

A SAINT FOR THE PARISH – STEPHEN, DEACON AND MARTYR

We are members of a parish church that claims St. Stephen as our patron, but how much do we really know about Stephen?

The story as we know it is found in chapters 6 and 7 of the Book of Acts.

The early Christian congregations had a program of assistance for needy widows, and some of the Greek-speaking Jews in Jerusalem complained that their widows were being neglected. The apostles replied: “We cannot both preach and administer financial matters. Choose seven men from among yourselves, respected, Spirit-filled, and of sound judgment, and let them be in charge of the accounts, and we will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word.” The people accordingly chose seven men, including Stephen, and the apostles laid their hands on them. They are considered to be the first deacons, although the Scriptures do not use the word to describe them.

Stephen was an eloquent speaker, and a provocative one. His declarations that the Temple service was no longer the means by which penitent sinners should seek reconciliation with God enraged the Temple leaders, who caused him to be stoned to death. As he died, he said, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” One of those who approved of the stoning was Saul of Tarsus, who took an active part in the persecution of Christians that followed the death of Stephen, but who was later led to become a Christian himself.

From early times, Stephen was venerated as the patron of horses. A poem of the tenth century pictures him as the owner of a horse and relates how Christ Himself miraculously cured the animal for His Disciple. Though there is no historical basis for this association with horses in the life of Saint Stephen, various explanations have been attempted. Some are founded on ancient Germanic ritual celebrations of horse sacrifices at Yuletide. Others use the fact that in medieval times “Twelfth Night” (Christmas to Epiphany) was a time of rest for domestic animals, and horses, as the most useful servants of man, were accorded at the beginning of this fortnight something like a feast day of their own.

It was a practice among the farmers in Europe to decorate their horses on St. Stephen’s Day, and bring them to the house of God to be blessed by the priest and afterward ridden three times around the church, a custom still observed in many rural sections. Later in the day the whole family takes a ride in a wagon or sleigh (St. Stephen’s ride). In Sweden, the holy deacon was changed by early legend into the figure of a native saint, a stable boy who is said to have been killed by the pagans in Helsingland. His name – Staffan – reveals the original saint. The “Staffan Riders” parade through the towns of Sweden on December 26, singing their ancient carols in honor of the “Saint of Horses.”

Horses’ food, mostly hay and oats, is blessed on St. Stephen’s Day. People throw kernels of these blessed oats at one another and at their domestic animals. In sections of Poland they even toss oats at the priest after Mass. Popular legends say this custom is an imitation of stoning, performed in honor of the saint’s martyrdom.

In the past centuries water and salt were blessed on this day and kept by farmers to be fed to their horses in case of sickness. Women also baked special breads in the form of horseshoes (St. Stephen's horns: *podkovy*) which were eaten on December 26.