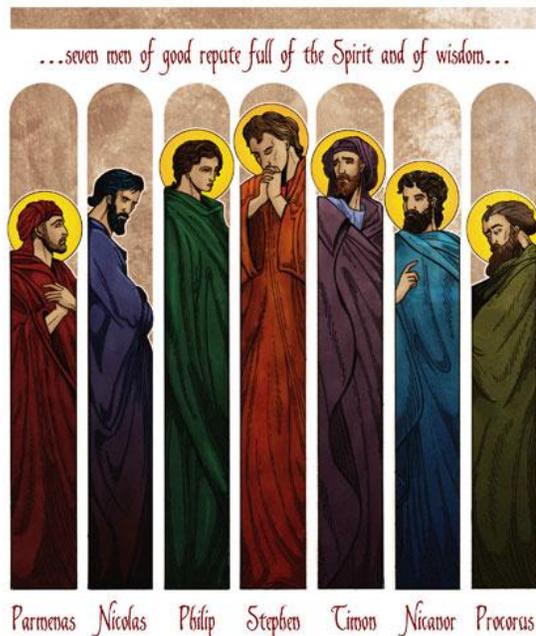


Session #6: Acts Chapter 6:1-7:53

Compiled and written by Theresa Lisiecki

The Need for Assistants, The Beginning of the Deaconate 6:1-7

With Chapter 6 we usher in a new section of Acts. While the troubles outside the Christian community continued St. Luke turns his writings to look at what was going on within this growing faith society. One of the challenges for all who serve the Lord is to find a balance between doing what needs to be done to serve those in need and taking care that one continues to grow in their own faith. What we see here in these next pages the creation of the Deaconate, the call and the unfortunate consequences for some. They follow the example of Moses in the desert (Exodus 18:17-23) and find others to share the work load.



6:1 the Hellenist complained

The Earliest Jerusalem Church was composed entirely of believers from Israel; some were **Hellenists**, and some were **Hebrews**. The Hellenists were Greek-speaking Jewish immigrants who had come to Jerusalem from various Jewish settlements throughout the Roman world. They had grown up with the scripture and prayers in Greek and had a unique culture. The Hebrews were Aramaic-speaking natives who lived in Palestine and therefore read and spoke in Hebrew. Whenever cultures combine there is a clash and we hear, in this chapter a little about that.

their widows were being neglected

As the Christian community sought out their ways of being in their world one of their primary acts was to see to the needs of widows and orphans because they would have no one else to take care of them. Conflict arose because those of the Hellenist community were somehow being neglected. St. Luke does not explain the cause of the neglect, probably prejudice on the Hebrews part combined with lack of goods. The reason that there would be more Hellenist Jewish widows rather than Hebrew is that the Hebrew widows would probably have family in the area to take care of them. It was the custom that the elderly would try to travel back to Jerusalem in their last years so that they could die and be buried in the Holy Land. With this custom these widows returning would have absolutely no means of support other than begging.

6:2 neglect the word of God to serve at table

In this verse we see the two primary functions of the Church in its early days – to teach and preach the good news of Jesus and to serve the poor. Serving the poor is what the Apostles mean by “*servicing at table*”. It could include the actual bringing food to the tables but scholars agree what the Apostles meant by this phrase meant so much more. It was the collecting of donations, buying of food, keeping accounts of monies in

and out, and the bringing of the food to the homes of the needing, especially widows and orphans who were particularly vulnerable over the ages (which would also mean sitting and sharing their company). In essence serving the needs of the poor which is the second responsibility of Deacons to this day, the first being attending or serving the Bishop. The Apostles, on the other hand, believed that their greater responsibility was the study of the Word of God so that they could be about teaching and preaching the truth of salvation. How often in our own lives do we struggle with wanting to attend something at church for spiritual renewal or to donate our time and talent but to be challenged by the need of housework, bills, office or childcare that we neglect if we do.

6:3 pick out seven... As with any good organization when something is everyone's job the consequence is something becomes no one's job. The Apostles realizing that some organization must come to this fledgling group begin to identify roles and the talents to fill those roles. These seven selected are now identified as having a special responsibility or calling that is bears with it a public face. It is not clear here whether St. Luke is seeing this as the establishment of Holy Orders or simply an act of necessity in the moment although scholars agree that this action of the calling of the seven gives rise to the Diaconate. All of the names listed in 6:5 are Greek names suggesting that the seven men were Hellenist chosen to represent the interests of their own community. This promoted fairness, inasmuch as the Greek-speaking community raised the complaint in the first place.

