

TWO HOMILIES CONCERNING SAINT STEPHEN, PROTOMARTYR

INTRODUCTION

During the fourth century, the period when Gregory of Nyssa had flourished, there existed a liturgical void between the feasts of Pentecost and Christmas. This lengthy interval extending from spring until the beginning of winter served to form a substantial part of the year¹. With this in mind, we can better appreciate the significance of Gregory's liturgical homilies, especially the relationship between his Homily on the Birth of Christ² and his two orations on St. Stephen whose feast day follows immediately. Jean Danielou has speculated that the Christmas homily was delivered on approximately 25 December 386, the same year as his two homilies on St. Stephen³. Gregory of Nyssa begins his first homily on the protomartyr or the first person who was recorded to have shed his blood for the new faith by posing him as an imitator (*mimetes*, J.75.6) of Jesus Christ whose birthday is immediately preceded by one day. Gregory asks how these two feasts are related and adds the well known Platonic image of a cave as representative of this life which is taken from the **Republic**⁴: "One [Christ] accepted the cave of this life for us, and the other [Stephen] left it for him" (J.75.7-8). Thus at once Stephen, who is venerated as a martyr, sets the tone for all future Christian testimony by freely offering his life. Because Stephen is the first Christian martyr, Gregory perceives him as having caused great awe and wonder among the angels or transcendent powers who marveled at the contest of a frail human being. The bishop of Nyssa employs a favorite image here, that of an athlete, who contends not so much against human power but against demonic forces. This becomes evident later in the first sermon as the following words reveal:

The father of lies assumed a human form and rose against truth which Stephen had spoken. However, the truth brought forth trophies against such lies, and its excellence wonderfully put to flight every assault of deceit. The minister of truth sought the truth about the enemy who concealed his substance; rather, he made the truth appear as something which lacks substance. (J.79.14-80.2)

Jean Bernardi observes an aspect of Gregory's originality with regard to Stephen's struggle not against human beings but against powers of darkness⁵. A few lines later we

¹ Cf. **La Predication des Peres Cappadociens** by Jean Bernardi, (Paris, 1968), p.290.

² Cf. P.G.#46.1128-1149.

³ Cf. an article entitled *La Chronologie des Sermons de Gregoire de Nysse* in **Revue des Sciences Religieuses** #29 (Paris, 1955), pp.367-8.

⁴ Cf. 514a, 515a, 539e.

⁵ "Les images et les mots inspires par cette comparaison [that is, an athlete] abondent dans ce sermon, mais son originalite consiste a voir l'adversaire d'Etienne moins dans ses juges ou ses bourreaux que dans Satan lui-meme." Ibid, p.293.

see the true identity between Satan, Stephen's true adversary:

Stephen directed his energy against his accusers [plural] and passed judgment upon him [singular, i.e., Satan] who both brought false accusations against him while being marked by rage and slander. (J.80.10-14)

This struggle against demonic powers resembles those conflicts endured by Gregory's other hero, Gregory Thaumaturgos or the Wonderworker. In both instances, the bishop of Nyssa seems more concerned with providing a model for pastors as opposed to the common faithful:

After that vision had filled him with confidence and courage much like an athlete who competes in a contest after having acquired stamina from a trainer, he [Gregory Thaumaturgos] strips himself for the stadium and prepares for the struggle. (J.19.20-20.2)

Shortly after this comparison, Gregory reverts to the image of an athlete who, although overcome by adversaries, has nevertheless achieved victory. It is precisely this victory that enables the Christian mission began to spread throughout the world through the Apostles, thereby "making all places accessible to the faith of Christ" (J.81.13-14). The bishop of Nyssa employs a verse from the Psalm 18.5 to demonstrate this mission: "To every place on the earth goes their sound" (J.104.23-24). We find a parallel to this same verse in his **Homily on the Forty Martyrs**:

Consider this holy field and the sheaf of martyrs. If you wish to know what I mean, you do not have to look far. What is this place which composes such a throng? What does this yearly commemoration say to you? What do our accounts bestow upon their memory? The prophet says, "There are no speeches nor words" (Ps 18.5). Is it only their voices which loudly announce our admiration? If you examine the place, he [the prophet] says that it is the amphitheater of the martyrs, and if you consider the day, it loudly heralds their crown. I hear the day proclaiming the martyrs and the heavenly lights glorifying another such person; heaven honors one martyr while earth heralds yet another. (J.141.3-17)

