



The Holy See

FEAST OF ST STEPHEN PROTOMARTYR

POPE FRANCIS

ANGELUS

*Saint Peter's Square
Tuesday, 26 December 2023*

[[Multimedia](#)]

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today, straight after Christmas, we celebrate the Feast of Saint Stephen, the first martyr. We find the account of his martyrdom in the Acts of the Apostles (cf. Chapters 6-7), which describe him as a man of good repute, who served food to the poor and administered charity (cf. 6:3). Precisely because of this generous integrity, he cannot but bear witness to what is most precious to him: he bears witness to his faith in Jesus, and this unleashes the wrath of his adversaries, who stone him to death mercilessly. And this all happens in front of a young man, Saul, a zealous persecutor of Christians, who acts as “guarantor” of the execution (cf. 7:58).

Let us think a moment about this scene: Saul and Stephen, the persecutor and the persecuted. There seems to be an impenetrable wall between them, as hard as the fundamentalism of the young Pharisee and the stones thrown at the man condemned to death. And yet, beyond appearances, there is something stronger that unites them. Indeed, through Stephen’s witness, the Lord is already preparing in Saul’s heart, unbeknownst to him, the conversion that will lead him to be a great Apostle. Stephen, his service, his prayer, the faith he proclaims, his courage, and especially his forgiveness at the point of death, are not in vain. It was said, at the time of the persecutions — and today too it is right to say it — “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christians”. They seem to end in nothing, but in reality, his sacrifice plants a seed that, going in the

opposite direction to the stones, plants itself in a hidden way in the breast of his worst rival.

Today, 2,000 years later, unfortunately we see that the persecution continues: there is persecution of Christians. There are still those — and there are many of them — who suffer and die to bear witness to Jesus, just as there are those who are penalized at various levels for the fact of acting in a way consistent with the Gospel, and those who strive every day to be faithful, without fanfare, to their good duties, while the world jeers and preaches otherwise. These brothers and sisters may also seem to be failures, but today we see that it is not the case. Now as then, in fact, the seed of their sacrifices, which seems to die, germinates and bears fruit, because God continues to work miracles, through them, (cf. *Acts* 18:9-10), changing hearts and saving men and women.

Let us ask ourselves, then: do I care about and pray for those who, in various parts of the world, still suffer and die for the faith today? So many who are murdered for their faith. And in turn, do I try to bear witness to the Gospel consistently, with meekness and confidence? Do I believe that the seed of goodness will bear fruit even if I do not see immediate results?

May Mary, Queen of Martyrs, help us bear witness to Jesus.

After the Angelus, the Holy Father continued:

Dear brothers and sisters, I renew to all of you the wish for peace and good that flows from the Nativity of the Lord. And I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of you who have sent me messages of good wishes from Rome and many parts of the world. Thank you, especially for your prayers! And continue to pray for the Pope! There is need.

In the spirit of the witness of Saint Stephen, I am close to the Christian communities who suffer discrimination, and I urge them to persevere in charity towards all, striving peacefully for justice and religious freedom.

I also entrust the invocation of peace of war-torn peoples to the intercession of the first Martyr. The media show us what war produces: we have seen Syria, we see Gaza. Think of martyred Ukraine. A desert of death. Is this what we want? The people want peace. Let us pray for peace. Let us strive for peace.

I greet you, people of Rome and pilgrims, families, parish groups, religious communities and associations. I invite you to pause before the large Nativity scene in Saint Peter's Square, inspired by the one Saint Francis made in Greccio 800 years ago. As you observe the statues, you will see a common feature on their faces and in their poses: wonder. You will see a wonder that becomes adoration. May we let ourselves be awestruck before the birth of the Lord. I hope that you

safeguard this in yourselves: the wonder that becomes adoration.

And thanks to all of you, to the young people of the *Immacolata*, and the many who are here in front of me!

I wish you all a happy feast day! And please, do not forget to pray for me. Enjoy your lunch.

Arrivederci!