



The Holy See

FEAST OF ST STEPHEN PROTOMARTYR POPE FRANCIS

ANGELUS

Saint Peter's Square

Wednesday, 26 December 2018

[Multimedia]

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

The joy of Christmas still floods our hearts. The wondrous message continues to resonate: Christ is born for us and brings peace to the world. In this joyful climate, today we celebrate the Feast of Saint Stephen, deacon and first martyr. It might seem curious to place the memorial of Saint Stephen alongside Jesus' birth, because a contrast stands out between the joy of Bethlehem and the tragedy of Stephen, stoned in Jerusalem during the first persecution against the nascent Church. In reality it is not so, because the Child Jesus is the Son of God made man, who will save humanity by dying on the Cross. We now contemplate him wrapped in swaddling cloths in the Nativity scene; after his crucifixion he will again be wrapped in bandages and laid in a tomb.

Saint Stephen was the first to follow in the footsteps of the divine Master in martyrdom; he died as Jesus did, by *entrusting his own life* to God and *forgiving his persecutors*. Two approaches: he entrusted his life to God and he forgave. As he was being stoned he said: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 7:59). They are words wholly similar to those spoken by Jesus on the Cross: "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!" (Lk 23:46). The attitude of Stephen, who faithfully imitates Jesus' actions, is an invitation addressed to each one of us to faithfully receive from the Lord's hands the positive and also negative things that life reserves for us. Our existence is marked not only by happy circumstances — as we know — but also by moments of difficulty and dismay. But trust in God helps us to welcome trying times and to experience them as opportunities to grow in faith and to build new relationships with our brothers and sisters. It means abandoning ourselves into the hands of the Lord, who we know is a Father rich in goodness toward his children.

The second approach with which Stephen imitated Jesus at the extreme moment of the Cross is *forgiveness*. He does not curse his persecutors but prays for them: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60). We are called to learn from him how to forgive, to always forgive, and it is not easy to do so, as we all know. Forgiveness expands the heart, creates sharing, gives serenity and peace. The Proto-martyr Stephen shows us the path to take with interpersonal relationships in the family, at school, in the workplace, in the parish and in the various communities. Always open to forgiveness. The logic of forgiveness and mercy is always successful and opens horizons of hope. But forgiveness is cultivated with prayer, which allows one to keep one’s gaze fixed on Jesus. Stephen was able to forgive his killers because, full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and opened his eyes to God (cf. Acts 7:55). He received from prayer the power to endure martyrdom. We must persevere in prayer to the Holy Spirit, that he pour out on us the gift of strength which heals our fears, our weaknesses, our pettiness, and expands our heart to forgive. Always to forgive! Let us invoke the intercession of Our Lady and of Saint Stephen: may their prayers help us always to entrust ourselves to God, especially in difficult times, and may they sustain us in the aim to be men and women capable of forgiveness!

After the Angelus the Pope continued:

Dear brothers and sisters, I greet all of you pilgrims, from Italy and from other countries. I renew to all of you the wish that contemplation of the Child Jesus, the heart and centre of Christmas festivities, may inspire attitudes of fraternity and sharing in families and communities.

In these days I have received many messages of good wishes from Rome and from other parts of the world. It is not possible for me to respond to each one, but I pray for each of them. Therefore, today I express my sincere thanks to you and to all, especially for the gift of prayer that so many of you have promised to offer. Thank you very much!

Happy Feast of Saint Stephen and, please, do not forget to pray for me. Enjoy your lunch.

Arrivederci!
