

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The first reading this weekend speaks of the martyrdom of St. Stephen. It notes at the beginning of the reading that Stephen was “**filled with the Holy Spirit**” (Acts 7:55). This is important to note, we who are preparing for the great feast of the Holy Spirit next Sunday (Pentecost). What did being filled with the Holy Spirit look like for Stephen?

The first thing I note about St. Stephen’s infilling with the Holy Spirit is that He is able to recognize the presence of Jesus, even when others cannot see Him: he “**saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God**” (Acts 7:55), even though none of the others around him saw Jesus. True, Stephen was seeing a vision, and most of us probably will not see visions of Jesus in our lifetime. However, He had trained His eyes to recognize the presence of Jesus. He spent His time getting to know Jesus in prayer and to serve Him in His people (remember that Stephen was one of the “seven,” the first deacons, who were sent to serve the poor in the Greek community [see Acts 6:1-7]). God also calls us to train our eyes to see the presence of Jesus. We do this by spending time with Him in prayer, coming into a living relationship with the living Christ. We do this by serving others. We do this by spending time gazing on the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. As we spend time piercing the appearance of bread to see the very presence of God, we train our eyes to see His presence in the disguise of the people around us. As we spend time in *Eucharist* (which literally means “thanksgiving”), we begin to see the loving finger of God in daily events, the works of our lives, in the struggles and joys of our lives. With the Holy Spirit, we train our eyes to see Jesus, even when others cannot see Him.

The next thing to note about St. Stephen is that He did not keep his faith to himself. This was not a personal, only-for-me thing. He shared how he saw Jesus: “**and he said, ‘Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God’**” (Acts 7:56). This took courage, especially since it was NOT well received (they stoned him, after all). Stephen knew that he had to share how he saw Jesus present. With the Holy Spirit, we are called to share our faith with others. It takes courage, but, then again, courage is a Gift of the Holy Spirit. The love of Christ that is poured out onto us, is not meant to be just for ourselves, but for the whole world. It is called “Good News” for a reason... not to be hidden, like a lamp under a bushel basket. No, our call is to share the loving presence of Christ.

Being filled with the Holy Spirit also means that we become more closely conformed to Jesus Christ. As they stoned Stephen, he said two different things: “**Lord Jesus, receive my spirit**” and “**Lord, do not hold this sin against them**” (Acts 7: 59, 60). These words echo the words of Jesus from the cross “**Father, into your hands I commend my spirit**” and “**Father, forgive them, they know not what they do**” (Luke 23:46, 34). Filled with the Holy Spirit, we become more like Christ – we take on His attitude, His mindset, and we become conformed to His Heart, loving what He loves, detesting what He detests.

I want to look at each of these two “words” more closely. As Stephen is dying and asks Jesus to receive his spirit, he shows a great *trust* in the Lord. Stephen knows that Jesus will not abandon him, even in death, and that Jesus is faithful. With the Holy Spirit, we grow in *trust* of God, that His love holds us even in the darkest and most hopeless of circumstances. Stephen also asks *forgiveness* for his persecutors – the ones who were killing him at that very instant. With the Holy Spirit, we are able to do the impossible – forgive our enemies. In this Stephen found peace, and so can we.

Finally, I want to note how St. Stephen died. St. Luke says, “**he fell asleep**” (Acts 7:60). What a delightful way to die – in such peace that it was like falling asleep – even as he is dying from the violence of rocks being hurled at him. But with the Holy Spirit, he was at peace. And that peace can be ours!

As we move toward the feast of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit next weekend, let’s take this week to pray that the Holy Spirit, who was given to us in Baptism. The prayer can be as simple as, “Come, Holy Spirit,” or “Come, Holy Spirit; come now; come as You will.” Let’s ask Him to be stirred up in our lives, that He may *fill us*, every part of us so that we may, like St. Stephen, be more completely conformed to Christ.