us will face the same fate...but we should ask ourselves just how far are we willing to go for Jesus?

Almost all of Chapter 7 of Acts is Stephen's long speech to the Sanhedrin...the Supreme Jewish Religious Council. He accused them of being stubborn and "heathen-hearted", of killing God's messengers, and of being complicit in the murder of Jesus. The Council members were humiliated and outraged by Stephen's accusations. Stephen was not bothered by their visible anger. Instead, filled with the Holy Spirit, he looked up to heaven and said he saw God's glory and Jesus standing at God's right hand.

Unable to control their anger any longer, the Council launched an accusation of their own against Stephen...blasphemy. They dragged him outside the city gates and threw stones at him. He asked God not to hold this sin of murder against them...and then he died.

Stephen's death amounted to a lynching since it violated even the Council's rules for a proper trial. Standing nearby was a man named Saul. He approved of Stephen's murder and may have actively participated in it. Today we know Saul by another name...Saint Paul! He would later become one of the Church's most vocal defenders.

Acts tells us Stephen performed miracles like Jesus. He was brought before the Council just as Jesus was. He asked God to forgive those who were killing him just as Jesus did. He was the proto-martyr...the proto-witness for Jesus...whose birth we continue to celebrate.

Stephen's name in Greek...*Stéphanos*...means *crown*. He received his Crown of Life through his martyrdom. May we learn from him how to be unwavering witnesses for Jesus!

