

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Stephen the Younger

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: November 28

IN BRIEF

Saint Stephen the Younger

Byzantine monk, hermit of Mount Saint Auxentius, martyr for the veneration of icons.

Feast day	November 28
Born	715, Constantinople
Died	November 765, Constantinople
Era	8th century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Stephen the Younger, Martyr for the Icons

Novena to Saint Stephen the Younger

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Stephen the Younger

Saint Stephen the Younger was an 8th-century Byzantine monk, born in Constantinople in 715 and put to death in the same city in 765. A hermit of Mount Saint Auxentius, near Chalcedon, he became the leader of the monks who opposed the iconoclast policy of Emperor Constantine V. Exiled, imprisoned and then lynched in the streets of the capital, he is venerated in both East and West as a martyr for the veneration of holy images. His feast day is November 28.

Who was Saint Stephen the Younger?

In the 8th century, the Byzantine Empire was torn apart by the quarrel over images. The iconoclast emperors, Leo III and then his son Constantine V, forbade the veneration of icons of Christ, the Virgin Mary and the saints, which they considered idolatry. In 754, the Council of Hieria officially condemned images. Monks, numerous and influential, were among the firmest defenders of icons. Stephen, a respected hermit, became their spokesman.

He is called "the Younger" to distinguish him from Saint Stephen the Protomartyr, the first deacon and martyr of the Acts of the Apostles.

His life is known through a *Life of Stephen the Younger* written some forty years after his death by a deacon of Hagia Sophia, also named Stephen. This very rich text mixes precise memories with polemical elements. The chronicles of Patriarch Nicephorus and of Theophanes the Confessor confirm his condemnation and death. Historians think the emperor also held it against him that he drew high-ranking members of the court to monastic life.



Saint Stephen the Younger, mosaic at the monastery of Hosios Loukas (11th century).

Key dates in the life of Saint Stephen the Younger

- **715**: Born in Constantinople to a modest and devout family; he is baptized by the patriarch Saint Germanus.
- **c. 731**: At sixteen, he becomes a monk on Mount Saint Auxentius, under the hermit John.
- **c. 746**: On John's death, he succeeds him in his hermitage; disciples gather around him.
- **754**: The Council of Hieria condemns images; Stephen refuses to sign its decrees.
- **c. 763**: His monastery is burned; he is exiled to the island of Proconnesus, in the Sea of Marmara.
- **764-765**: Brought back to Constantinople, he is questioned by the emperor and then imprisoned.

- **November 765**: He is dragged from prison and killed in the streets of Constantinople.
- **787**: The Second Council of Nicaea restores the veneration of images.

The hermit of Mount Saint Auxentius

Mount Saint Auxentius, in Bithynia, across the water from Constantinople, had been a great center of monastic life since the 5th century. The young Stephen was brought there by his parents and received the monastic habit from the hermit John, whom he served for fifteen years. When his master died, he took his place in the cave.

His reputation attracted many disciples, for whom he founded a monastery. He himself withdrew to a narrow cell higher up the mountain, where he lived a life of rigorous asceticism.

Defender of the icons

After the Council of Hieria, the monks opposed to iconoclasm turned to him. He encouraged them to remain faithful, and even to go into exile in regions where images were still honored: southern Italy, Cyprus, Crimea, Lebanon. He reminded them that the pope and the patriarchs of the East rejected iconoclasm, as Saint John Damascene had done.

The emperor sent an official to obtain his signature. Stephen refused. He was arrested, slandered by corrupt disciples and accused of plotting. His monastery was burned and he was exiled to the island of Proconnesus, where he lived in a cave, joined by his disciples, his mother and his sister.

The coin and the martyrdom

Brought back to Constantinople, he was questioned by Constantine V himself. According to his *Life*, when the emperor maintained that trampling on an icon was no insult to Christ, Stephen threw to the ground a coin stamped with the imperial image and trod on it, asking whether that gesture would not offend the emperor. He was immediately put in chains and imprisoned.

