

Meditations: 26 December, Saint Stephen

Some reflections that can assist our prayer during these days of the Christmas season. The topics are: the martyrdom of St. Stephen and our mission; the Christian message will never grow old; sowers of peace and joy through charity.

- The martyrdom of St. Stephen and our mission
- The Christian message will never grow old
- Sowers of peace and joy through charity

STEPHEN, *FULL of grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people (Acts 6:8)*. The number of those who believed in the doctrine of Jesus Christ was increasing. However, many — either because they did not know Christ or because they misunderstood Him — did not consider Jesus as the Savior. *They began arguing with Stephen, but they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. Then they secretly instigated some men to say, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God' (Acts 6:9-11).*

Saint Stephen was the first Christian martyr. He died filled with the Holy Spirit, praying for those who stoned him. "Yesterday, Christ was swaddled for us; today, He clothes Stephen with the robe of immortality. Yesterday, the narrowness of a manger held

Christ as a child; today, the immensity of heaven has received triumphant Stephen. The Lord descended to lift up many; our King humbled Himself to exalt His soldiers."^[1] We too have received the incredible mission to spread the message of Jesus Christ with our words and, above all, with our lives, showing the joy of the gospel. Perhaps Saint Paul, who was present at that event, was moved by Stephen's testimony and, once he became a Christian, drew strength for his own mission.

“Goodness always tends to spread. Every authentic experience of truth and goodness seeks by its very nature to grow within us, and any person who has experienced a profound liberation becomes more sensitive to the needs of others. [...] Let us recover and deepen our enthusiasm, that delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing, even

when it is in tears that we must sow... And may the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the good news not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel [...] who have first received the joy of Christ.”^[2]

FALSE WITNESSES came forward, saying, 'This man never stops speaking against the holy place and the law' (Acts 6:13). Even today, as in the time of Saint Stephen, Christian doctrine may be distorted at times, but we can always demonstrate its eternal freshness through our own lives. “The Christian message [...] will never grow old. [...] Whenever we make the effort to return to the source and to recover the original

freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today's world. Every form of authentic evangelization is always 'new.'"^[3]

Saint Stephen faced death defending Christ, full of mercy and praying for the salvation of those who stoned him. One of the readings of the Divine Office today says, "Our King, being most high, descended to us in humility, but He did not come empty to the earth. He brought a great gift to His soldiers, with which He not only enriched them abundantly but also comforted them for an invincible struggle. He carried with Him the gift of charity [...]. The same charity that brought Christ from Heaven to earth lifted Stephen from earth to Heaven. The same charity that first appeared in the King then shone forth in the soldier."^[4]

We too want to light up the world with the joy of the Gospel, giving new meaning to the aspirations and concerns of our time. We can use our dialogue with the Lord to ask for more wisdom and boldness in our mission. "This is the great apostolate of the Work: to show that multitude, which awaits us, the straight path to God. Therefore, my children, you are called to this divine task of proclaiming the mercies of the Lord: *misericordias Domini in aeternum cantabo* (Ps 88:2); I will sing the mercies of the Lord forever."^[5]

STEPHEN, FULL of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, 'Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God' (Acts 7:55-56). Until the last

moment, the testimony of the first martyr shows God's mercy seeking our conversion. His identification with the Master was so profound that Saint Stephen died praying with words similar to those of Christ: *As they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he fell on his knees and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.'* When he had said this, he fell asleep (Acts 7:59-60). Our apostolic mission is also grounded in prayer and penance: "Without prayer, without continuous presence of God; without expiation, carried out in the small contradictions of daily life; without all that, there is, there can be no personal action of true apostolate."^[6]

Saint Stephen died in prayer, forgiving his enemies, following the example of his Lord who had done the in the last moments of his life, with those who crucified Him. For

this reason, he is a model for our apostolic mission, summarized in the adventure of "overcoming evil with an abundance of good."^[7] If the environment in which we move becomes tense at times, we who are children of God will remember that our mission is to be "sowers of peace and joy, of the peace and joy that Jesus has brought us."^[8] "It is not a question of negative campaigns, or of being anti anything," St. Josemaria said. "On the contrary, we should live positively, full of optimism, with youthfulness, joy and peace. We should be understanding with everybody, with the followers of Christ and with those who abandon him, or do not know him at all."^[9]

"Stephen had charity as his weapon, and with it, he conquered everywhere. For the love of God, he did not fold his arms before the enraged Jews; for the love of neighbor, he interceded for those

who stoned him; out of love, he argued with those in error, so they would correct themselves; out of love, he prayed for the stone throwers, so they would not be punished. Supported by the strength of charity, he overcame Saul's violent cruelty and deserved to have as his companion in Heaven the one who had been his persecutor on earth."^[10] Let us turn to our Lady, Queen of the Apostles: she will give us the charity and strength of the first martyr.

^[1] St. Fulgentius of Ruspe, Sermon 3.

^[2] Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, nos. 9-10.

^[3] *Ibid*, no. 11.

^[4] St. Fulgentius of Ruspe, Sermon 3.

^[5] St. Josemaría, *Letter* 24-III-1930, no. 3b.

^[6] St. Josemaría, *Intimate Notes*, no. 74, 21-VII-1930.

^[7] St. Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 72.

^[8] *Ibid*, n. 30.

^[9] St. Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 864.

^[10] St. Fulgentius of Ruspe, Sermon 3.