



Sermons at the Feast of Archdeacon Stephen the First Martyr

(by Fr George Calciu – 2005)

The Holy Scripture testifies: “And as they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, **“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”** And he knelt down and cried with a loud voice, **“Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”** And when he had said this, he fell asleep” (Acts 7, 59-60).

According to the Jewish law of the time, if someone was accused, those witnesses testifying against him had to also be the executors, if a death sentence was set. So, there wasn't just an outside executioner with no conscience whatsoever and paid for such. In the case of Stephen, the accusers that most likely made use of their Jewish law, had to strip off their clothes, and place them at the feet of a very zealous young Jew, who by being a minor, could not take part in the execution. This young man was named Saul and would later become the Apostle Paul, through conversion. Saul was a persecutor of Christians. And because he could not participate in the stoning of Stephen, he was happy at least to watch the clothes of those who killed Stephen.

I was reflecting on this, making a parallel with what is happening today. If in times of persecution under communism and even in our times, when Christians were denounced to the authorities that convicted and imprisoned them, I thought that those who testified against them were not the executors. If they would have kept the Jewish law – “Those who have testified against him, kill him!” – I think that many would have been hesitant and would avoid to condemn. But because their denouncement was kept unanimously, they seemed to bare no responsibility; and because of this, the human villains and wickedness have multiplied. In this sense, I think that the Jewish law was better: You've testified against him, you will be responsible...! And perhaps many people would have given back.

Let us be attentive!

Throughout Christian history and its martyrdom either earlier in the Roman times or later in the modern times, this martyrdom takes sometimes violent and other times less violent forms: trials, falsifying the truth, mockery and so on. All these take part in the string of Christian suffering.

We live in a world where Christianity is not too applauded or loved. We live in a world in which modernism, science, libertinism (...) mock (in) Christianity and us. They say that to believe in God means to be mentally retarded, for indeed, those so called semi- docts (and when I say semi-docts I mean people who read a lot... scientists) fail to raise themselves outside the boundaries of intellectual, physical or sensual knowledge. For beyond all these, you ask yourself, **is there something else?** And they do not ask and know only in part.

Peter Tutea (a Christian philosopher) used to say “*all sciences including mathematics reached a high school level, only theology goes beyond and has achieved a license,*”... because theology works with things beyond the cognitive and sensory knowledge, it works with the absolute elements of the faith. And I agree with him. That is why, symbolically, he called those people who stayed at the “high school level”: “semi- docts”, because they have no power to know more.

And they do not wish to raise themselves outside this box, because they are the prisoners of their intellect and senses, and the devil holds them back not allowing them to reach God, and because they feared nothing.

It's not so easy to deny one self and to ascend into the Divine. It is not simple for us to give up some things, (right?): to give up pride, your position, your economic status and to say, “**today is Sunday, I will not work and I will go to church; today is a feast day, I'm not going to attend a party, I will go to church, to glorify God**” – I can do the rest other days. It's hard to do these things. (...)

So I am very glad to see you here (*in church*) and I pray God to keep your heart clean and grounded in faith and despite our infirmities, to be numbered among those who renounce at least a part – of this world so we may receive Christ, to be near Him, to follow the example of St. Stephen and all the great martyrs and in a world where martyrdom is no longer asked of us, **we are required at least the courage to confess Christ**, to bear the scorn of those who know nothing but what they comprehend with the mind, to bear their shame because we know through faith more than anything: we know God and know Jesus Christ, **in our hearts we caved the manger where He was born at Christmas**, and we are ready to follow Him to His baptism (Theophany) and beyond, *to death on the cross, that we may die with Him and be resurrected with Him! Amen.* “

Source: <http://orthodoxword.wordpress.com/category/orthodox-saints-and-church-fathers/>