

Saint Stephen – the Church’s first martyr



Saint Stephen is regarded as the first Christian martyr, that is, the first person to be killed for his faith in Jesus Christ.

His life

We learn about Stephen’s life primarily from the Acts of the Apostles (chapters 6–7). As the first Christian congregation in Jerusalem continued to grow, the apostles had to concern themselves not only with proclaiming the Gospel, but also with caring for the poor, widows and those in need. The congregation therefore chose seven men to take on this ministry. Stephen was one of them.

The Acts of the Apostles describes him in these words:

‘But Stephen, full of grace and power, performed wonders and great signs among the people.’ (Acts 6:8)

He cared for people in need, boldly proclaimed faith in Jesus Christ and won many people over to the Gospel.

His courage before the Sanhedrin

Stephen came into conflict with the religious leaders of Jerusalem because of his preaching. They accused him of speaking against the law of God and against the Temple.

He was brought before the Sanhedrin. There, Stephen delivered a long speech (Acts 7), in which he traced the history of Israel and made it clear that God had repeatedly sent prophets, who were, however, often rejected. Finally, he openly confessed his faith in Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah.

The Bible records: **‘I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.’** (Acts 7:56)

These words enraged his opponents so much that they led him out of the city and stoned him.

His Death

As Stephen was being stoned, his extraordinary strength of faith was evident. He prayed for his murderers – just as Jesus had done on the cross.

His final words were: **‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit! Lord, do not hold this sin against them!’** (Acts 7:59)

With these words, Stephen died as the Church’s first martyr.

A young man named Saul was also present at his stoning; he was supporting the persecution of the Christians (Acts 7:58). This Saul later became the Apostle Paul through his encounter with Christ – a sign that Stephen’s witness continued to have an impact long after his death.

Why was Stephen canonised?

Stephen was not canonised through a specific process. In the early centuries of the Church, martyrs were venerated as saints immediately because they had given their lives out of love for Christ.

What can we learn from Stephen?

Saint Stephen reminds us that Christian faith requires courage. He shows that true strength lies not in violence or power, but in faithfulness to one’s convictions and in love even towards those who wrong us.

Stephen can be a role model for soldiers in particular: he embodied responsibility, steadfastness and integrity. His life makes it clear that courage is needed not only on the battlefield, but also when it comes to standing up for truth, justice and the dignity of every human being.

But even before his death, he was exemplary, for he took responsibility for the members of the congregation, organised matters, ensured fair distribution and resolved conflicts. He enjoyed the trust of others. Even under pressure, he remains capable of acting and remains true to his values and convictions.

A professional military person is not defined solely by military skill. Equally important are: professional competence, a sense of responsibility, integrity, steadfastness, respect for the dignity of every human being, and acting in accordance with the law and one’s conscience

Stephen shows that professionalism is always a matter of character. His expertise, his reliability and his ethical conduct form a unified whole.

Feast Day 26 December