

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Stephen, Deacon and First Martyr

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: December 26

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IN BRIEF

Saint Stephen, Deacon and First Martyr

One of the first seven deacons of the Church of Jerusalem, stoned to death, venerated as the first Christian martyr.

Feast day	December 26
Died	c. 31-36, Jerusalem
Canonized	pre-congregation saint (immemorial cult)
Era	1st century
Patron saint of	deacons, stonemasons

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Stephen, Deacon and First Martyr

Saint Stephen was one of the seven men chosen by the apostles to serve the first Christian community in Jerusalem, in whom the Church sees the first deacons. A fervent preacher, accused of speaking against the Temple and the Law, he was stoned outside the city a few years after the death of Jesus, praying for those who killed him. The Acts of the Apostles recount his death in detail: he is the first disciple to have given his life for Christ, the "protomartyr." His feast is on December 26, the day after Christmas.

Who was Saint Stephen?

Everything we know about Stephen comes from chapters 6 to 8 of the Acts of the Apostles, written by Saint Luke. His name is Greek, *Stephanos*, meaning "crown." He probably belonged to the group Luke calls the "Hellenists": Greek-speaking Jews, often born outside the land of Israel, who had come back to live in Jerusalem and become disciples of Jesus. Luke describes him as "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit," full "of grace and power." Nothing is known of his birth, his family or his life before he became a disciple.

Key dates in the life of Saint Stephen

- **Early 1st century**: Born, in an unknown place.
- **Shortly after Pentecost**: Chosen with six other men to serve the widows of the community; the apostles lay hands on them (Acts 6:1-6).
- **c. 31-36**: Accused before the Sanhedrin, he gives a long speech (Acts 7), then is stoned outside Jerusalem in the presence of the young Saul of Tarsus.

- **Late 4th century**: His feast is celebrated on December 26 in the East.
- **415**: Relics attributed to Stephen are discovered at Caphargamala, near Jerusalem, by a priest named Lucian.
- **c. 415-425**: His relics spread to Africa and the West; Saint Augustine records healings at Hippo and Uzalis.
- **5th century**: Empress Eudocia builds a basilica in his honor north of Jerusalem.

Serving at table

The first community in Jerusalem shared its goods and cared for the poorest. Yet tension arose: the Hellenists complained that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution. The Twelve, who wanted to remain free for prayer and preaching, proposed choosing seven men "of good repute" for this service. The community chose Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolaus, a convert from Antioch. The apostles prayed and laid their hands on them.

Acts does not yet call them deacons, but tradition has seen in this account the origin of that ministry, whose Greek name, *diakonia*, means "service." Stephen did not simply hand out meals: he preached, debated and worked "great wonders and signs" among the people. In him, service of the poor and proclamation of the Word go together.

The speech before the Sanhedrin

His opponents, members of synagogues of Jews from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia and Asia, could not hold their own against him in debate. They brought forward witnesses who accused him of saying that Jesus would destroy the Temple and change the customs handed down by Moses. Brought before the Sanhedrin, Stephen appeared, Luke writes, with a face "like the face of an angel."

His defense, the longest speech in Acts, retells the whole history of Israel, from Abraham to Solomon. He shows that God revealed himself outside the Holy Land, to Abraham in Mesopotamia, to Joseph in Egypt, to Moses in the desert, and that "the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands." He also recalls that the people often rejected those whom God sent to them. Tempers rose. Then Stephen, looking up, cried out: "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

The stoning and the forgiveness

They dragged him out of the city and stoned him. The witnesses laid their cloaks at the feet of a young man named Saul, the future Saint Paul, who "approved of his killing." Stephen prayed: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then, kneeling down, he cried out in a loud voice: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And Luke concludes: "When he had said this, he fell asleep." His last words echo those of Jesus on the cross: self-surrender to the Father and forgiveness for those who put him to death.

Devout men buried him and mourned him greatly. His death opened a persecution that scattered the disciples through Judea and Samaria, and so the Gospel began to go out from Jerusalem. A saying traditionally attributed to Saint Augustine sums up the link between this martyrdom and Saul's conversion: if Stephen had not prayed, the Church would not have had Paul.



