



SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE **BOLLETTINO**

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General Audience

This morning's General Audience took place at 9.10 in Saint Peter's Square, where the Holy Father Francis met with groups of pilgrims and faithful from Italy and all over the world.

In his address in Italian the Pope continued his cycle of catechesis on the Acts of the Apostles, focusing on the theme "*Stephen, 'full of the Holy Spirit' (Acts 7: 55) from diaconate to martyrdom*" (Bible reading: from the *Acts of the Apostles*, 6, 8-10, 15).

After summarising his catechesis in several languages, the Holy Father addressed special greetings to the groups of faithful present.

The General Audience concluded with the recitation of the *Pater Noster* and the Apostolic Blessing.

Catechesis of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Through the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, let us continue to follow a journey: the journey of the Gospel in the world. Saint Luke, with great realism, shows both the fruitfulness of this journey and the emergence of some problems within the Christian community. From the beginning there have always been problems. How can the differences that co-exist with it be harmonized without clashes and ruptures?

The community welcomed not only Jews, but also Greeks, that is, people from the diaspora, not Jews, with their own culture and sensibility, and with another religion. We, today, say "pagans". And they were welcomed. This co-presence gives rise to fragile and precarious balances; and in the face of difficulties, "tares" arise, and what are the worst tares that destroy a community? The tare of grumbling, the tare of chattering: the Greeks grumble because of the inattention of the community towards their widows.

The Apostles begin a process of discernment that consists of carefully considering the difficulties and seeking solutions together. They find a way out by dividing the various tasks for a serene growth of the entire ecclesial body, and to avoid neglecting both the “course” of the Gospel and the care for the poorest members.

The Apostles are increasingly aware that their main vocation is prayer and the preaching of the Word of God: praying and proclaiming the Gospel; and they resolve the matter by instituting a core of “seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty” (*Acts 6: 3*) who, after receiving the laying-on of hands, take care of the service of the ... They are deacons who are created for this, for service. The diaconate in the Church is not a second-level priesthood, it is another thing; it is not for the altar, but for service. He is the custodian of service in the Church. When a deacon likes going to the altar too much, he errs. This is not his path. This harmony between service to the Word and service to charity represents the leaven that makes the ecclesial body grow.

And the Apostles create seven deacons, and among the seven “deacons”, Stephen and Philip in distinguish themselves in particular. Stephen evangelizes with strength and parrhesia, but his word encounters the most obstinate resistance. As they find no other way of making him desist, what do his adversaries do? They choose the meanest solution for destroying a human being: that is, slander or false testimony. And we know that slander always kills. This “diabolical cancer” which is born of the desire to destroy the reputation of a person, also harms the rest of the ecclesial body and damages it gravely when, for trivial interests or to cover up one’s own inadequacies, it comes together to smear someone.

Conducted into the Sanhedrin and accused by false witnesses – just as they did with Jesus and went on to do with all martyrs through false witnesses and slanders – Stephen proclaims a reinterpretation of sacred history centred in Christ, to defend himself.

And the Pasch of the dead and risen Jesus is the key to the whole history of the covenant. Faced with this superabundance of divine gift, Stephen courageously denounces the hypocrisy with which the prophets and Christ Himself were treated. And he reminds them of history by saying: “Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered” (*Acts 7: 52*). He does speak by halves, but rather speaks clearly; he tells the truth.

This provokes the violent reaction of the listeners, and Stephen is condemned to death, condemned to stoning. But he manifests the true “fabric” of the disciple of Christ. He does not seek loopholes, he does not appeal to people who can save him, but rather places his life back into the hands of the Lord, and Stephen’s prayer is beautiful at that moment: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (*Acts 7: 59*) - and he dies as a son of God, forgiving: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (*Acts 7: 60*).

These words of Stephen teach us that it is not beautiful speeches that reveal our identity as children of God, but rather that the abandonment of one’s life in the hands of the Father and forgiveness for those who offend us make us see the quality of our faith.

Today there are more martyrs than at the beginning of the Church’s life, and martyrs are everywhere. Today’s Church is rich in martyrs, it is irrigated by their blood which is “the seed of new Christians” (Tertullian, *Apologetic*, 50,13) and ensures growth and fruitfulness for the People of God. The martyrs are not “holy men”, but men and women in flesh and blood who – as the Revelation says – “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (7: 14). They are the true winners.

Let us also ask the Lord that, looking at the martyrs of yesterday and today, we can learn to live a full life, welcoming the martyrdom of daily fidelity to the Gospel and conformation to Christ.

Greeting in English

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today's audience, especially the groups from England, Scotland, Denmark, Malta, Norway, Kenya, Australia, Mariana Islands, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Sri Lanka and the United States of America. In a particular way my greeting goes to the new seminarians of the Venerable English College as they begin their priestly formation here in Rome. Upon all of you, and your families, I invoke the joy and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ. May God bless you!

Greetings in other languages

The Pope, addressing the young, the elderly, the sick and newlyweds remarked that next Friday will be the memorial of Saint Vincent de Paul, founder and patron of all charitable associations. "May the example of charity given to us by Saint Vincent de Paul lead us all to a joyful and impartial service to those most in need, and open us to the duty of hospitality and the gift of life", he said.
