

St Stephen d c 35. 26th December

The feast of the first martyr of the Church has been celebrated since at least the 4th c. Acts Ch 6 relates how, when disputes arose over food distribution the apostles decided to appoint seven helpers to look after this, while they continued the work of "prayer and the ministry of the word of God."

5 This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. 6 They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them..... 8 Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people.

In view of this office, Stephen is the patron of deacons.

In the lunettes of the Cappella Niccolina in the Vatican, which he painted in fresco in 1447-1449, Fra Angelico shows Stephen being commissioned as a deacon by St Peter, and distributing alms and food.



But opposition arose from a particular Jewish group, who first argued with Stephen, and, unable to "stand up against the wisdom the Spirit had given him" they resorted to stirring up a mob, making accusations of blasphemy against him, and finally seizing him and bringing him before the Sanhedrin, as they had done with Jesus. Acts 7 devotes 53 verses – as the text is now arranged- in which Stephen traced scriptural history and accused his accusers of being "just like their ancestors" who violated the Law, killed the prophets, and resisted the Spirit of God.

54 When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. 55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. (Stoning was the traditional form of execution for a range of offences, including blasphemy).

59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

Fra Angelico represented both the seizing and the stoning, but in a grave, calm manner typical both of his art and of his period.



When Jacopo and Domenico Tintoretto painted an altarpiece for San Giorgio Maggiore in 1594, however, they took a very different approach, by combining his vision of “the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” at the conclusion of his address (Acts 7.55), and the actual stoning.