The Stoning of Saint Stephen, one of Rembrandt's earliest dated paintings (1625), Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon.

A devotion spread throughout the Church

Stephen's feast is one of the oldest in the Christian calendar. By the end of the fourth century it was celebrated in the East on the day after Christmas, alongside the feasts of Saint John the Evangelist and the Holy Innocents: tradition calls these saints the "companions of Christ." In 415 the discovery of relics at Caphargamala, following a dream of the priest Lucian, sparked an immense wave of devotion. Fragments reached North Africa, where Saint Augustine built a chapel at Hippo and recorded in *The City of God* (Book XXII, chapter 8) the healings attributed to them. In Gaul, a great many cathedrals took his name, among them Bourges, Metz, Sens, Toulouse, Auxerre, Limoges and Châlons.

In Ireland, December 26 is still known as Saint Stephen's Day and is a public holiday, and in Britain the same day, Boxing Day, has long been linked with giving to the poor. The English carol "Good King Wenceslas" is set "on the feast of Stephen."

Why is Saint Stephen the patron saint of deacons?

Stephen is the first named among the Seven on whom the apostles laid hands for the service of the poor, so the Church has always seen him as the model of deacons, uniting the service of charity and the proclamation of the Word. He is also invoked by stonemasons, a patronage that comes from the stones of his martyrdom. More deeply, he shows that Christian martyrdom is not a fight against enemies but a love that goes as far as forgiveness. He is prayed to for deacons, for persecuted Christians and for the strength to forgive.

To pray with him, you can repeat his last words, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit," or follow the novena to Saint Stephen from December 17 to 25, which also accompanies the last days of Advent.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Stephen in art

- **The deacon's dalmatic**: he is usually shown as a young man in the vestment of a deacon.
- **Stones**: held in his hand, placed on his head or lying at his feet, recalling his stoning.
- **The martyr's palm**: the sign of victory through death.
- **A book or a censer**: the Gospel he proclaimed and the liturgical service of the deacon.

Where to pray to Saint Stephen

- **Jerusalem**: the Basilica of Saint Stephen, north of the Damascus Gate, rebuilt by the Dominicans on the Byzantine church of Empress Eudocia.
- **Rome**: the Basilica of Saint Lawrence Outside the Walls, where tradition places part of his relics beside those of Saint Lawrence, and the round church of Santo Stefano Rotondo on the Caelian Hill.
- **Bourges** (France): the Cathedral of Saint Stephen, a Gothic masterpiece on the World Heritage list.
- **Metz** (France): the Cathedral of Saint Stephen and its immense stained glass windows.
- **Paris**: the church of Saint-Étienne-du-Mont, on the hill of Sainte-Geneviève.

PRAYER

Prayer of Saint Stephen: "Lord Jesus, Receive My Spirit"

Saint Stephen left no written prayer. But the Acts of the Apostles preserved his last words, two short prayers spoken under the stones, which Christians have repeated for twenty centuries. This page presents that text, an excerpt from a sermon read in the liturgy of December 26, and an original prayer to Saint Stephen.

The last words of Stephen (Acts 7:55-60)

Translated from the Greek by Saintspedia.

> *Filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. He said: "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."*
>
> *But they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears and rushed together upon him. They dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.*
>
> *While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then, falling to his knees, he cried out with a loud voice: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.*

Source: Acts of the Apostles, chapter 7, verses 55 to 60. These two prayers echo those of Jesus on the cross, recorded by the same author, Saint Luke: "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34) and "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

"Yesterday we celebrated the birth of our King"

At the beginning of the sixth century, Saint Fulgentius, Bishop of Ruspe in North Africa, devoted a sermon to Saint Stephen. Its opening, read every December 26 in the Office of Readings, links Christmas and martyrdom. Translated from the Latin by Saintspedia; the original text is in the public domain.

