

December 22, 2002

The Sunday before the Nativity

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Generations of preachers have employed no little ingenuity, and sometimes a fair measure of eloquence, to expound the theological reasons for celebrating St. Stephen's Day so close to Christmas. It is not to slight those rhetorical efforts that one reflects that "the feast of Stephen" was celebrated long before anyone thought of celebrating the birthday of the Savior. Stephen, that is to say, got there first. Indeed, there is good reason to think that St. Stephen's is among the oldest feast days in the Christian Church. Moreover, except for the days of Holy Week and the Paschal cycle itself, it is possible that the annual commemoration of the martyrdom of St. Stephen is the oldest feast day in the Christian liturgical calendar.

We know, first of all, that very early the dates of the martyrs' deaths were commemorated annually in their local churches. *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, from Smyrna in A.D. 156, is our earliest explicit witness to this custom, but it seems already to have been traditional. Stephen, the first martyr (due exception being considered for John the Baptist), was venerated in the earliest church, Jerusalem, from which all other Christian churches derived their liturgical precedents. Furthermore, primitive chronological collections affirm that the martyrdom of St. Stephen occurred on December 26 in the very year of our Redemption, and this was arguably the view of Eusebius of Caesarea. In short, then, when good King Wenceslaus, centuries later, "looked out on the feast of Stephen," he was observing a commemoration that Christians have observed, literally, from the very beginning.

In Luke's description of Stephen's martyrdom, several features are worthy of remark:

First, like the Savior (John 20:19; Hebrews 13:12), Stephen is executed outside the city wall (Acts 7:58), because even in this massive miscarriage of basic justice, Stephen's murderers adhere to the Mosaic prescription (Leviticus 24:14; Numbers 15:35f). This is ironical, because in Lukan theology this exit from Jerusalem, for the murder of Stephen, symbolizes that outward movement of the witness from Jerusalem that is so strong a general theme in the Book of Acts (1:8).

Second, and also as a feature of considerable irony, it is in this scene that St. Paul is first introduced in the Acts of the Apostles (7:58). This introduction of the Apostle to the Gentiles, at exactly this point in the narrative of Acts, is of a piece with the theological significance of Stephen's dying outside of the walls. Later on, praying in a state of trance, Paul will say to Jesus, "And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by and consenting to his death, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him" (22:20). Stephen's death, then, links the Gentile mission to the Jerusalem church.

Third, there is a powerful emphasis on the Holy Spirit. It was early said that Stephen was "full of the Holy Spirit" (6:3,5), but the statement is repeated once again in the context of his death (7:55). This emphasis, which relates Stephen's death to the Pentecostal outpouring, reflects the conviction of the early Church that martyrdom is the supreme charism of the Christian life, the final and crowning gift of the Holy Spirit that definitively seals and consecrates the testimony, the martyria, of the Church and the believer. We meet this conviction somewhat later in **The Martyrdom of Polycarp** and the earliest treatises on martyrdom by the Christian apologists.

Lastly, there is a dramatic change in Stephen's tone. Having bitterly denounced the Jews in his testimony before the Sanhedrin (7:51-53), Stephen finishes his life by committing his soul to the Lord and devoutly praying for his persecutors (7:59-60). Luke thus takes great care to observe the similarities between the deaths of Jesus and Stephen (Luke 23:34,46), as Irenaeus of Lyons early noted (**Against the Heresies** 3.12.13).

Dante's portrayal of the scene is especially memorable:

Then I saw people incited in a fire of wrath
to kill a young man (giovinetto) by stoning, loudly
calling out to one another, 'Kill him, kill him!' (Martira, martira!)
And him I saw, bowed down by the death
that already laid him prone upon the earth,
but he ever made with his eyes a door into heaven,
praying to the high Lord (all'alto Sire), in so great a struggle,
that He would pardon his persecutors,
with a gaze deserving of mercy"
(Purgatorio 15:106-114).

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