



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS **GENERAL AUDIENCE** *St Peter's Square*

Wednesday, 25 September 2019 [\[Multimedia\]](#)

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

With the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, we shall continue to follow a journey: the journey of the Gospel in the world. With great realism, Saint Luke illustrates both the fruitfulness of this journey, and the onset of problems within the Christian community. From the very beginning there were always problems. How can we harmonize the differences that coexist within it without the occurrence of conflict and schisms?

The community not only welcomed the Hebrews, but also the Greeks, that is, people from the diaspora, non-Jews, with their own culture and sensitivities and with another religion. Today we call them “gentiles”. And they were welcomed. This shared presence brought with it a fragile and precarious balance: and before these difficulties, “weeds” begin to appear, and which is the worst weed that destroys a community? The weed of discontent, the weeds of gossip: the Greeks complain about the community’s lack of attention to their widows.

The Apostles begin a process of discernment which consists in recognizing all the difficulties and trying to find solutions together. They find a way out by dividing the various tasks, for the peaceful growth of the entire ecclesial body, and in order to avoid neglecting either the “course” of the Gospel or caring for the poorest members.

The Apostles are ever more aware that their main vocation is to pray and preach the Word of God: to pray and proclaim the Gospel: and they resolve the issue by establishing a nucleus of “seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom (Acts 6:3), who, after receiving the laying on of hands, will “serve tables”. It refers to the deacons who were created for this, for service. In the Church a deacon is not a deputy priest, but something else. He is not for the altar but for service. He is the custodian of service in the Church. When a deacon is too fond of going to the altar, he is making a mistake. This is not his path. This harmony between service to the Word and service to charity represents the leaven that makes the ecclesial body grow.

So the Apostles create the seven deacons and among the seven “deacons”, Stephen and Philip in particular stand out. Stephen evangelizes with strength and *parresia*, but his word meets the most obstinate resistance. Not finding any other way to stop him, what do his opponents do? They choose the most paltry solution to annihilate a human being: that is, slander or false witness. And we know that slander always kills. This “diabolical cancer” that arises from the desire to destroy the reputation of a person, also attacks the ecclesial body and seriously damages it, when as a result of malicious interests or to cover up one’s own inadequacies, people unite to denigrate someone.

Brought to the Sanhedrin and accused by false witnesses — they had done the same to Jesus and they will do the same to all the martyrs through false testimonies and slander — Stephen proclaims a re-reading of the sacred story centred on Christ, to defend himself. And the Paschal mystery of Jesus dead and Risen is the key to the entire story of the Covenant. Imbued with this overabundance of the Divine Gift, Stephen courageously denounces the hypocrisy with which the prophets and Christ himself had been treated. And he reminds them of the story, saying: “Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered” (Acts 7:52). He does not mince his words, but rather speaks with clarity; he speaks the truth.

This stirs a violent reaction in the audience and Stephen is condemned to death, condemned to be stoned. However, he manifests the true “fabric” of a disciple of Christ. He does not seek shortcuts, he does not appeal to important people who could save him, but rather places his life in the hands of the Lord, and Stephen’s prayer is very beautiful at that moment: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (Acts 7:59) — and he dies as a son of God, forgiving: “Lord do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60).

These words of Stephen teach us that it is not beautiful speeches that reveal our identity as children of God, but that only by surrendering one’s life into the hands of the Father and forgiving those who offend us can the quality of our faith be shown.

There are more martyrs today than there were at the beginning of the life of the Church, and martyrs are everywhere. Today the Church is rich in martyrs, it is steeped in their blood: “The blood of Christians is seed” (Tertullian, *Apology*, 50:13) and ensures the growth and fruitfulness of the People of God. Martyrs are not just “saintly”, but rather men and women in flesh and blood who — as Revelation says — “have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (7:14). They are the true victors.

Let us also ask the Lord today that by looking to the martyrs of yesterday and today, we can learn to live a full life, welcoming the martyrdom of everyday faithfulness to the Gospel and conforming to Christ.

Special Greetings

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today's Audience, especially the groups from England, Scotland, Denmark, Malta, Norway, Kenya, Australia, Mariana Islands, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Sri Lanka and the United States of America. In a particular way my greeting goes to the new seminarians of the Venerable English College as they begin their priestly formation here in Rome. Upon all of you, and your families, I invoke the joy and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ. May God bless you!

I offer a special greeting to *young people, the elderly, the sick and newlyweds*. This Friday, we will celebrate the memorial of Saint Vincent de Paul, Founder and Patron Saint of charitable associations. May the example given to us by Saint Vincent de Paul lead us all to a joyful and selfless service to the neediest and open us up to the duty of hospitality and the gift of life.