

Homily

5th Sunday of Lent – A

Rev. Peter G. Jankowski

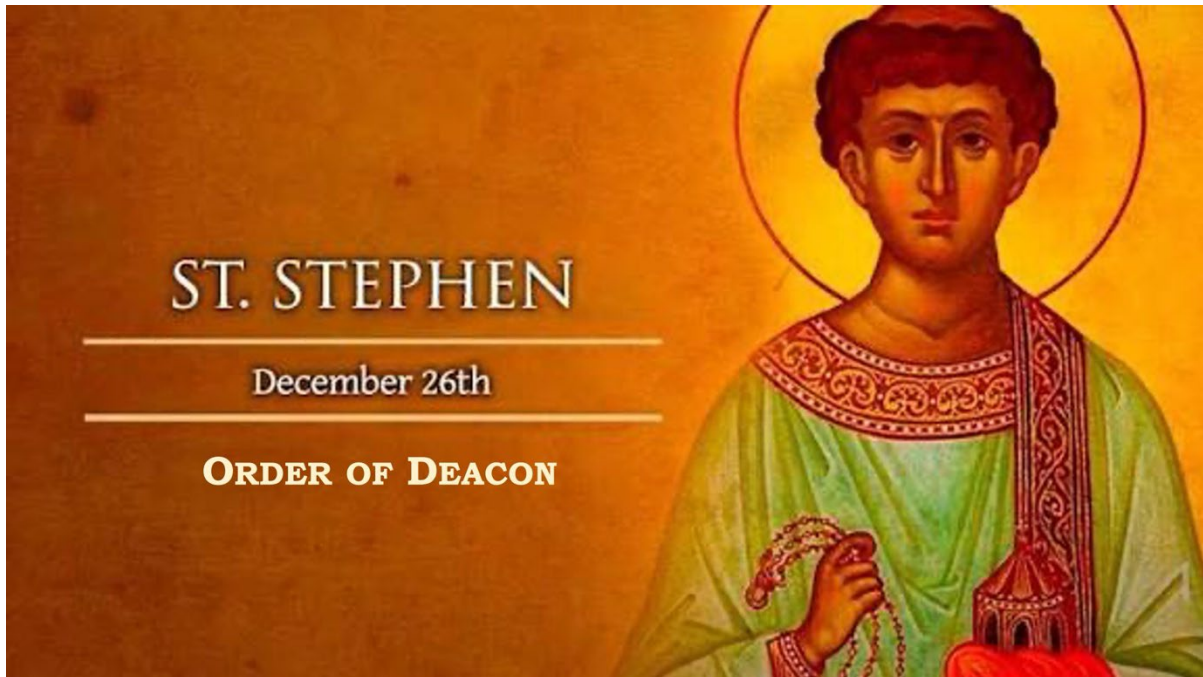
March 21-21, 2026

Ez 37: 12-14

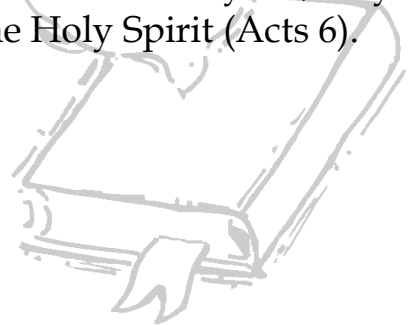
Ps 130: 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8

Rm 8: 8-11

Jn 11: 1-45



As several disciples continued to grow, the Greek speaking Christians complained against the Hebrew speaking Christians, saying that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. So, the twelve called together the community of the disciples and said, "It is not right for us to neglect the word of God to serve at table. Brothers, select from among you seven reputable men filled with the spirit and wisdom whom we shall appoint to this task. Whereas we shall devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word. The proposal was acceptable to the whole community. So, they chose St. Stephen, a man filled with faith in the Holy Spirit (Acts 6).



The Acts of the Apostles say that St. Stephen was a man filled with grace and power who offered great wonders among the people. Certain Jews, members of the synagogue of Roman freed men, debated with Stephen, but proved no match for the wisdom and spirit from which he spoke. The leaders of the Sanhedrin persuaded others to make the charge of blasphemy against him.

As a result, Stephen was seized and carried before the Sanhedrin. In his speech, St. Stephen recalled God's guidance through Israel's history as well as Israel's idolatry in disobedience. Stephen then claimed that his persecutors were committing identical sins as their ancestors and were opposed to the work of the Holy Spirit. Stephen's speech brought anger from the crowd, but filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen looked up intently to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Stephen then proclaimed, "Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

Hearing what they considered blasphemy, the leaders of the faith threw Stephen out of the city and began to stone him. As they were

stoning St. Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” St. Stephen died as Jesus did, falsely accused, brought to unjust condemnation because he spoke the truth fearlessly. He died with his eyes trustfully fixed on God and with a prayer of forgiveness on his lips.