A word about the Diaconate: There are those who, because of the recent rise of Deacons in the Catholic Church, would say that the Diaconate is a new phenomenon. In truth they are as ancient as the early community. In the document *Lumen Gentium* we understand: *"...at a lower level of the hierarchy are to be found deacons, who receive the imposition of hands 'not unto the priesthood, but unto the ministry'. For, strengthened by sacramental grace they are dedicated to the people of God, in conjunction with the bishop and his body of priests, in service of the liturgy, of the Gospel and of works of charity. It pertains to the office of a deacon, in so far as it may be assigned to him by the competent authority, to administer Baptism solemnly, to be custodian and distributor of the Eucharist, in the name of the Church to assist at and to bless marriages, to bring Viaticum to the dying, to read the Sacred Scripture to the faithful, to instruct and exhort the people, to preside over the worship and prayer of the faithful, to administer sacramental and to officiate at funeral and burial services."* (#29)

By the way the ancient Greek word for "to serve" *diakonia* translates into the noun "deacon".

6:4 devote ourselves... With the Deacons now in service focused on the *material* needs of the community the Twelve Apostles (or priests) are now able to focus on *spiritual* needs of the community. The Apostle's job now can be about praying and preaching. But in fact their ministry to teach and preach grew into much more later having to allow for the administrative and educational needs of the Church. And Deacons we also be called to more as well because we later we will see Stephen preaching.

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6:5 Philip... Nicholas of Antioch

What we have here is the first seven men who were called to be Deacons. Let's take a moment to find out a little about each of these men.

- Stephen: Seen as the first deacon of the Catholic faith we will read about him as we continue with this study. For now it is important to know that after preaching and the subsequent debate between himself and members of the Sanhedrin, Stephen was convicted of blasphemy and then stoned to death. Note that Saul of Tarsus (later to become known as St. Paul), a Pharisee bore witness to the martyrdom of St. Stephen. It is also interesting to note that the Feast of St. Stephen is purposely placed on the day after Christmas day, on December 26th. Why? It is reminder each Christmas season that, in the midst of our joy in receiving Christ, those who truly believe and live in accordance with the teaching of Christ will know hardship, pain and even possibly martyrdom for the very reason of their belief.
- Philip: This gentleman we will meet later in Acts 8:5-8, 26-40 and 21:8-9. In Acts 8 we will hear of Philip traveling to the city of Samaria so as to bring the message of Jesus. There he healed the crippled and cured those possessed by demon spirits. Later in the chapter we read of Philip meeting an important Ethiopian eunuch to whom he proclaimed the truth of Jesus Christ, converting and baptizing him. This is one of the scriptures the Church uses as a foundation for the right of Deacons to Baptism in the name of the Church. This Ethiopian is believed to be the one to evangelize what is the present day Sudan. Later in chapter 21 we read of St. Paul (accompanied by St. Luke) going up to Jerusalem for the last time. St. Paul stops in Caesarea and spends several days with Philip. It is believed by scholarship how St. Luke came to know of the conversion story of the Ethiopian eunuch and other elements of the early chapters of Acts.
- Prochorus: While there is nothing further about this saint in Holy Scripture tradition holds that St. Prochorus traveled with St. Peter and/or St. John, one of whom ordained him to be the Bishop of Nicomedia (today Ismir, Turkey).
- Nicanor: We know nothing else about this saint of the Church other than it was believed he was martyred in the mid 70's AD
- Timon, Parmenas: We know nothing else about these two men.
- Nicholas of Antioch: The first thing we absolutely know is that Nicholas was at one point a gentile (non-Jew). How do we know that because in the verse he is identified as *a convert to Judaism*. Otherwise we know nothing else

6:6 laid their hands

This is a symbolic gesture of consecration and commissioning. This gesture is found in the Old Testament as a way the process of ordaining the Levites (Numbers 8:5-7) and we see it as a way of conferring wisdom and grace on Joshua (Numbers 8:10). We can later read in the letters to Timothy the early community continuing this practice of laying on of hands to ordain (1 Timothy 4:14; 5:22 and 2 Timothy 1:6) Today we continue this tradition as priests and bishops call down the grace of God in sacramental moments such as Baptism, Confirmation, Reconciliation/Penance, Anointing of the Sick, and Ordination to Holy Orders.

