The life and the martyr of Saint Apostle Stephen the Protomartyr

On December 27, we commemorate the holy, glorious, all-laudable Apostle Stephen the Protomartyr.

The holy, glorious, all-laudable Apostle Stephen the Protomartyr was an early Christian convert from among the Hellenistic Jews, one of the original seven deacons ordained by the Apostles, and the first martyr of the Orthodox Church. The Church remembers the martydom of St. Stephen on December 27, and the translations of his relics on August 2.

Life of Saint Stephen

St. Stephen was a Jew living in the Hellenic provinces, related to the Apostle Paul and one of the first seven deacons ordained by the Apostles to serve the Church in Jerusalem (thus making him an archdeacon). The Holy Spirit worked powerfully through his faith, enabling him to perfom many miracles and always defeat the Jews who would dispute with him. The Jews in their hatred of St. Stephen lied about him to the people. But St. Stephen with his face illumined reminded the people of the miracles God had worked through him and even rebuked the Jews for killing the innocent Christ.

The people were enraged by what they thought was blasphemy and 'gnashed their teeth' at Stephen. It was then that he saw his Christ in the heavens and declared it so. Hearing this, the Jews took him outside the city and stoned him to death, with his kinsman Saul (later St. Paul) holding their coats while they did it. Afar off on a hill was the Virgin Mary and St. John the Theologian who witnessed this first martyrdom for the Son of God and prayed for him while he was being stoned. This occurred about a year after the first Pentecost.

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When the Jews stoned St. Stephen, they left his body at the foothill of the city for two days to be eaten by dogs. But on the second night, Gamaliel—teacher of the Apostle Paul and the Apostle Barnabas— came and moved the body to his own land in Capharganda. Nicodemus, who died while weeping at this grave, was also buried there along with Gamaliel's godson Abibus and Gamaliel himself upon his repose.

After many years the memory of St. Stephen's burial place had left the minds of men, until 415 when Gamaliel appeared three times to Father Lucian, priest at Capharganda. He revealed to Fr. Lucian the place of his burial and everything about it. Fr. Lucian received the blessing of the Patriarch to exhume the saints from their grave where a strong, sweet fragrance fillled the cave.

St. Stephen's relics were tranlated to Zion and honorably buried, and many of the sick were healed by his relics. The other three relics were placed inside a church atop the cave on a hill. Eventually, his relics were translated to Constantinople.

Hymns

Troparion (Tone 4)

O Protomartyr and mighty warrior of Christ our God,
You are victorious in battle and crowned with glory, O holy Stephen!
You confounded the council of your persecutors,
Beholding your Savior enthroned at the right hand of the Father.
Never cease to intercede for the salvation of our souls!

Kontakion (Tone 3)

Yesterday the Master assumed our flesh and became our guest;
Today His servant is stoned to death and departs in the flesh,
The glorious Protomartyr Stephen.

[Sources: OrthodoxWiki.org]