A happy death is one that finds us in the same spirit. Whether our dying is as quiet as Joseph’s or as violent as Stephen’s, dying with courage, total trust, and forgiving love. As offered in prayer,

O God Our Creator, from your provident hand we have received our right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. You have called us as your people and given us the right and the duty to worship you, the only true God, and your Son, Jesus Christ. Through the power and working of your Holy Spirit, you call us to live out our faith in the midst of the world, bringing the light and the saving truth of the Gospel to every corner of society.

We ask you to bless us in our vigilance for the gift of religious liberty. Give us the strength of mind and heart to readily defend our freedoms when they are threatened; give us courage in making our voices heard on behalf of the rights of your Church and the freedom of conscience of all people of faith.

Grant, we pray, O heavenly Father, a clear and united voice to all your sons and daughters gathered in your Church in this decisive

hour in the history of our nation, so that, with every trial withstood and every danger overcome – for the sake of our children, our grandchildren, and all who come after us – this great land will always be “one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

That prayer is dedicated to a 16th Century saint named St. Thomas More, who was a defender of the law, both secular and church, and ended up losing his life for defending a cause. St. Thomas ended up opposing King Henry VIII, who had broken from the Church in the 16th Century because his first wife could not bear children. As a result, Henry divorced her to marry another and demanded that St. Thomas Moore, the chancellor, permit him to do so.

As the story tells us, St. Thomas More refused the request of King Henry VIII. Say what you will about St. Thomas More; St. Thomas stood his ground on a specific issue and he ended up losing his life in the process because he had integrity of heart to stand up for a cause. To stand up for a cause is not easy, especially in today’s society.

When celebrated a “Red Mass” way back on February 15 for Judge Patrick Burns from St. Anne’s Church here in this church, so many lawyers and judges processed into this Church and attended that Mass. I came to find out that we had never celebrated a “Red Mass” in Kankakee County until February 15 in honor of Judge Burns.

At this Mass, I was thinking about how Judge Burns, a man of integrity, defended the Church, defended his community, defended his family, and very much lived the Catholic faith while serving as a judge in Kankakee County. He was one of those Catholics who attended Mass from the back of the church. He quietly contributed to the faith life of this parish, and he very much loved this Church but he did not want to make his faith life public. Judge Burns wanted to keep his faith life secret because he wanted to keep the faith of God in his heart. just like the Fifth Chapter of Matthew’s gospel tells us to do: “When you pray, when you fast, when you give alms, do it in secret so what God sees in secret he will repay you.”

I honestly believe that Judge Burns and the way he lived his life very much followed what Jesus told us to do in the Fifth Chapter of Matthew's gospel. As a result, we offered a special Mass a "Red Mass" on behalf of all the judges and all the lawyers and all those who work in the world of jurisprudence, to tell them that we support them and we love them. When judges and lawyers live a life of integrity, to defend the nation, to defend the defendant, to moderate between the two, which is the role of judges, then we understand what this country means and what kind of ethics we live in order to protect the rights of the individual and the rights of the state.

If we look back at the life of St. Stephen in the first century we encounter a man who is one of the first seven deacons of the church. As we are taught, a deacon stays in a local community and defends the teachings of God among the people with whom he lives. A deacon defends those rights of the community, and stands for the life of Christ, the way as they called to do so, offering the Lord's grace in the community where he serves.

For St. Stephen, his life did not sit well with those of mainstream Judaism of the First Century and so as part of the belief system of the First Century, St. Stephen was killed as a result of his beliefs. St. Stephen was stoned to death = the way he was killed was by having the people of the time toss him off a cliff and then throw boulders and rocks on top of the tossed person until the person died.

According to this martyrdom as portrayed in Acts 7, which the community martyred St. Stephen, up on a hill stood a man who enabled this murder named *Saulos Paulos* or as we came to know him, St. Paul the Apostle. During this martyrdom, the people of the time threw their cloaks at his feet of *Saulos Paulos* while they were killing Stephen.

In today's age, Saulos Paulos in no way would ever be considered a saint, let alone be allowed to remain free in our society after enabling such a murder. In today's age, *Saulos Paulos* probably would have been imprisoned or executed for what he had enabled the people to do. That said, we learn in Acts that God chose *this* particular man spewing murderous threats at that particular moment to become the one who

would take this Christian ministry of faith and carry it over to the Gentiles and to “the ends of the earth (Acts 1: 8).”