6:7 the word of God continued to spread

With this verse St. Luke brings an end to this short Thus Luke brings closure to this short narrative of the first Christian community. Once again he shows that this community of believers continued to grow and get stronger, and even those who were counted at one time as their enemy now stand as believers.

many of the priests St. Luke is referring to here were those of the Levite tradition who converted from the priestly ranks. It is possible these “priests” were also from an Essene group of priests who lived in the southwestern quarter of Jerusalem. In any regard St. Luke is referring to Priests of the Jewish Temple

In this next section, (6:8-8:1), although a bit long, we must look at it as one whole movement within the Acts of the Apostles. What we will be looking at is the last days of St. Stephen, the first martyr of the Christian faith. What begins as the joyous telling of the power of the Holy Spirit within Stephen, false testimony that brings about his arrest which leads to a speech given by St. Stephen which leads to his conviction and ultimate death by stoning. In many ways this section is written to remind us of those last hours of Jesus.

Stephen is Arrested 6:8-15

6:9 synagogue of the Freedmen

While it is less prevalent today, there was a time in the Catholic Church where there could be two or three Catholic Churches each catering to a distinct population. When I worked in north-central Louisiana (in the early 1980’s) there was one small community that had two Catholic Churches sitting side by side – one Catholic Church where the whites celebrated Mass and the other where the black Catholics celebrated Mass. So it was even in the time of Christ. A synagogue is basically a community center where a Rabbi teaches and a community gathers for prayer, education and social events. In this case scholars believe the synagogue of the Freedmen was a community of descendants of the Jews that were enslaved by Pompey after his conquest of Judea in 63 BC and taken to Rome. It was not uncommon for a slave owner to free his slaves upon the owner’s death or for some outstanding service provided. Scholars believe this synagogue of Freedmen to be just such men having now returned to Jerusalem. Because of their reaction to Stephen and his preaching regarding salvation and Jesus as the Christ these Jews of the Freedmen Synagogue were more inflexible regarding their Jewish faith.

6:11 heard him speak blasphemous words

In the same way that this was the crime of Jesus, Stephen is accused of speaking against what the Jews believe to be the truth of God and considered (by the Jews) the most heinous crime. If we look at Leviticus 24:16 we read: *whoever utters the name of the Lord in a curse shall be put to death. The whole community shall stone that person; alien and native-born alike must be put to death for uttering the Lord’s name in a curse.* This is the law that allows the Sanhedrin to put St. Stephen to his death.

6:12 brought him before the council... Stephen is taken to the Jewish high court, the Sanhedrin.

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6:13 They presented false witnesses

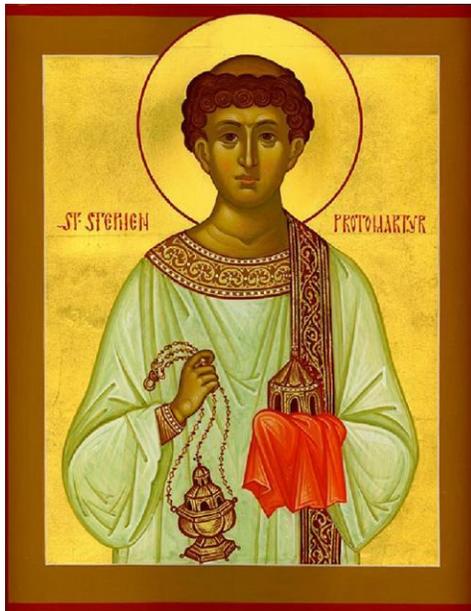
While the death will be brought about by different means St. Luke writes offers this fact with a purpose, to show a parallel to the death of Jesus. The Sanhedrin manipulates the moment to bring about their desired end (death) by finding individuals who are willing to bring false witness against the accused.

6:15 his face like the face of an angel

The presence of God can not only be felt but at times can be seen by others. In Daniel 3:92 King Nebuchadnezzar looks at the three young men in the fiery furnace, sees a forth and says: *looks like a son of God*. It is said that there was a change in countenance in St. Polycarp at his martyrdom. And let us not forget the Transfiguration of Jesus (Matthew 17:1–9, Mark 9:2–8, Luke 9:28–36)

Stephen's Speech to the Council 7:1-53

Stephen, most likely, realizes his fate is set, so he offers a speech or teaching using the history of the Israelite people as the canvas from which he draws. The history in this speech is divided into three historical periods: the Patriarchs (verses 1-16), Moses (verses 17-43) and the building of the Temple (verses 44-50). The last verses are given over to tie the whole argument together. Throughout the speech we will see two themes:



1. Looking over the past, how has the people of Israel reacted to God's chosen leaders? They have consistently rejected them.
2. Stephen will point out that the Jews have misconstrued God's intention for the Temple. Yes, it is a place where God can be worshipped but God can be worshipped anywhere.