> *"Yesterday we celebrated the birth in time of our eternal King; today we celebrate the triumphant suffering of his soldier."*

Source: Saint Fulgentius of Ruspe, *Sermon 3*, for the feast of Saint Stephen ("Heri celebravimus temporalem sempiterni Regis nostri natalem, hodie celebramus triumphalem militis passionem").

Prayer to Saint Stephen

Saint Stephen, you who served the widows of Jerusalem with the same zeal with which you proclaimed the Word, pray for me.

Teach me never to separate prayer from service, the faith I profess from the practical help I owe to my poorest brothers and sisters.

You who spoke with courage before your accusers, give me the strength to remain faithful to Christ when it costs me, without harshness and without fear.

You who saw heaven opened as you died, and who prayed for those who were stoning you, obtain for me the hardest grace of all: to forgive those who have hurt me. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Pray for deacons, for persecuted Christians and for those who persecute them. And when my hour comes, may I say with you: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Stephen's feast is on December 26 in the Latin Church; the Orthodox Churches keep it on December 27. Coming the day after Christmas, it recalls that the Child in the manger is also the one for whom people give their lives. In Ireland the day is still called Saint Stephen's Day. You can also pray to him at a diaconal ordination. For a longer time of prayer, you can follow the novena to Saint Stephen, and read more about the life of Saint Stephen.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Stephen

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the account in the Acts of the Apostles (chapters 6 and 7). It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast, begin on December 17; it ends on December 25, Christmas Day, and so accompanies the last days of Advent. Day after day, it follows Stephen from the service of the widows to the forgiveness he gave as he died.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day and then an Our Father. The small act suggested for each day helps you live the day in the spirit of Saint Stephen, between service and witness.

Day 1: A community that listens

The first community had its tensions: some widows were being overlooked. The apostles did not deny the problem; they listened and looked for a solution. The Church begins by taking seriously the complaints of the most vulnerable, those who have no one to speak for them.

Prayer: Lord, open my ears to the complaints of those who are forgotten, and make me attentive to what is lacking around me.

Today: Visit or call an elderly person who lives alone.

Day 2: Chosen to serve

Stephen was chosen because he was "full of faith and of the Holy Spirit." What he received was not an honorary title but a service: waiting on tables. In God's eyes, no service is small, and the humblest tasks can be filled with the Spirit.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, fill me with faith, and help me accept the humble services entrusted to me.

Today: Do a thankless task at home or at work without complaining.

Day 3: The laying on of hands

The apostles prayed and laid their hands on the Seven. Service in the Church is not mere organization: it is received from God and carried by the prayer of all. Those who serve need the support of those they serve.

Prayer: Lord, bless the deacons of your Church and all who serve the poor in your name.

Today: Pray for a deacon, a priest or a volunteer you know.

Day 4: The wisdom of the Word

His opponents could not withstand "the wisdom and the Spirit" with which he spoke. Stephen knew the Scriptures and lived by them. His words were strong because they were nourished by long familiarity with the Word of God.

Prayer: Lord, give me a love for your Word, so that my words may be true and just.

Today: Read slowly Acts 6:8-15.

Day 5: The face of an angel

Unjustly accused, Stephen did not lose his peace: his face appeared "like the face of an angel." Inner peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of God in the heart of conflict.

Prayer: Lord, when I am accused or misjudged, keep my heart in your peace.

Today: Answer a criticism calmly, without trying to have the last word.

Day 6: God cannot be confined

In his speech, Stephen recalled that God revealed himself to Abraham, to Joseph and to Moses far from the Temple. God does not live only in holy places: he comes to meet people where they are, in exile, in the desert, in daily life.

Prayer: Most High God, teach me to recognize you everywhere, in the places and people where I do not expect you.

Today: Pray for a few moments in an ordinary place: on a bus, in a kitchen, in an office.



Praying with Saint Stephen, deacon and first martyr.

Day 7: The heavens opened

At the darkest moment, Stephen looked up and saw Christ standing, as if to welcome him. Christian hope opens heaven in the very heart of trial. The one who suffers is not alone, and death itself becomes a passage into the arms of Christ.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, in my trials, open my eyes to your presence and your victory.