As we learn, this conversion of faith is important for us to learn because each one of us is a sinner in need of God’s mercy. We learn that God calls each of us to change our lives so that we can follow the ways of God; this is what *Saulos Paulos* did, for his salvation and ours. Through this conversion, St. Paul changed his way of life; he defended the gospel and ultimately, he lost his life in the same way that St. Stephen lived his.

The story of Stephen’s conversion talks about a faith of this first martyr of the church, this *proto-martyr* who was willing to stand up for a cause and became hated for what he preached. As I have learned all too often, when many better people before me and after me have learned, when you stand up for a cause, you are not going to be popular. Jesus referenced this in the scriptures. In Mt 10: 22, Jesus explicitly tells us that by living the gospel message and preaching Christ crucified, people will

revile you and will abuse you. by living the gospel message, people will persecute you but, in the end, the faithful soul will persevere.

Not much has changed in the last two thousand years except for the way good souls get persecuted. We realize that society may hate you, the world may hate you but if you do what is right in God's eyes, God will carry you over to the next life. I keep reminding myself that no matter how we live our lives, eventually each one of us is going to die. Our lives are very short (most likely, less than a hundred years). Judge Burns died at the age of 93. I just lost a cousin who died at the age of 63. People have died in their infancy. People have died of old age but eventually, all of us die and all of us, each one of us, must stand at the foot of God to answer the basic questions. Do we love our God? Do we love our neighbor?

If we live correctly, if we live according to God's plan, God knows what is in our heart. Society may not, but God certainly does and Jesus knew this when he entered the world. Jesus knew that he would have to give up his life at an early age for the sake of the faith and in this gospel

reading in which we are focusing today, we read the seventh of the seven “signs” from the gospel of John where Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead.

That Jesus had the ability to die and rise through the working of his Father through the power of the Holy Spirit revealed who he actually was. The Father’s Son, through the power of the Holy Spirit, allowed Lazarus to rise from the dead; this miracle proved to be “the last straw” for the Jewish leaders of the First Century who wanted to eradicate love itself; the leaders of the First Century wanted to take Jesus’s life because he showed the people of faith who he really was.

What strikes me as awesome from this gospel (which also is reflected in the 19th Chapter of Luke’s gospel) is that Jesus wept. Only two times in our gospel passages does Jesus cry. In Luke 19, Jesus weeps on his way heading into Jerusalem; in this passage from John from today’s gospel, Jesus also cries when he approaches the tomb of Lazarus. In this story, Jesus weeps for us. Jesus weeps for his friend. Jesus has a broken heart because Jesus knows what needs to be done for our salvation, that

he needs to die for our salvation and by his death, we live. The grain of wheat that falls into the ground dies to produce much fruit (John 12: 24) and Jesus must die for the sake of our salvation.

Stephen died by following Jesus' path so that we might live. Thomas More died to preserve our faith and for our salvation as well. St.

Stephen, St. Paul, St. Thomas and certainly our Lord Jesus Christ died because they stood up to defend a principle that most of us would not because most of us do not have the strength of conviction to carry this principle to its radical end. Society probably would not die to defend this faith but God demands us to follow this example if we want to get to the kingdom of heaven.

So, we attend and learn from our Lord's example of faith, how God can raise the dead and can raise us to heaven... if we have faith! St. Stephen remained true to the teachings of God despite the opposition and the oppression and the ultimate martyrdom; we must do the same if we wish to follow St. Stephen, St. Paul and St. Thomas into heaven by holding on to our Lord and allowing the Lord to raise us from the dead.

I would like to conclude today's homily with a prayer attributed to St. Stephen the Proto-Martyr, the first martyr of the church after Christ, one of the first deacons of the church who supported and loved his local community. I would like to offer this for all those who stand up for the principles of faith, come what may. Let us pray for all who hold on to that faith and who defend that faith, for those in the homes who sacrificed their lives for their children and their grandchildren, and for all of you who have been so supportive to our border town communities by making that sacrifice necessary so these parishes can persevere. This is the prayer.

Lord Jesus, you chose Stephen as the first deacon and martyr of your one holy Catholic and apostolic church. The heroic witness of his holy life and death reveals your continuing presence among us through following the example of his living faith. and by his intercession empower us by your Holy Spirit to live as witnesses of the faith in this new missionary age. No matter what our state in life, career, or vocation, help us to proclaim in both word and deed the fullness of the gospel in a world which is waiting to be born a new in Jesus Christ. Pour upon your whole church the same Holy Spirit which animated St. Stephen our proto martyr to be faithful to the end which is the beginning of life eternal in the communion of the trinity through Christ our lord. Amen.

St. Stephen pray for us. This is our prayer.