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December 26: Saint Stephen, the First Martyr

Gospel for December 26th, the feast of Saint Stephen, and commentary.

Gospel (*Mt 10:17-22*)

At that time, Jesus said to his disciples:

Beware of men; for they will deliver you up to councils, and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear testimony before them and the Gentiles. When they deliver you up, do not be anxious

how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will deliver up brother to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved.

Commentary

With our hearts still overflowing with joy at the Savior's birth, we read today these words of Jesus, who announces to his disciples that they will be persecuted for the sake of his name. Light and the Cross, joy and suffering intermingle in the life of those who want to follow the Master

with perseverance, trusting in the strength that comes from the Holy Spirit in order to resist the attacks from the enemies of God and his Church.

Today's Gospel passage reflects the faithfulness of the first disciple of Jesus who bore witness to him and gave up his life as a result. Being faithful means being like the Master, identifying oneself with him. Like Jesus, Stephen preached to his fellow Jews, filled with the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, and performed great wonders on behalf of his people. Like Jesus he was taken outside the city, and there he was stoned while forgiving his executioners and giving up his spirit to God (cf. *Acts* 6:8-10; 7:54-60).

We can beseech Jesus today: how can we not be intimidated by the threats of an environment that is hostile to the Gospel? How can we overcome

the temptation of fear and human respects? Even more so when this hostility arises in the family environment itself, as the prophet Micah foretold: “for the son treats the father with contempt, the daughter rises up against her mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; a man’s enemies are the men of his own house” (*Micah* 7:6). It is true that Jesus does not give us a technique to escape persecution unscathed. He gives us much more: the assistance of the Holy Spirit to speak and persevere in doing good, thus giving faithful testimony to God’s love for all mankind, including persecutors. This first day of the Octave of Christmas does not take away our joy, since what we most desire, what makes us most happy, is not our own security, but the salvation of all men and women.

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