

Adventures in Acts

Session 7: The First Christian Martyr

October 18, 2007

Acts of the Apostles, chapters 6 & 7

These two chapters can fairly easily be divided into a few simple sections based on the events that unfold at this point in the life of the early Church:

- 1. the emergence of a need for new specific ministers: Deacons**
- 2. the choice of eight Deacons, with particular emphasis placed on Stephen**
- 3. the accusation of Stephen**
- 4. the response of Stephen**
- 5. the martyrdom of Stephen**

1. The emergence of a need for new specific ministers: Deacons

As the early Christian community develops and grows, communal needs emerge, and corresponding ministerial needs emerge.

The Apostles found themselves overwhelmed in caring for the community, and began to realize that things needed to be (re)structured so that

- the needs of the community be better met
- they, as priests, better exercise what is properly their ministry

Those members of the community who are ordained ministers have a specific role.

They can, at times, be “jacks-of-all-trades”,

but this really ought to be temporary, if they are not to lose focus.

The priest’s role is most deeply and properly defined in reference to the Eucharist.

At this point, amongst other reasons, given the Jewish precedent,

the centrality of the Eucharist was still coming into focus,

and the role of the Apostles – priests – is defined as

- devotion to prayer
- ministry of the word

Forget not how the *gradual* emergence of the Church’s understanding of Christ and herself in reference to Christ is not a problem.

We are not *sola scriptura*, which leads one to think

that whatever is not explicit in Scripture is

- not meant to be
- incorrect

WRONG!

Acts chapter 6 describes the institution of the office of Deacon.

Now, some Protestants disagree with this.

The early Tradition (specifically the Church Fathers), however, is unanimous.

As stated, ministers, Deacons were needed to “serve at table”.

“Deacon” indeed translates “server”, but we are not talking Ruby Tuesday!

It is somewhat uncertain what exactly the “service at table” entailed:

actual serving or more the management of the whole enterprise.

It clearly had to do with the distribution of food to needy members of the community, surprisingly and movingly considered important enough in the life of the community to warrant an ordained ministry.

The need for Deacons to be good managers and not be “greedy for sordid gain”, as mentioned by St. Paul to Timothy, also suggests a role in the managing of finances. The role of the deacon was also coming into focus.

This service set the stage for the deacon’s later more liturgical role in the community. In the end, as with the priesthood, the diaconate is ordered to the Eucharist.

The deacon *prepares, gathers, and distributes*.

The deacon *prepares* the altar, *gathers* the offering – both material and spiritual, and has a preponderate, unique role as regards the *distribution* of this spiritual food to the needy, i.e. each and every member of the community.

The **Apostolic Constitutions**, a fourth-century pseudo-apostolic collection (with which I was entirely unfamiliar until I prepared this presentation!) says that Deacons are to be, in relation to the Bishop,

- “his ears and eyes and mouth and heart” *or, as it is stated elsewhere*
- “his soul and his senses”

As New Advent encyclopedia says, based on these “Apostolic Constitutions”,

“They saw that the faithful occupied their proper places, that none gossiped or slept. They were to welcome the poor and aged and to take care that they were not at a disadvantage as to their position in church. They were to stand at the men's gate as janitors to see that during the Liturgy none came or went, and as St. Chrysostom says in general terms: “if anyone misbehave let the deacon be summoned” (Hom. xxiv, in Act. Apost.). Besides this they were largely employed in the direct ministry of the altar, preparing the sacred vessels and bringing water for the ablutions. Most especially were they conspicuous by their marshaling and directing the congregation during the service.”

NB What about Deaconesses? There is mention in Romans 16:1 of Phoebe...

This is an issue to which we need to return.

In the meantime, allow me to refer you to the article in New Advent.

2. The choice of Eight Deacons, with particular emphasis placed on Stephen

Eight men are chosen.

Three qualifications are enumerated:

1. reputable
2. filled with Holy Spirit
3. wise

These qualifications are complemented by those listed in I Timothy 3:8-13.

1. dignified
2. not deceitful
3. sober
4. not greedy
5. holding fast to the mystery of faith with a clear conscience
6. married only once
7. good parent and household manager

Candidates should also be tested.

It is not clear how they are to be tested...

Interestingly, the *whole community* chose.

There was some sort of “general election” by popular vote.

The specifics of the appropriate way to transmit orders,
as was the case with specifics of the roles of priests and deacons,
was still coming into focus.

This new moment in the life of the early Church occurs in the midst of great growth.

v.7: “spread”, “increased greatly”, “large group”

It is growth of the Christian community by more persons

“becoming *obedient* to the faith”

What is the “obedience of faith”?

We read about it in Romans 1:5 and 16:26.

The obedience of faith is not some sort of moral alignment.

The obedience of faith is an acquiescence and yielding of the mind.

The Catechism speaks of this in #142 and #143.

Now, acquiescence and yielding are acts of the will, are they not?

One acquiesces and yields *willfully*.