This is the longest speech in Acts. It is twice as long as Peter's speech at Pentecost. And throughout this speech Stephen will not once mention the name of Jesus. The closest he comes is in verse 52 naming the Righteous one. Scholars suggest there was no need since all gathered in the Sanhedrin would have understood what Stephen was saying was directly connected to Jesus.

7:2 appeared to our father Abraham...in Mesopotamia

Scholars are a little bewildered by this statement. We read in Genesis 12:1 that it was while living in Haran that God first spoke to Abraham. It could be that Stephen is referring to Abraham's original home, the city of Ur which was in Mesopotamia which is present day Iraq. Stephen's point here? God spoke to Abraham – not in the Temple and not while standing in the Promised Land. Conclusion: God is everywhere and will speak where God chooses. God is not controlled by space and place.

7:4 this land

Stephen is speaking of here the land promised to their forefather Abraham, what is also called Canaan

7:7 *worship me in this place*

This was the call and the promise that came out of the Israelites being freed from slavery in Egypt. They were to be led to the Promised Land and to live out their lives worshipping God

7:9-16 -- Joseph

In this section Stephen retells the story of Joseph. Scholars believe he does so in anticipation of his audience making the connection that Jesus, just like Joseph, was rejected and then rescued by God and end up becoming the cause of redemption for all.

7:12-13 *a first time...The second time*

Why would Stephen choose this little fact in salvation history, that Jacob traveled to Egypt twice? In keeping to the comparison between the patriarchs and Jesus – Joseph just like Jesus was not recognized for who he was, their salvation. It was only in the second visit, with Jesus at His resurrection, that he revealed himself for who he truly was.

7:14 *seventy five souls*

These would be the wives, children and grandchildren of Jacob. Further proof of Stephen's connection to the Hellenists. Stephen is quoting from the Greek version of the Old Testament. In the Hebrew version the count is 70 omitting the descendants through Joseph sons: Ephraim (two sons, one grandson) and Manasseh (two sons)

7:16 *Shechem*

According to the Hebrew Old Testament the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob..) were buried in Mach-pelah (Genesis 49:29-32) and Joseph alone was buried at Shechem (Jos 24:32). It was a Samaritan tradition to place the tombs of all the patriarchs in Shechem.

7:17-22—Early life of Moses

Stephen continues with the story and turns his attention to Moses who for Jews was the life that would prefigure the life of the Messiah. Stephen uses this concept to show that Jesus fits that pattern just shown in Joseph and now Moses of rejection, rescue and redemption

7:21 *Pharaoh's daughter*

We need to keep our eyes and hearts open in this message from Stephen and look to why he is including certain details. This verse is a good example. Stephen is challenging the Sanhedrin who believes that God can only be found in the Temple and only connects with them, the Chosen People, the Jews. Yet Stephen is reminding them in this one simple fact that God works through all people, chosen or not. The Pharaoh's daughter acted in God's plan to save Moses.

7:22 *wisdom of the Egyptians*

While it is written nowhere in the bible we can assume that Moses, living in the house of the Pharaoh, raised by the daughter of the Pharaoh would have received the same education of wealthy Egyptian boys.

he was mighty in his words and deeds
who prefigured Jesus.

Stephen offers this of Moses as the one

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7:23-29 Moses Rejected

7:23 forty years old

We read in Deuteronomy 34:7 that Moses lived to be 120 years old. Because those in the old testament used a wide variety of ways of marking time (phases of the moon for one) and none of them similar to our contemporary way we are unsure of how old Moses really was, but Stephen will break down Moses life into three 40 year periods.

1. The forty years from his birth to his escape from Egypt.
2. The forty years in Midian (Exodus 7:7 records that Moses was eighty years old at the time of his return to Egypt, also see Acts 7:30).
3. The forty years Moses led Israel from the Exodus liberation to his death at the border of the Promised Land at 120 years old (Deuteronomy 34:7; Acts 7:36).

7:29 Moses fled

Stephen is continuing his theme. Moses has come back to reunite with his people. He acts on their behalf but the people see not their savior but a man. And in seeing a man reject him, just as Jesus was not seen as a savior, as just a man and then rejected.

7:30-38 Call of Moses

7:33 holy ground

Stephen is quoting from the book of Exodus. His point? That it is God's presence that makes a person or a place holy. It is not that a place is holy so God comes there. It is a subtle difference but one many people even today struggle with.

7:37 God will raise up

Stephen is offering a direct quote from Deuteronomy 18:15 which is in a section (18:15-19) where Moses is warning the people that God will raise up a prophet who will resemble the life of Moses.

7:39-43 Moses is rejected

7:39 in their hearts they turned to Egypt

After all the signs and wonders that God had provided through Moses, those Israelites freed from the slavery in Egypt, rather than put their faith in God returned to their old comfortable habits they held in Egypt. In other words, idol worship.

