

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 28, 2021
MONK-MARTYR STEPHEN THE NEW

The Monk Martyr and Confessor Stephen the New was born in 715 at Constantinople into a pious Christian family. His parents, having two daughters, prayed the Lord for a son. The mother of the new-born Stephen took him to the Blachernae church of the Most Holy Theotokos and dedicated him to God.

During the reign of the emperor Leo the Isaurian (716-741) there was a persecution against the holy icons and against those venerating them. With the support of the emperor, the adherents of the Iconoclast heresy seized control of the supreme positions of authority in the Empire and in the Church. Persecuted by the powers of this world, Orthodoxy was preserved in monasteries far from the capital, in solitary cells, and in the brave and faithful hearts of its followers.

The Orthodox parents of St Stephen, grieved by the prevailing impiety, fled from Constantinople to Bithynia, and they gave over their sixteen-year-old son in obedience to the monk John, who labored in asceticism in a solitary place on the Mount of St Auxentius. St Stephen dwelt with the venerable monk John for more than fifteen years, devoting himself totally to this spirit-bearing Elder, and learning monastic activity from him. Here Stephen received the news that his father was dead, and his mother and sisters had been tonsured as nuns.

After a certain time his teacher John also died. With deep sorrow St Stephen buried his venerable body, and continued with monastic effort in his cave by himself. Soon monks began to come to the ascetic, desiring to learn from him the virtuous and salvific life, and a monastery was established, with St Stephen as the igumen. At forty-two years of age Stephen left the monastery he founded, and he went to another mountain, on whose summit he dwelt in deep seclusion in a solitary cell. But here also a community of monks soon gathered, seeking the spiritual guidance of St Stephen.

Leo the Isaurian was succeeded by Constantine Copronymos (741-775), a fiercer persecutor of the Orthodox, and an even more zealous iconoclast. The emperor convened an Iconoclast Council,

attended by 358 bishops from the Eastern provinces. However, except for Constantine, the Archbishop of Constantinople, illegitimately raised to the patriarchal throne by the power of Copronymos, not one of the other patriarchs participated in the wicked doings of this Council, thus making it less likely to style itself as "ecumenical." This council of heretics, at the instigation of the emperor and the archbishop, described icons as idols, and pronounced an anathema on all who venerated icons in the Orthodox manner, and it described icon veneration as heresy.

Meanwhile, the monastery of Mount Auxentius and its igumen became known in the capital. They told the emperor about the ascetic life of the monks, about their Orthodox piety, about the igumen Stephen's gift of wonderworking, and of how St Stephen's fame had spread far beyond the region of the monastery, and that the name of its head was accorded universal respect and love. The saint's open encouragement of icon veneration and the implied rebuff to the persecutors of Orthodoxy within the monastery of Mount Auxentius especially angered the emperor. Archbishop Constantine realized that in the person of St Stephen he had a strong and implacable opponent of his iconoclastic intentions, and he plotted how he might draw him over to his side or else destroy him.

They tried to lure St Stephen into the Iconoclast camp, at first with flattery and bribery, then by threats, but in vain. Then they slandered the saint, accusing him of falling into sin with the nun Anna. But his guilt was not proven, since the nun courageously denied any guilt and died under torture and beatings. Finally, the emperor gave orders to lock up the saint in prison, and to destroy his monastery. Iconoclast bishops were sent to St Stephen in prison, trying to persuade him of the dogmatic correctness of the Iconoclast position. But the saint easily refuted all the arguments of the heretics and he remained true to Orthodoxy.

Then the emperor ordered that the saint be exiled on one of the islands in the Sea of Marmora. St Stephen settled into a cave, and there also his disciples soon gathered. After a certain while the saint left the brethren and took upon himself the exploit of living atop a pillar. News of the stylite Stephen, and the miracles worked by his prayers, spread throughout all the Empire and strengthened

the faith and spirit of Orthodoxy in the people.

The emperor gave orders to transfer St Stephen to prison on the island of Pharos, and then to bring him to trial. At the trial, the saint refuted the arguments of the heretics sitting in judgment upon him. He explained the dogmatic essence of icon veneration, and he denounced the Iconoclasts because in blaspheming icons, they blasphemed Christ and the Mother of God. As proof, the saint pointed to a golden coin inscribed with the image of the emperor. He asked the judges what would happen to a man who threw the coin to the ground, and then trampled the emperor's image under his feet. They replied that such a man would certainly be punished for dishonoring the image of the emperor. The saint said that an even greater punishment awaited anyone who would dishonor the image of the King of Heaven and His Saints, and with that he spat on the coin, threw it to the ground, and began to trample it underfoot.

