

May 8, 2016 St. Stephen Homily: Brothers and sisters, many years ago, I heard a remarkably talented preacher tell a story of a devout Christian family in Soviet Russia whose life was made very difficult because of the official atheism of the country's ruling leaders. Considered as enemies of the state, the family lived under constant surveillance by the secret police. At every opportunity they mocked their beliefs, verbally abused them and, even more troubling, threatened them with physical violence for their willful stubbornness. Undeterred, the family remained loyal to Christ. Their deep faith never wavered an iota.

In time, the Soviet agents of the state learned that they were not easily intimidated. One night, under cover of darkness, a young Soviet agent visited the family without the permission of his superiors. He told the father of the family of his wish to be baptized in the Christian faith. Thinking the agent's words were a calculated trick, he was understandably wary. "Why", the father asked, "do you wish to be baptized? You have made our lives very hard, and why, simply because we are a family of faith? In reply, the young man said, "I have been inspired by your courage and your faithful witness. Your steadfast faith under fire has impressed me very much. I want to be a Christian, too!"

In today's first reading (Acts 7:55-60) we are given an account of the martyrdom of St. Stephen. In the history of Christianity, he is the first Christian to shed his blood for the sake of the gospel of Christ. It is surely worth noting that St. Luke, the author of Acts, devotes two full chapters to him in his chronicle of the early Church. (Chapters six and seven) Luke considers him the perfect model of a disciple.

In particular, the scene of Stephen's death must have had a profound impact on one man. Luke informs us that the witnesses of Stephen's stoning "laid their cloaks at the feet of a young man named Saul of Tarsus (Acts.7:58) and that he, Saul, (later Paul) consented to his execution," (Acts 8:1).

In the final moments of his holy life, Stephen falls to his knees in adoration, forgives his tormenters and hands over his Spirit in a loud cry. His death bears a striking resemblance to the saving death of his crucified and risen Lord.

In the Church today, there is a need for saints. Christian witness makes a difference. Just consider St. Paul!

Remember also the young Soviet agent whose life took a dramatic turn after witnessing the extraordinary faith of a Russian family under fire.

Amen!