The act of faith implies the intellect being moved by the will.

The object of faith is not obvious as is the object of everyday experience and knowledge.

Exteriorly speaking, therefore, the act of faith,

i.e. God and all that is claimed to be revealed about God and the world in relation to God,
seems to be akin to opinion, to opining.

The will thus “compensates” the lack, i.e. prompts and/or moves there where the intellect would normally be prompted and moved by the object of experience in its obviousness.

To “bring about the obedience of faith”, as mentioned in Romans, is thus

not to force people into religious submission to a belief system,

but to encourage this willful, and thus *loving*,

acquiescence and yielding to the invisible God.

3. The accusation of Stephen

Stephen is chosen and as quickly Stephen is *accused*.

He is accused of “speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God” (v. 11).

As the false witnesses later testify, Stephen supposedly claims that Jesus the Nazorean will destroy the Temple and change the customs transmitted by Moses.

Then an amazing something happens to the countenance of Stephen:

“his face was like the face of an angel” (v. 15).

The aspect of unbearable irresistibility enraged Stephen’s opponents all the more.

Notice the parallel that is being established between Stephen and Jesus.

It is in fact more than a parallel. It is the *configuration* of Stephen to the person of Jesus.

- v.8: “filled with grace and power”
- v.8: “working wonders and signs among the people”
- v. 10: “they could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which he spoke”
- v. 15: “his face was like the face of an angel”

Not just Christ-like, but Christ.

4. The response of Stephen

Stephen's response to the accusations is very much like those of Jesus.

He refers to Jewish history, to

- recall previous hardness of heart
- unveil the hardness of heart of his accusers

He recalls

- the patriarchs selling Joseph, Abraham's grandson, into slavery (v.9)
- Moses' brethren threatening him when he tries to stop in-fighting (v. 27-28)
- the ancestors unwilling to obey Moses (v. 39)
- the idolatry into which the Jewish people had fallen (v. 48)

He respectfully prepares them, in

- recalling God's promises to bless (with land and kingdom and descendants), and that he could very well be an instrument through which God fulfills His promises
- recalling that no one is immune to such hardness

He respectfully prepares them, but when he corrects them it is *strongly* so!

5. The martyrdom of Stephen

The reaction to Stephen's response is one of anger, *unfounded*, *unjustified* anger.

We become angry when we perceive something unfair.

Our perception can be right and the resultant anger is founded and justified.

Jesus' anger in the Temple was founded and justified and holy.

Our perception can be wrong and the resultant anger is *unfounded* and *unjustified*.

The high priest and those with him perceived that Stephen was unfair.

The ultimate unfairness was his claim of their infidelity to the law.

They know the law; it is their "professional turf".

It was a low blow, *but true*.

Their anger was unfounded and unjustified.

In various ways, they were unfaithful in spirit to the law,

...and their infidelities made them unready and unable to receive Jesus.

They are infuriated, and they grind their teeth (an image less familiar to us).

The "grinding of teeth" signifies grave discontent and a "regret" at what has befallen.

The last straw, beyond any perceived unfairness,
was the vision which Stephens describes to them.

Stephen fulfills the very prophecy that Jesus made to the high priest in Mark 14:62.

Then they do that wonderfully mature thing that we do

when we do not want to hear something: cover our ears and cry out "blah blah blaaaaah".

He is stoned to death, making him the first *martyr* of the Church,

i.e. the first to be killed to remain faithful to his bond with Jesus.

Before we explore martyrdom, what is significance of the detail about the cloaks being laid before Saul, who, at this point, is persecuting the Church? I do not know!

Stephen is martyred.

As he is dying, he expresses the ultimate conformity with Christ.

He utters the last two things that Jesus uttered from the Cross to the Father.

The last two things are the most intimate things, for the law of love is such.

What is deepest in the heart is last expressed and accomplished.

Stephen expresses a heart completely transfigured.

What is a martyr?

The Greek word *martus* signifies a witness who testifies to something he/she knows from personal experience. In this broader sense, the Apostles were "witnesses" of all that Christ lived and taught. St. Peter, in his address to the Apostles and disciples relative to the election of a successor to Judas earlier in Acts (1:22), employs the term with this meaning: "Wherefore, of these men who have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus came and went among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day he was taken up from us, one of these must be made *witness* with us of his resurrection".

Very quickly, however, a new shade of meaning is already noticeable given the real possibility of severe punishment and even death itself faced by disciples of Christ.

A witness of Christ very quickly might be called upon to deny Jesus, under penalty of death.

St. John uses the term martyr in this sense in the Book of Revelation (2:13; 6:9).

Gradually it came to mean exclusively the witness who gives his/her life.

Stephen "falls asleep", a typically Jewish way of expressing death.

He "falls asleep" as he expresses love for those stoning him.

He gave so that he could be received.

No purgatory for him.

Purgatory is the final transfiguration of our hearts.

What love we have not poured forth will need to be poured forth

so that we can definitively be received into God's embrace...