7:41 they made a calf

While Moses was on the mountain, in their fear and uncertainty the Israelites returned to their old gods and gathering the gold they could find melted it down to make a golden calf. This sin of idolatry was a great and grave sin. Scholars in recent years have suggested that God never intended for the Jews to offer sacrifice of animals; but in this moment of the golden calf realized that the Israelites were not ready to be a people of "priests" (meaning each can come to God as we do today without the need of an intermediary. So it was here that not only was the law given but the instructions for the Tabernacle and the formation of a Priestly class who would lead the people in prayer and be the intermediaries before God. *It was this event that called forth an entire body of sacrificial laws and liturgies as a means of ordering the worship of Israel toward Yahweh and removing idolatry from the heart of the nation.* Ignatius Catholic Bible Study

7:42 gave them over to worship the host of heaven

In this context Stephen is talking about the ancient pagan religion of worshipping the stars. Scholars suggest that Stephen is stating that sometimes God allows us to stumble in our ignorance and worship false gods. In this year of mercy we are focusing on the merciful love and compassion of God. But we must remember that God is a just judge and sometimes the best lesson is to allow someone to become consumed by their own sin. In looking at the Exodus story we see that the Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years. Scholars suggest that in this time God allowed these people to be destroyed by their own sinfulness. This is what St. Paul talks about in Romans 1:18-32.

42b-43 Did you offer

Stephen backs up his argument by quoting a Greek rendition of a prophecy of Amos (5:25-27). Amos the prophet is offering the voice of God warning the northern nation of Israel that if they continue in their ways of idolatry (**Moloch**—a Canaanite god and god of the Ammorites; **Rephan**—possibly a god associated with the planet Saturn) they too will be about their own destruction. Scholars suggest that Stephen is once again prophesying to that present generation that if they continue in their excessive devotion to the Temple at the expense of the truth of God, heard in Jesus Christ and his Apostles and disciples, they too will create their own destruction.

7:44-50 God dwelling here on earth

Stephen takes up the issue now of the idol worship of the Temple. Remember for decades the desert Sanctuary was a portable structure that was not bound to one place. The purpose of the Tabernacle was to give Israel visible proof of God's divine Presence and to teach His people about worship through the practice of a defined liturgy.

7:46 asked leave to find a habitation

It was King David, while reflecting on the fine palace he lived in and the simple tent that was the dwelling place of God (2 Samuel 7), asked to build a dwelling place for God which becomes the Temple. (Psalm 132:1-5)

7:47 made with hands

Stephen is playing on images here. The Temple, which meant to be a place to honor and worship God but became an idol in itself. The hands of man for false worship made the golden calf and other images of worship. Solomon who built the Temple that David hoped for understood that God cannot be contained within a building or any structure created by humanity. (1 Kings 8:27)

7:49-50 Heaven is my throne

Stephen is quoting Isaiah 66:1-2. In Isaiah we read of God's condemnation of the Jews for their idol worship of the Temple itself and their overconfidence in their worship. *Stephen uses the text to draw a sharp contrast between the creative hand of God (7:50) and the corrupting hands of men (7:41, 38)* Ignatius Catholic Bible Study. Stephen is challenging his listeners to understand that God cannot be confined to a structure or a place.

7:52-53 Stephen concludes

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7:51 stiff-necked people These are the same words God used against the Israelites wandering in the desert (Exodus 33:5). Stephen is bringing his preaching to a close by making a connection of the sinfulness of their ancestors to the sinfulness of that present age.

7:52 Which of the prophets Stephen points out that all of the prophets were not appreciated, listened to and many died at the hands of those they were trying to help. Many of these prophets announced the coming of the Messiah who Stephen calls here in this verse **the Righteous one**. One should also notice that Stephen, who began by talking about “our” ancestors (verse 39) distances himself here by saying “your” ancestors.

7:53 delivered by angels Jewish tradition holds that God wrote the Ten commandments but they were delivered into the hands of Moses by angels.

Reflection Questions:

1. What is your understanding of the Diaconate as it is lived out today? Do you see it's value or would you change something in their ministry?
2. How does authority play out in your life? ...the authority of the Church? Are we ever justified in challenging the authority of the Church – pastors, bishops, the pope?
3. Do you know anybody in your life, or maybe a time in your life that to use the phrase “stiff-necked” would be appropriate? What can we do to soften their lives so that they might hear and change their ways?

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The Three Degrees of the Sacrament of Holy Orders: 1554

The ordination of deacons - "in order to serve": 1569-1571

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