



Pope Francis gives his blessing after reciting the Angelus prayer on the feast of St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Dec. 26, 2023. (CNS photo/Lola Gomez)

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On the feast of St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, Pope Francis prayed for people persecuted for their faith or denigrated for living a life marked by Gospel values.

"I am close to the Christian communities that suffer discrimination, and I ask them to persevere in charity toward all, peacefully struggling for justice and religious liberty," the pope said Dec. 26 after reciting the Angelus prayer with visitors in St. Peter's Square.

Francis also entrusted to St. Stephen's intercession all the people in the world "tormented by war."

The news, he said, "shows us what war produces. We've seen Syria, look at Gaza, think of the tormented Ukraine -- a desert of death. Is this what people want?"

"People want peace," he said. "Let's pray for peace, let's struggle for peace."

In his main address, focused on the feast of St. Stephen, Francis noted how the Acts of the Apostles lists Saul, the future St. Paul, as being present at St. Stephen's stoning.

"Through Stephen's witness, the Lord is already preparing in Saul's heart, unbeknownst to him, the conversion that will lead him to be the great Apostle Paul,"

the pope said.

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"Stephen, his service, his prayer and the faith he proclaims, his courage and especially his forgiveness at the point of death, are not in vain," Francis said. "It has been said in times of persecution, and it is true today, that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christians, and it's right to say that."

In addition to those who die for their faith, the pope praised the example of people who are penalized or even just made fun of for "acting in a way consistent with the Gospel" and striving to be faithful.

Just as in St. Stephen's time, he said, their sacrifices bear fruit "because God, through them, continues to work miracles, changing hearts and saving men and women."

Francis asked people in the square to pray for persecuted Christians and to consider in their own lives how they bear witness to the Gospel.

He also asked them not to leave St. Peter's Square without stopping to look at the Nativity scene, noting the look of awe and adoration on the faces of the statues.

"Let us be in awe at the birth of Jesus," he said, encouraging people to allow that wonder to become adoration.