In prison he went on praying and encouraging the other prisoners. Soon afterwards, soldiers dragged him out, hauled him through the streets and beat him to death with clubs. His body was thrown into the pit for condemned criminals.

Veneration

After the victory of the defenders of images, at the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 and then at the "Triumph of Orthodoxy" in 843, Stephen was honored as one of the great martyrs of iconoclasm. The Byzantine Church celebrates him on November 28, the date of his death according to his *Life*. The Roman Martyrology commemorates him on the same day.

Why is Saint Stephen the Younger invoked by iconographers and artists?

Saint Stephen the Younger has no official patronage. Because he gave his life for the veneration of holy images, it is natural to pray to him for Christian artists and iconographers, whose work makes the mystery of the Incarnation visible. He can also be invoked by monks and by all who suffer for refusing to betray their conscience.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Stephen the Younger in art

In iconography he is depicted as an elderly monk, holding an icon of Christ or of the Virgin Mary. The icon in his hands is his distinctive sign, recalling the cause for which he died. The 11th-century mosaic at Hosios Loukas, in Greece, and the miniature of his martyrdom in the Menologion of Basil II are among his best-known images.

What can we learn from Saint Stephen the Younger?

Stephen defended icons because he was defending the Incarnation: if God became man, he can be depicted, and the honor paid to the image passes to the one it represents. He also reminds us of the freedom of conscience before political power. You can pray to him for Christian artists, for monks, and for all who are persecuted for their faithfulness.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Stephen the Younger and the novena to Saint Stephen the Younger.

Where to pray to Saint Stephen the Younger

- **Hosios Loukas (Boeotia, Greece)**: the monastery whose 11th-century mosaic depicts him.
- **Istanbul, Turkey**: ancient Constantinople, the city of his birth and martyrdom.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Stephen the Younger, Martyr for the Icons

Saint Stephen the Younger, hermit of Mount Saint Auxentius, gave his life in Constantinople in 765 for the veneration of holy icons. Before Emperor Constantine V, he showed that the honor paid to an image passes to the one it represents. No traditional prayer to him in English has come down to us, so Saintspedia offers this original prayer, followed by a short teaching of the Church on icons.

Prayer to Saint Stephen the Younger

Saint Stephen the Younger, from your youth you left everything to seek God in silence on the holy mountain: teach me to love prayer and to find God in stillness.

You defended the holy icons because you believed that the Son of God truly became man: strengthen my faith in the Incarnation, and help me to see the face of Christ in every person.

You refused to sign what your conscience rejected, even before the emperor: give me the courage to stay faithful to the truth when it is costly.

Exiled, slandered and imprisoned, you went on praying and encouraging others: be close to all who suffer for their faith, and to those betrayed by people they trusted.

Pray for Christian artists and iconographers, for monks and nuns, and for the unity of the Churches of East and West. I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence). Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

When to pray this prayer

The feast of Saint Stephen the Younger is November 28. You can pray to him:

- before writing or painting an icon, or beginning a work of sacred art;
- when you pray before an icon or a holy image at home;
- when you are pressured to act against your conscience;
- for persecuted Christians and for those wrongly accused;
- for monks, nuns and hermits.

What the Church teaches about icons

The Second Council of Nicaea, in 787, upheld the veneration of images for which Stephen died. The Catechism of the Catholic Church sums up this teaching with the words of Saint Basil, "The honor rendered to an image passes to its prototype," and of the Council itself, "whoever venerates an image venerates the person portrayed in it."

Source: Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2132.

To go further, read the life of Saint Stephen the Younger or pray the novena to Saint Stephen the Younger, from November 20 to November 28.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Stephen the Younger

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Stephen the Younger, the Byzantine hermit who gave his life in Constantinople in 765 for the veneration of holy icons. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, begin on November 20; it ends on November 28. You can also pray it at any time, especially when you need courage to remain faithful to your conscience.

