

STEPHEN, DEACON

Stephen, a Greek-speaking Hellenistic Jew was appointed to help with the distribution of alms to Greek-speaking windows in the Early Church. "And Stephen, full of grace and fortitude, did great wonders and signs among the people" (Acts 6:8). The medieval compendium, the *Golden Legend* begins with a definition of the character of the saint according to the actual name of the person. Therefore we read, "Stephen is a Greek name: it means crown: in Hebrew it means rule. He was the crown of the martyrs for he was their forerunner under the New Covenant . . . He was an exemplar or rule: he showed how one should suffer for Christianity, how one should act or live, and how one should pray for one's enemies." In the construction of saintly biographies, elements of a life that echo those of Christ's are emphasized. The saint is recognized by the parallels between his or her life and that of Christ. The model was a strict application of the words of Saint Paul: "I no longer live but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). Luke is both the author of the Acts of the Apostles, which chronicles Stephen's death, and a Gospel account of Christ's death. The phrasing of both events demonstrates the parallel purpose. The Gospel includes the statement by Christ: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 24:34). Similarly, Stephen is recorded as praying for his tormentors: "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge" (Acts 7: 59). When Stephen realized his impending death, he cried out "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 7: 58), echoing the action of Christ on the Cross, whose last words were "Father into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

Stephen is represented in the central scene dressed in deacon's robes and carrying the stones symbolic of his martyrdom. In tradition, Stephen is honored as the model deacon as well as the protomartyr. He was chosen, along with six others, to administer the material goods of the church, leaving the Apostles to the spiritual matters. Therefore his task was described as the distribution of alms, caring for those without regular income, who in the Gospel are characterized as widows. Thus in the broad Christian tradition he was seen as a model for stewardship, both for the clergy and for the good works required of a responsible laity. The Golden Legend adds that Stephen's name can also be interpreted as "he who speaks with zeal," and in particular "with zeal for the aged," testimony of the specific virtues that Stephen embodied in the hierarchy of saints.



The image in the lunette above Stephen's head is precisely the crown with martyr's palm, explained by the *Golden Legend's* definition of his name. Below, a hand appears offering a crown. The narrative panel shows the moment of that martyrdom. Stephen is outside the walls of Jerusalem, on his knees, praying while beams of light shine down from heaven. In the background Saul, later to experience a dramatic conversion and receive the name of Paul, is looking over the executioners' cloaks, which have been laid at his feet.

The borders contain symbols of Stephen's additional roles. A scapular, symbolic of a yoke or a burden, represents Stephen's response to Christ's injunction: "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart" (Matthew 11:29).



Other symbols appear to have several meanings, references to generic virtues and also to specific liturgical practice for deacons. The aspergill, or holy water sprinkler, is a symbol of purification and of Stephen's role in the entrance rite of the Mass. During the time when the windows were designed, it was customary for the priest to approach the altar through the congregation before the principal Mass on Sunday, sprinkling them and the altar with holy water. The incense container, chalice, candle, and the pitchers for the water and wine of the Mass refer to other liturgical rituals often tended to by a deacon.