The emperor gave orders to take the saint to prison, where already there were languishing 342 Elders, condemned for the veneration of icons. In this prison St Stephen spent eleven months, consoling the imprisoned. The prison became like a monastery, where the usual prayers and hymns were chanted according to the Typikon. The people came to the prison in crowds and asked St Stephen to pray for them.

When the emperor learned that the saint had organized a monastery in prison, where they prayed venerated holy icons, he sent two of his own servants, twin-brothers, to beat the saint to death. When these brothers went to the prison and beheld the face of the monk shining with a divine light, they fell down on their knees before him, asking his forgiveness and prayers, then they told the emperor that his command had been carried out. But the emperor learned the truth and he resorted to yet another lie. Informing his soldiers that the saint was plotting to remove him from the throne, he sent them to the prison. The holy confessor himself came out to the furious soldiers, who seized him and dragged him through the streets of the city. They then threw the lacerated body of the martyr into a pit, where they were wont to bury criminals.

On the following morning a fiery cloud appeared over Mount Auxentius, and then a heavy darkness descended upon the capital, accompanied by hail, which killed many people.

GREAT VESPERS

LORD I CALL: Six stikhera of the resurrection in tone 6 (spiral bound vespers book), followed by three stikhera for the Saint Saint, tone 6:

You offered yourself fully to the Master from your youth, transcending the flesh and worldly love.

You were an excellent monk, O most holy Stephen, and a vessel of the Spirit of God.

You were imprisoned in a narrow hut, O blessed one, but you gave your mind wings to fly to the heavens to behold the ineffable beauty of Christ our King and God.// Venerating His image, you suffered greatly.

Imprisoned in a dungeon, you fasted for forty days like the Master, preparing yourself for suffering, O holy Stephen, confirmation of monks and adornment of martyrs. Therefore, those who had no mercy, fell upon you like wild beasts, dragging you like an innocent lamb. They unjustly tore your body to pieces and cast you out with the evildoers. You suffered greatly,// and now you pray boldly on behalf of our souls.

Evil men, subject to the iniquity of the lawless emperor, stoned you without pity, O venerable one, like the honored Protomartyr Stephen. They crushed your holy head, O Father, dragging you most savagely through the streets, causing your bowels to spill forth, O most blessed one, showing you no mercy even after you were dead.

How great was your courage!
How great were your fortitude and endurance!//
By them, O Stephen, you have received an unfading crown.

Glory... Saint, tone 6:

Like the great prophet Samuel, O Stephen,
you were dedicated to God while yet an infant.
Having ascended the mountain, you were well-pleasing to Him in
the monastic life.
You manfully stripped yourself for the contest,
enduring banishment and tribulation with patience.
You bore fetters and imprisonment for His image.
You were dragged and beaten;
you were stoned, and your head was crushed.
Therefore you were crowned by Christ God.
Entreat Him that those who celebrate your honorable memory
may be delivered from sufferings, temptations and the tribulation to
come,//
and that our souls may be saved!

NOW AND EVER... The Dogmatikon in tone 6 (spiral bound vespers book)

APOSTIKHA: All stikhera of the resurrection in tone 6 (spiral bound vespers book)

GLORY... Saint, tone 8:

O venerable Father, greatly-suffering Stephen,
you preserved unharmed that which is according to the image
as a manful champion of Christ's image,
not fearing the threats of Copronymus.
Indeed, you slew him with the sword of the Spirit.
Therefore, since you have acquired boldness before God,//
save your flock from all heresies!

NOW AND EVER...The Theotokion of the Resurrection in tone 8, (spiral bound vespers book)

TROPARIA

Resurrection, tone 6

The Angelic Powers were at Your tomb;
the guards became as dead men.
Mary stood by Your grave,
seeking Your most pure body.
You captured hell, not being tempted by it.
You came to the Virgin, granting life.
O Lord, Who rose from the dead,//
glory to You.

Glory... Saint Stephen, tone 4

Trained in asceticism on the mountain,
with the weapon of the Cross you destroyed the spiritual assaults of
the hostile powers, all-blessed one;
Again you bravely prepared for combat
and slew Copronymus with the sword of faith;
for both struggles you have been crowned by God monk-martyr
Stephen of eternal memory.

Now & ever... Resurrectional Dismissal Theotokion, tone 4

The mystery of all eternity,
unknown even by Angels,
through you, Theotokos, is revealed to those on earth:
God incarnate by union without confusion.
He voluntarily accepted the Cross for us,
by which He resurrected the first-created man,//
saving our souls from death.

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