

Sr. Margaret Dorgan's Weekly

This reflection appeared first in *The Church World*, the diocesan weekly of Maine.

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STEPHEN THE FIRST MARTYR

The name Stephen (or Steven) is a popular one today as it has been throughout the centuries. In this season of Easter, we turn to that first Christian martyr among Jesus' followers, who are rapidly gaining converts in Jerusalem. Stephen--his feast is December 26--was a leader of the Greek-speaking Jewish Christians. He was one of seven deacons, chosen to deal with internal community affairs and thus free up the apostles for preaching.

Stephen is described as "a man filled with faith and the Holy Spirit." The apostles prayed over him and the other six "and then imposed hands on them"(Acts 6:5,6). This gesture of human touching bestows special power and appears often in the Old and New Testaments. In Acts, the laying on of hands can signify healing, imparting the Holy Spirit and, as here, a commissioning for ministry.

Stephen stands in the line of the Hebrew prophets. He could be a patron for speakers because his is the longest speech in all of Acts. He worked great signs and wonders among the people, which aroused the jealousy and anger of other Hellenistic Jews, who had him arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin. This council of leaders "stared at him intently. Throughout, Stephen's face seemed like that of an angel " (Acts 6:15).

Stephen's arrest, his trial, and his defense are portrayed in a sequence that harkens back to all that took place in the last chapters of Jesus' life. The evangelist Luke, author of the Acts of the Apostles, wants to link the two trials, of Jesus and Stephen, and their ultimate conclusion. Becoming incarnate, Christ is our model for dealing with whatever may occur in our lives. We may not be called to die for our faith, but we do suffer the small and not-so-small martyrdoms that are embedded in human existence. Relationships with others can involve accusations, defensive posturing, envy and denunciations. We need to examine our conduct to recognize where we too may be responsible whenever there is an adverse outcome in a family or communal situation.

If we see ourselves as victims, we turn to the pure and holy One Who surrendered Himself as a spotless offering for us. He will teach us how to avoid wrangling and quietly search out a solution--one that might persuade everyone to work toward greater harmony.

As Stephen realized that his listeners were "grinding their teeth in anger at him, he looked to the sky above and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at God's right hand" (Acts 7:55). We probably won't experience a vision like that; yet our faith gives us as strong a confidence that God is in charge of human affairs. When all seems to be falling apart, we know that our Savior is not like someone at a distance looking on. He is present at every development. Jesus foretold what was to happen to His followers. "Not only will they expel you from synagogues, a time will come when anyone who puts you to death will claim to be serving God" (Jn 16:2).

The divine glory which Stephen beheld "in an opening in the sky," pours out its power over us today. "God is our refuge and our strength, an ever-present help in distress. Therefore we fear not though the earth be shaken and mountains plunge into the depths of the sea" (Ps 46:2,3). We earth dwellers are subject to many disturbances but we do not confront them with our limited strength only. "Though its waters rage and foam and the mountains quake at its surging...the Lord Almighty is with us; our stronghold is the God of Jacob " (Ps 46:4,8).

Stephen's final cry speaks powerfully to us. The apostles' hands were once laid upon him as a blessing for service. Now other hands in rage propel the stones that pierce open his flesh. "Falling to his knees, he cried out loudly, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them"" (Acts 7:60).

Jesus, help us to control our anger. Injustice creates turmoil and destruction; goodness is assaulted. As we try to remedy every harmful result of human misdeeds, let us repeat Stephen's words, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." We have a Redeemer who forgives and can build up what has been torn to pieces.

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