How to pray this novena

Each day, place your intention before God, read the short meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The small act proposed for each day helps carry the prayer into ordinary life. If you miss a day, simply continue where you left off. If you have an icon or a holy image at home, you may pray in front of it, in the spirit of Saint Stephen.

You may begin each day with this invocation:

> *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, who became man for us, have mercy on us. Saint Stephen the Younger, pray for us. Amen.*

Day 1: A child of faith

Stephen was born in Constantinople in 715 to a modest and devout family and was baptized by the patriarch Saint Germanus. His parents brought him to the holy mountain when he was young. Faith was a gift received from his family, long before it became a cause for which he would give his life.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the gift of baptism. Bless parents who hand on the faith to their children.

Today: Make the sign of the cross slowly, remembering your baptism.

Day 2: Seeking God in silence

At sixteen, Stephen became a monk on Mount Saint Auxentius and served the hermit John for fifteen years. In silence and obedience, he learned to listen to God.

Prayer: Lord, quiet my heart. Teach me to listen to you in stillness.

Today: Spend ten minutes in silent prayer, without a phone or distraction.

Day 3: A spiritual father

Disciples gathered around Stephen, and he founded a monastery for them, while he himself withdrew to a narrow cell higher on the mountain. His holiness drew others toward God.

Prayer: Lord, give your Church holy spiritual fathers and mothers, and help me to be a good example to others.

Today: Pray for a priest, monk or religious who has guided you.

Day 4: The God who became visible

Stephen defended icons because the Son of God truly became man. The invisible God showed us his face in Jesus Christ, and so he can be depicted.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you are the image of the invisible God. Let me contemplate your face and recognize it in my neighbor.

Today: Pray for a few minutes before an icon or a crucifix.

Day 5: Refusing to sign

When the emperor sent an official to obtain his signature on the decrees against images, Stephen refused. He would not put his name to what his conscience rejected.

Prayer: Lord, give me a well-formed conscience and the courage to follow it, even when it costs me.

Today: Examine your conscience on one area where you are tempted to compromise.

Day 6: Betrayed and slandered

Corrupt disciples slandered Stephen, and he was accused of plotting. Like Christ, he knew betrayal by those close to him.

Prayer: Lord, heal those who have been betrayed or falsely accused. Give me the grace to forgive.

Today: Pray for someone who has hurt you, and ask God to bless them.

Day 7: Exile with those he loved

His monastery burned, Stephen was exiled to the island of Proconnesus, where he lived in a cave. His disciples, his mother and his sister came to join him. Even in exile, love and community did not disappear, and prayer went on in a cave as it had on the mountain.

Prayer: Lord, be with exiles and refugees. Comfort those who have lost their home.

Today: Pray for refugees, or support an organization that welcomes them.

Day 8: The coin and the truth

Before Constantine V, Stephen threw down a coin bearing the emperor's image and trod on it, asking whether that would not offend the emperor. With one gesture, he showed that the honor or dishonor given to an image reaches the one it represents.

Prayer: Lord, give me wisdom and clarity to bear witness to the truth with simple words and gestures.

Today: Read paragraph 2132 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church on the veneration of images.

Day 9: Faithful unto death

In prison, Stephen kept praying and encouraging the other prisoners. Then he was dragged through the streets and killed. Twenty-two years later, the Second Council of Nicaea vindicated the faith for which he died.

Prayer: Saint Stephen the Younger, pray for all who suffer for their faith today. Obtain for us perseverance to the end.

Today: Pray for persecuted Christians, and if possible attend Mass on his feast.

Closing prayer

> *Saint Stephen the Younger, monk of the holy mountain and martyr for the holy icons, you confessed that the Son of God truly became man and can be contemplated in his image. Present to the Lord the intention I have carried during these nine days. Obtain for me a love of prayer, a faithful conscience and the courage of truth. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Discover the life of Saint Stephen the Younger and the prayer to Saint Stephen the Younger.

CREDITS

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