

In 975 an expectant mother had a heavenly vision. Saint Stephen, the first Deacon Martyr, appeared to her and told her she would bear a son who would evangelize Hungary. At the age of 10, her son was baptized taking the name Stephen with his initiation into the Christian faith. As an adult, Stephen succeeded his father as a Duke of Hungary and carried on his father's dream of converting non-believers to the Catholic faith.<sup>i</sup>

A young man approached Jesus and said, "Teacher, what good must I do to gain eternal life?" (Mt 9:16). Jesus encouraged the young man to give to the poor. Stephen approached Pope Sylvester II, through diplomatic channels, and asked for the pope's blessing as he tried to establish Hungary on the "firm rock of Christian values."<sup>ii</sup> Stephen "asked the pope to provide for the Church's organization in Hungary—and also requested that the pope confer the title of king upon him. He was crowned on Christmas day in 1001."<sup>iii</sup> In addition to giving his blessing, Pope Sylvester II reminded Stephen of his responsibility to use his authority wisely for the good of the church and the people entrusted to his care.

In the Gospel story, the young man went away sad because he was unwilling at that time to give to the poor. "Stephen had a special devotion to the poor and often distributed alms to them in disguise."<sup>iv</sup> He also wielded his political influence to support the church and encourage others to do so as well. "Stephen established a system of tithes to support churches and pastors and to relieve the poor. Out of every 10 towns one had to build a church and support a priest."<sup>v</sup>

Stephen had a special devotion to the Virgin Mary and had a number of churches built in her honor. The Blessed Mother's intercession "is credited with preventing a war between Hungary and the Holy Roman Empire under Conrad II and stopping an assassination plot against Stephen himself."<sup>vi</sup>

No life is without its share of tragedy and trial. Stephen and his wife had a number of children, but only Emeric survived to adulthood. Stephen hoped to pass his crown onto Emeric but that dream ended when Emeric died in a hunting accident. "Emeric was later canonized as a saint in his own right, and Stephen eventually came to rejoice that his son had been permitted to enter God's presence before him."<sup>vii</sup>

Stephen of Hungary died on August 15, 1038, the Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary. Stephen's final words encouraged the leaders of the Church and state to evangelize and to carry on his work of building the Kingdom of God in the land of Hungary and beyond. On the brink of his own entry into eternal life, he also asked the Blessed Virgin Mary to continue to assist in the spiritual works that still needed to bear fruit: "To thee, O Queen of heaven, and to thy guardianship, I commend the holy Church, all the bishops and the clergy, the whole kingdom, its rulers and inhabitants; but before all, I commend my soul to thy care."

Pope John Paul II addressed the nation of Hungary on the Feast of Saint Stephen in the jubilee year of 2000. He reminded the people that the work of building the Kingdom of God falls on the shoulders of every Christian in each generation:

In Christianity the true, the just, the good and the beautiful are combined in marvelous harmony under the action of grace, which transforms and elevates all things... In this creative restlessness pulsates all that is most deeply human: the sense of belonging to God, the search for truth, the insatiable need for goodness, the burning thirst for love, the hunger for freedom, the longing for the beautiful, the wonder of the new, the soft but commanding voice of conscience. It is this very restlessness which reveals the true dignity of man, who feels in the depths of his being that his destiny is inseparably linked to God's eternal destiny. Every attempt to obliterate or ignore this irrepressible need for God reduces and impoverishes man's essential nature: the believer who is aware of this

must bear witness to it in society, in order to serve the authentic cause of man in this way as well.<sup>viii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> catholicnewsagency.com/saint/st-stephen-of-hungary-565

<sup>ii</sup> vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2000/jul-sep/documents/hf\_jp-ii\_spe\_20000821\_santo-stefano.html

<sup>iii</sup> franciscanmedia.org/saint-of-the-day/saint-stephen-of-hungary

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid Franciscan Media

<sup>v</sup> Ibid Franciscan Media

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid CNA

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid CNA

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid JP II