

11. May 2025

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

“The election of the seven deacons and the persecution of Stephen”

Acts 6:1-7

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the body of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” And what they said pleased the whole multitude, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands upon them. And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.

The early church was not without internal difficulties that needed to be resolved. Some of the Hellenistic widows were not being cared for in the daily attendance, and the apostles realised that it was not their task to deal with all these matters alone.

The wise decision was made to select seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, among whom was Stephen, to assist the apostles in this service, thus enabling them to devote themselves fully to the primary and special mission entrusted to them: prayer and the ministry of the Word. The service entrusted to these seven men would later be institutionalised as the ministry of the diaconate.

When we look at the ecclesial situation, we can see very well how helpful it would be if priests were given a lot of support in their ministry.

They often seem to be overburdened with tasks which prevent them from concentrating on what is essential: the proclamation of the Word of God and the administration of the sacraments. In addition to these tasks proper to their ministry, they also need sufficient time for prayer and personal retreat so that their ministry may be truly sustained by the Spirit of God.

The early Church obviously found the right solution to this problem. We read in the Acts of the Apostles that *"the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem"*, and it is explicitly mentioned that *"a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith"*.

At that time, too, it was necessary for the priests, who were entrusted with such a special ministry, to meet the Lord Jesus, to receive through Him the grace that God offered to His people, and thus to become His authoritative witnesses.

Today, especially in times of crisis, it is no less important for our priests to be faithful ministers of the Gospel and not to be misled. To this end, they also need the spiritual support of the lay faithful, because, in view of their priestly ministry, they are undoubtedly under particular attack from those powers which wish to prevent their ministry from being as fruitful as possible for the Kingdom of God. Perhaps one of the most subtle temptations is to overburden them with work, thus depriving them of the time they should have for evangelisation and for all that is conducive to this work. The example of the early Church should therefore be kept in mind and applied to today's situation.

Among the seven men chosen by the early Church to assist the apostles, Stephen was particularly outstanding, so much so that he soon became the target of hostility from certain groups in Judaism.

This is how the account continues in the book of Acts:

Acts 6:8-15

Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, arose and

disputed with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. Then they secretly instigated men, who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, and set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place, and will change the customs which Moses delivered to us." And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

The hostility towards Stephen was enormous. After he had shown more wisdom in his discussions with his enemies in the power of the Holy Spirit, they resorted to lies and slander to accuse him before the Sanhedrin. When people take recourse to such perverse means, one can see the forces at work behind them. Often it is not enough for them to slander, they want the death of their opponents.

But Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, took advantage of the situation to testify before the Sanhedrin. Tomorrow we will listen to his speech.

Meditation on the Gospel of the day: <https://en.elijamission.net/identifying-the-voice-of-the-lord/>