

28. November 2025
THE LIVES OF THE SAINTS
“Saint Stephen the Younger:
Victim of Iconoclasm”

Before we delve into the story of today's saint, we should first ask: what is iconoclasm?

Following the Council of Chalcedon, a controversy arose in the Eastern Church over whether it was permissible to depict Christ in icons. Influenced by the Islamic doctrine of God's inaccessibility, those who opposed images argued that Christ could not be represented because He was true God, and they considered that icons placed too much emphasis on His humanity. Conversely, defenders of images claimed that the Spirit of God permeated visible representations of the invisible God. In 726, Emperor Leo III banned images and ordered their destruction in all churches and monasteries.

The 'iconoclasts', or detractors of images, based their argument on the Old Testament prohibition against making representations of God. This dispute, which raged fiercely for nearly a century, ended when the Church bindingly defined that icons of Christ and the saints could be venerated.

Centuries later, this controversy was reignited during the Protestant schism. However, bloody clashes only occurred in the East. One of the most eminent martyrs to shed his blood for the Catholic faith during the iconoclastic persecution was St Stephen the Younger, whose story we will learn about today.

St Stephen, nicknamed the Younger, was born in Constantinople in 714 during the reign of Emperor Anastasius. His wealthy and pious parents raised him in the fear of God.

At around the age of 16, his parents entrusted him to the care of a devout hermit named John who lived on a nearby mountain and was responsible for other hermits living in small cells scattered throughout the mountain, forming a monastic community. Stephen was soon accepted into this group by John and became his favourite disciple.

Before he died, John predicted the tribulation that would befall them at the hands of the iconoclasts. He then expired in Stephen's arms. Stephen was chosen as his successor and performed his duties excellently. However, when the number of his disciples continued to grow, he decided to hand over his position and retire to solitude.

At that time, the prohibition and subsequent destruction of images was in full swing in the Byzantine Empire. Stephen had advised the monks to retreat to the desert to escape persecution. However, Emperor Constantine V demanded his approval of the iconoclastic decisions made at the so-called Fifth Council of Constantinople (the Synod of Hieria), held in 754.

Stephen made it clear through a messenger that he was not willing to accept the decisions of this synod. Consequently, he was captured and imprisoned in a monastery, but was released only six days later due to the circumstances of the war.

However, his ordeal had only just begun. His enemies tried to damage the saint's reputation among the people. They wanted to accuse him of having dishonourable relations with a widow, and forced a slave girl to give false testimony against him. The widow, however, remained steadfast even under flogging, affirmed Stephen's innocence and called him a saint.

Then they set another trap for him: the emperor, who had forbidden the monastery to accept novices, sent him a "false brother" begging to be admitted to the monastery. Stephen ended up giving in to the impostor's pleas and took him in. As soon as he received the habit, he fled dressed as a monk to the emperor, as they had agreed. The emperor took the opportunity to publicly denounce Stephen's disobedience.

Thus, the emperor incited the people against Stephen. Meanwhile, he sent a group of armed men to the mountain where Stephen lived. They expelled the monks and hermits, looted the buildings and church, set them on fire and destroyed them completely. They forcibly removed St Stephen from his cell, beat him, insulted him, spat on him and mistreated him in many inhumane ways. As if this were not enough, they imprisoned him in a monastery near Constantinople and sent several iconoclastic bishops and officials to interrogate him and try to change his mind.

However, their efforts were in vain, as Stephen was able to refute every iconoclastic argument and explain his position convincingly. The emperor then exiled him to the island of Proconnesus in the Hellespont.

While in exile, Stephen chose to live in a secluded cave and fed on herbs. Before long, his disciples, who had also been driven away, gathered around him again and formed a monastic community. The servant of God led an increasingly austere life, performed many miracles and bore witness to the truth. He took every opportunity to speak out in favour of the veneration of images.

However, the emperor did not relent. After two years of exile, he had Stephen brought back to Constantinople in chains and locked him in a dungeon full of monks. A few days later, the emperor summoned him and said indignantly, 'Is Jesus trampled upon when images are trampled upon? Why do you consider us heretics?' Instead of answering, the saint took a coin bearing the emperor's image and asked those present, 'What punishment would someone deserve for trampling on this image of the emperor?' Everyone exclaimed, 'The most severe punishment!' "Oh, blind people!" said the saint. "He who dishonours the image of an earthly king is worthy of punishment. Should he who throws the image of the heavenly King into the fire not be punished as well?"

But the emperor remained stubborn and ordered that he be whipped to death. However, the executioners refused. Others then ran to the dungeon in their place, dragged the saint through the streets of the city, beat him and threw stones at him. As they passed the church of St. Theodore, the saint bowed his head in reverence. A man struck him with a piece of wood until he was dead.

Thus, St. Stephen the Younger, who simply wanted to serve the Lord as a monk, became a witness to the legitimacy of the veneration of images, a practice that would later be defined and approved by the Seventh Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (787) and ratified again by the Council of Trent.

Meditation on the day's Gospel: <https://en.elijamission.net/thinking-about-the-end/>