Today: Entrust to God someone who is sick or near the end of life.

Day 8: "Do not hold this sin against them"

Stephen died praying for those who were killing him. Among them stood Saul, who would become Paul. Stephen's forgiveness opened a future no one could have imagined. Our forgiveness, too, can open doors we cannot yet see.

Prayer: Lord, I bring before you those who have hurt me. I cannot yet forgive everything: help me to begin.

Today: Pray by name for someone who has done you wrong.

Day 9: Christmas and martyrdom

Stephen's feast follows immediately after Christmas. The Child in the manger comes to give his life, and Stephen is the first to follow him that far. The joy of Christmas and the gift of self are not opposed: they belong together.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, on this day of your birth, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Stephen, help me to love you and to serve my brothers and sisters to the very end. Amen.

Today: Pray for persecuted Christians around the world.

Closing prayer

Saint Stephen, first martyr, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Pray for me, for deacons and for all who suffer because of their faith. Obtain for us the grace to serve with humility, to bear witness with courage and to forgive without measure. Amen.

To go further, read the life of Saint Stephen and pray with his last words, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

PILGRIMAGE

Basilica of Saint Stephen in Jerusalem, Place of Remembrance of the First Martyr

The Basilica of Saint Stephen in Jerusalem stands a few hundred yards north of the Damascus Gate, within the Dominican convent that houses the French Biblical and Archaeological School. It is built on the foundations of a large 5th-century church raised by the Empress Eudocia to receive the relics of the first martyr. It is the main Catholic place of remembrance of Saint Stephen in the Holy Land.

A Byzantine Church for the First Martyr

The Acts of the Apostles say only that Stephen was stoned "outside the city." After his relics were discovered in 415 at Caphargamala, they were first placed in Jerusalem, in the Church of Zion. In the middle of the 5th century, the Empress Eudocia, wife of Theodosius II and retired to Jerusalem, had a vast basilica built north of the city in honor of Stephen; she was buried there at her death in 460. The church was ruined during the invasions and wars of the following centuries. The Crusaders raised a more modest one, which was in turn destroyed in the late 12th century.



The Basilica of Saint Stephen in Jerusalem, place of remembrance of the first martyr.

Rebuilding by the Dominicans

In the late 19th century the French Dominicans acquired the land and uncovered the remains of the Byzantine church. Father Marie-Joseph Lagrange founded the Biblical School there in 1890, which became one of the world's great centers for the study of the Bible and archaeology. The present basilica, consecrated in 1900, follows the plan of the ancient building. Fragments of mosaics and ancient tombs have been found on the site, which the friars still serve.

Praying to Saint Stephen in Jerusalem

Before your visit, you might reread the life of Saint Stephen or chapters 6 and 7 of the Acts of the Apostles. In the basilica, a time of silence allows you to meditate on his last words and to entrust an intention to him, especially for

someone you struggle to forgive, or for Christians who suffer for their faith. The prayer of Saint Stephen can accompany this moment. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other Places Associated with Saint Stephen

- **Jerusalem, Lions' Gate**: the eastern gate of the Old City is also called "Saint Stephen's Gate," a later tradition placing the stoning in the Kidron Valley.
- **Beit Jimal** (Israel): the Salesian monastery west of Jerusalem, often identified with ancient Caphargamala, where the relics were discovered in 415.
- **Rome**: the Basilica of Saint Lawrence Outside the Walls, where tradition places part of his relics, and the Church of Santo Stefano Rotondo on the Caelian Hill, built in the 5th century.
- **Bourges, Metz, Sens, Toulouse**: some of the many French cathedrals dedicated to Saint Stephen.
- **Vienna** (Austria): Saint Stephen's Cathedral, emblem of the city.

Practical Information

The basilica is in the neighborhood north of the Damascus Gate, a few minutes' walk from the Old City. The site is part of a convent and a teaching institution, so visiting conditions and service times should be checked with the Saint Stephen convent before you come. For a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, also look into the safety and travel conditions currently in effect.

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