

St. Stephen the Proto-Deacon and Proto-Martyr

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Stephen was a shining light in the early Church. When the twelve Apostles recognized they needed assistants to serve the growing Church, seven deacons were appointed to look after the daily distribution to the poor. “The multitude chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, whom they set before the apostles as worthy candidates; and when they had prayed, the apostles laid their hands on them” (Acts 6:1-6).

Stephen was the leader of the deacons, and therefore called the Proto-Deacon, because of his special gifts and attributes. He performed “great wonders and signs among the people,” taught in the synagogue, and there debated with the Jews of the Dispersion. His wisdom and success brought about an attack upon him and he was charged with blasphemy against Moses and God. Stephen was among the first Christians to proclaim that the Christian faith and worship is for all people, not only the Jews.

Chapter 7 of Acts records Stephen’s remarkable “apology” before the Sanhedrin council. As he sat before the council, a divine radiance, the very uncreated energy of God was reflected in Stephen’s face. Stephen’s exclamation at the close of his speech is particularly noteworthy: “Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” (Acts 7:56). This is the only occurrence of the title “Son of Man” in the New Testament on the lips of anyone other than Jesus Himself and reveals Stephen’s messianic understanding of the term. Such radical thinking was too much for the Sanhedrin. Stephen’s vision of the enthroned Christ was the ultimate blasphemy to his opponents and, thus, they stoned him to death. According to subsequent references, this event played a role in the conversion of Paul who was an indirect participant in and witness to the martyrdom of Stephen.

As they cast stones at him, Stephen called on God saying, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he knelt down and cried with a loud voice, “Lord do not charge them with this sin,” reminiscent of Christ’s words from the Cross. And when he had said this, he fell asleep (Acts 7:60). The martyrdom of St. Stephen, called the Proto-Martyr since he was the first to be tortured and killed for Christ, marked the beginning of the first widespread persecution of the early Christians.

In the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church, between December 24 and 26, the Feast of St. Stephen is celebrated with great reverence and ceremony. On that day, the Church honors all deacons, granting them the privilege of wearing a liturgical crown, recalling St. Stephen and his crown of martyrdom. It is also the traditional day for ordination to the diaconate.