

Mass on the Feast of Saint Stephen

In case you participated in Mass on this Feast of Saint Stephen or read the official Roman Catholic readings for the Mass this day, this is just a heads-up to keep you from being misled by an intentional omission in today's readings.

The first reading is from the Acts of the Apostles and tells the story of the martyrdom of the Nonviolent Saint Stephen, ACTS 6:8-10; 7:54-59. It concludes at VERSE 59 with the words, "As they were stoning Saint Stephen, he called out, '*Lord Jesus receive my spirit*'" (ACTS 7:59).

No scholarly or popular rendering of the story of Saint Stephen in Acts that I have ever read, until today, ended with VERSE 59. The story and the entire Chapter in the New Testament on Stephen's martyrdom always and without exception ends with VERSE 60, not 59. VERSE 60 says, "Then he fell to his knees and cried out in a loud voice, '*Lord, do not hold this sin against them;*' and when he said this, he fell asleep" (ACTS 7:60).

What spirit would ever move the Bishops of the Catholic Church in the U.S.—for they alone control the formal Liturgy of the Catholic Church—to alter this important New Testament passage in a way that truncates its intended meaning, which was established in the text two thousand years ago by Luke, the author of ACTS and of the GOSPEL OF LUKE? No one, but no one, removes VERSE 60 from the story of Stephen because in scholarship and in common sense it directly references back to LK 23:33-46, the crucifixion of Jesus narrative. In fact, in the official Catholic Bible in the U.S, THE NEW AMERICAN BIBLE, the footnote for "*Father forgive them for they know not what they do*" (LK 23:34) directs the reader to ACTS 7:60. Why, why eliminate this critical sentence, critical for a proper and clear presentation of what Luke is relating about the Spirit and Truth of Saint Stephen's martyrdom, from the official Mass readings of the Church on the feast of Saint Stephen?

Lex orandi, lex credendi, translates, *the law of praying is the law of believing*. It has been a principle in the Church since the Fifth Century. Of course, and what is seldom discussed, is that its corollary, *the law of believing is also the law of praying*. So, whoever controls the prayer life of the Church, also controls the belief life of Christians and whoever controls the catechesis—formal religion education of the Church from infant to senior citizen—also controls the prayer life.

This rather ingenious circular structure of controlling the beliefs in the institutional Church by controlling the prayer life and controlling the prayer life by controlling the beliefs is of course irrevocably tied to what the controllers (Bishops), of the Liturgical life and of the religious education, present and emphasize as important, and ignore and dismiss as unimportant.

Whatever may be said positively about the symbiotic relationships between *lex orandi, lex credendi*, it all falls to pieces once *legem gubernii politic*, the law of government politics, enters into the equation. At that point the law of prayer becomes an agent to support parochial national, ethnic, military and financial interests, as well as the means being used to achieve those interests—whether consistent with the explicit teaching of Jesus or not. In the history of

the Church, most Bishops have been willing to ignore, cover-up, gloss over and even bracket out authentic Jesus teaching by permitting the *legem gubernii politic* to infect the *lex orandi* and *lex credendi*. The two most disgraceful examples of this in the institutional Church are the NICENE CREED and the remembrance or *anamnesis* of the Mass, where the entire memory of Jesus' life, truth, teaching and way are not mentioned except to say He was born, suffered and died. The historical Apostolic memory, remembrance, given definitively to Christians in the Gospels, is intentionally cut out *in toto*. [See the essay, THE NONVIOLENT EUCHARIST, on either website below.] The historic memory of the Gospel is permeated with Jesus' teaching of Nonviolent Love of friends and enemies from the Sermon on the Mount to Jesus' love of lethal enemies unto His agony and betrayal in Gethsemane and His suffering and death on the Cross. This memory is supposed to be the centerpiece of the Eucharist Narrative revealing the true image of God, His Way and His greatest deed of love on behalf of all human beings. But, since Constantine, it has all been morphed into a sound bite as "suffered and died."

The refusal to have the Acts reading for Saint Stephen's Feast conclude with VERSE 60 is but another example of the virulent plague of *legem gubernii politic* infecting what Bishops approve and foster as the *lex orandi* in the Church, and hence the *lex credendi* in the Church. In the U.S. the Bishops do not seem to want to miss the smallest opening to push the *legem gubernii politic* into the praying life and believing life of Christians. But, of course, history reveals this is not just a parochial problem of the U.S. Churches. This is a long metastasizing malady in the prayer life of all Churches, Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox. Try praying for the enemies created by your local corporate mass media affiliates, by your political and economic big shots by name at Sunday worship and you will not be tolerated for long. In fact, I know Catholics who have done just that and the priest has called them in after Mass and told them not to so pray again at the public prayers of petition.

So to be clear, if the Christian praying life or believing life, regardless of how consistent they are with each other, approves of what Jesus rejects, approves of the opposite of what Jesus teaches, facilitates what is contrary to the teachings of Jesus as God's will, then that piece of the prayer life and belief system must be discarded, regardless of the *legem gubernii politic*. Perhaps all you can do is to discard it for yourself and try to convince your fellow local congregants to not so pray, but faith and love and truth require you do at least this.

Saint Stephen, the first nonviolent martyr, who died loving his lethal enemies in the imitation of Jesus, pray for us.

—EMMANUEL CHARLES MCCARTHY

P.S. The Catholic Bishops of England did not remove from the official text of their Lectionary for the reading on the Feast of St. Stephen the final sentence, "Then he fell to his knees and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them;' and when he said this, he fell asleep."

www.centerforchristiannonviolence.org or www.emmanuelcharlesmccarthy.org