

“Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:56). The vision of Stephen before his death helps to strengthen his resolve to follow in the footsteps of Christ. We recall that in the Gospel of Luke when Jesus was hanging on the cross, his heart was filled with sacrificial love and mercy. Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34). Likewise, in the acts of the Apostles with his dying breath Stephen the martyr cries out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60).

Each Advent, we await the second coming of Jesus. When that happens, it may be a bit like the vision of Stephen with the heavens opening up. Jesus is the just judge whom we will see at the right hand of the Father. He comes to judge the living and the dead in part on the mercy we have extended towards others. Stephen’s final words echoing Jesus are most fitting for us to contemplate and to emulate.

Stephen’s vision also calls to mind our celebration of Mass. The Liturgy of the Eucharist is not an isolated earthly event. We remember the events of the Last Supper. We participate with Jesus the one true high priest who is a model for the priests who serve us in our time. Listen to the Nativity Preface and you will hear this:

“For in the mystery of the Word made flesh a new light of your glory has shone upon the eyes of our mind, so that, as we recognize in him God made visible, we may be caught up through him in love of things invisible.” Our voices join with the choir in heaven. “And so, with Angels and Archangels, with Thrones and Dominions, and with all the hosts and Powers of heaven, we sing the hymn of your glory...” (Preface of the Nativity I).

We pray “Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts. Heaven and earth are full of your glory.” With God and the saints present in heaven, it is easy to understand how Heaven is full of his glory. We should meditate on how earth is also full of God’s glory. Life is truly a gift from heaven. Our hearts are warmed by seeing the infant in the manger. “For on the feast of this awe-filled mystery, though invisible in his own divine nature, he has appeared visibly in ours; and begotten before all ages, he has begun to exist in time; so that, raising up in himself all that was cast down, he might restore unity to all creation and call straying humanity back to the heavenly Kingdom.” (Preface of the Nativity II).

The life of every newborn contains the beauty of the child we can see, but also the invisible, the soul that God has imbued in each child that is destined for eternity. As we celebrate Mass, the priest prays a silent prayer that brings this reality in to focus when he adds a little water into the chalice of wine: “By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity” (Roman Missal).

Indeed, Jesus humbled himself in sharing our humanity ... but with a much greater purpose in mind. God wants us to join him in heaven. God wants us to have that same vision of Saint Stephen. “Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” God wants us to join the communion of saints in heaven where He will share his divinity with us for eternity. During the Octave of Christmas, we pray “For through him the holy exchange that restores our life has shone forth today in splendor: when our frailty is assumed by your Word not only does human mortality receive unending honor but by this wondrous union we, too, are made eternal” (Preface of the Nativity III).

As we gather for worship, we rejoice with the angels who sing Glory to God in the highest. Beyond our communal gathering let us always and everywhere give thanks to our almighty Father for the gift of his Son and the gift of immortality to come.