

Homily based on the readings from May 6, 2025 (Acts 7.51-8.1a; John 6.30-35)

If you have ever had the opportunity to serve at the altar, you may have noticed that there are several prayers that are often said *silently*. In particular, there is a specific prayer that is whispered by the priest or the deacon as he is preparing the chalice:

By the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.

It is reasonable to wonder what this prayer might actually *mean*. What does it look like, in a practical sense, for us to share in Christ's divinity?

It is unlikely that we can ever *fully* comprehend – at least as mortal human beings – what such a transformation would entail. Nevertheless, Holy Scripture and the history of the Church do provide us with a variety of *partial* and *preliminary* examples. One of the most *remarkable* is the protagonist of our first reading – Saint Stephen, one of the Church's first seven deacons and the *very* first Christian martyr.

From a *human* perspective, the idea of martyrdom seems totally incompatible with the joys of the Easter season. Nonetheless, there is an important reason that we remember this event, and that we do so at this point in our Easter celebration. The fact is that *martyrdom* – dying at the hands of unjust persecutors – is an essential component of Christian discipleship. Saint Paul admonishes us all to “be imitators of God,” and there is no clearer way of *doing so* than *following* the example of Christ’s own Crucifixion.

To be clear, martyrdom – in a general sense – is not an exclusively Christian concept. Many religious and cultural traditions recognize the value of sacrificing one’s life for a noble cause. There is an *aspect* of martyrdom, though, that is distinctly and uniquely *Christian* – one that is embodied by Stephen’s final prayer: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” In other words, as he was enduring an excruciating death, the last thing Stephen thought to do was to pray for the people who were

murdering him. This exhortation, of course, echoes Jesus' own words: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

In praying for the salvation of his murderers, Saint Stephen is not only following Christ's example – in a certain sense, he is actually partaking in Christ's divinity. It is only through sharing in God's own *nature* that human beings can overcome our *ancestral* imperative of self-preservation. Stephen is not acting as a *man* would act, but as *God* would act – as God *did* act. Just as Christ conquered death through his own death, Stephen overcomes the hatred of the world by willingly and *lovingly* submitting himself to its murderous rage:

*like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb,
so he opened not his mouth.*

Another point – that is *particularly* important for us to remember – is that the crowd that murdered Saint Stephen was not just an anonymous mob. One of the main instigators was "a young man named Saul" – the

individual who, after his own encounter with Jesus Christ, would eventually become the Apostle Paul. The prayers of Saint Stephen *undoubtedly* paved the way for Paul to embrace his own calling, and ultimately his own martyrdom.

And so, as we continue to bask in the radiance of the Resurrection, we have no better example of Christian discipleship – of partaking in Christ’s divinity – than Saint Stephen. May all of us, who count ourselves among the followers of Christ, have the courage to preach fearlessly, the strength to give our lives willingly, and the compassion to pray selflessly; so that, one day, we too may experience the unimaginable joy of seeing “the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” *That* is the true fulfillment of the Easter season.