

Personal reflection of Orfeo Cicchetti --

St. Stephen was a man on fire. On fire with the Holy Spirit that is. We first learn about Stephen in "The Acts of the Apostles" which is the second volume of Luke's two-volume contribution to the New Testament. We don't know if Stephen was an original disciple who actually knew Jesus firsthand or whether he was one of the Jews who converted under St. Peter. . . but Luke tells us in Acts, Chapter 6, that the apostles had a need for helpers, so they appointed seven reputable men, including Stephen, "a man of faith and the Holy Spirit", as assistants or deacons if you will.

After the apostles prayed and laid hands on him, Stephen was filled with grace and power, working many "great wonders and signs among the people". Stephen boldly preached and spread the good news about Jesus throughout Jerusalem. Luke tells us that certain members of the Synagogue finally came forward to debate with Stephen, but that "they could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which he spoke". So they seized him and, like Jesus, they brought him before the Sanhedrin to be likewise unjustly accused of blasphemy by false witnesses.

Despite the evil closing in on him, amazingly Stephen's face remained "like the face of an angel". When the high priest pressed him for a response to blasphemy charges, Stephen replied with a long discourse going all the way back to the time of Abraham in Mesopotamia, detailing how God's chosen people had repeatedly rejected and opposed the Holy Spirit. He recounted how God's own people persecuted and put to death all those who foretold "the coming of the righteous one", before bravely adding "whose betrayers and murderers you have now become". As the Sanhedrin looked on in fury and outrage, Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked up intently to heaven and said "Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God". At that, they dragged him out of the city and stoned him to death at the feet of Saul of Tarsus (St. Paul) who himself was zealously hunting down Christians at that time. The last words Stephen uttered before he died were "Lord do not hold this sin against them".

We know that cold is a lack of heat, darkness is a lack of light, and that sin is the result of a lack of faith. When we look at Stephen, we are amazed to find an otherwise ordinary man of uncommon faith and holiness. Consider that he was well aware of the horrific death of Jesus and of the persecution being waged against the Christians of his time. When he found himself dragged before the same Sanhedrin who crucified Jesus, he could have saved himself from certain death but he didn't. He well knew of the fate that awaited him, but his faith was on fire with the Holy Spirit. It has been said that courage is not a lack of fear, but a willingness to act, in spite of fear. Surely, any reasonable man living in those brutal days would have been fearful in Stephen's position. However, this beautiful, holy man chose to act with faith in spite of his fear. . . becoming the very first Christian martyr to die for Christ, and a shining example for all who followed afterwards.