A bit later in his homily on the protomartyr Gregory proceeds to compare Stephen to his divine Master, Jesus Christ, who had suffered the same type of denunciation, namely, of abrogating the Law of Moses (cf. J.83.4). At this point Stephen most closely resembles his Master as both priest and victim:

However, he resembled a priest according to the spiritual law, was a pure

sacrifice, submissive, and offered his own body and instead of an offering of sprinkled blood. He saw God in the celestial sanctuary, made petition on behalf of those who mistreated him, exchanged their bloodthirstiness for a good deed and cried out in their ears, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." (J.84.10-16)

Gregory embellishes the death of Stephen by saying that "he fell into a sweet, blessed sleep as though he were surrounded by tender flower or by gentle dew" (J.84.18-20). In response to the Jews' denunciation, the bishop of Nyssa closely follows the account in Acts where Stephen refutes his adversaries (J.86.4-88.22). Towards the end of his discourse, Stephen assumes the demeanor of an angel which was visible even to his enemies. At this point Gregory once again has recourse to the image of an athlete which is fulfilled at the point of Stephen's death:

Thus being outside human nature, he shared the angelic nature which seemed like a miracle to these murderers. His face was changed to assume that of the angels and seeing invisible reality, he proclaimed the grace he had beheld. (J.87.10-13)

At the point of death Gregory has the murderers provide Stephen with a "crown much like a victor's crown" (J.88.8-9). Here, as at the beginning of the first sermon (J.76.4-6), Gregory makes a play on words because in Greek, Stephen means crown, *stepahnos*. Instead of bearing hatred towards his murderers, the martyr expresses a sweetness and compliance in imitation of Christ. It should be remembered that death for Christian martyrs is a key to eternal life, as Paul Zemp has remarked with regard⁶ to the following sentence: "At once he forsook this life and rightly judged it better to exchange a more honorable life for the present one." (J.77.3-5). Compare this with a passage from Gregory's **Commentary on the Song of Songs**:

Our life is mortal, indeed, having been deprived of immortality. But the person knowing that he is in the midst of two lives, crosses over from mortality to immortality. By eliminating the former, the bad one, he gives victory to the latter. (J.351)

After describing Stephen's death in some detail, Gregory gets to the point he wishes to convey to his listeners, namely, that the martyr trains "us in piety that we might escape the grips of spiritual adversaries (*pneumatomachoi*)," J.89.5-7. During the fourth century when the bishop of Nyssa flourished, one of the chief antagonists confronting

⁶ "Diese positiven Deutungen des Todes entspringen aber nur der streng theologischen Betrachtungsweise des Todes als Schwelle zum Heil." **Die Grundlagen Heilsgeschichtlichen Denkens bei Gregor von Nyssa** (Munich, 1970), p.177, footnote #19.

orthodox Christianity came from the so-called *Pneumatomachoi*, literally, "fighters against the [Holy] Spirit." This heresy denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit and ultimately, the Trinity. St. Athanasios had earlier struggled with this heresy in defending the *homoousion* of the Spirit⁷. In Gregory's first homily we have a summary of this heretical teaching as follows:

They claimed that he perverted the teachings of piety when, if the Spirit should be included along with the Father and Son, why did not Stephen see in his vision the Spirit with the Son?...Do you seek, oh *pneumatichos*, when the Father's glory appears and the Son stands at his right, the location of the Spirit? (J.89.10-12 & 16-17)

As J.N.D. Kelly points out, the term *Pneumatomachoi* came into use after the year 380 and represents an heretical sect reminiscent of Athanasios' opponents at Alexandria. To counter their mistaken views, Gregory states that the Holy Spirit is not an objectively seen reality like Stephen's vision of the glorious Christ, but is present as a divine person residing within us. He quotes Acts 7.55 in J.90.6-7: "Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit and saw the glory of God and his Only-Begotten Son." Although Gregory does not discuss the heretical implications of this verse, it is clearly related to the *Pneumatomachoi*. The latter saw the Son as inferior to the Father (being situated "at the right hand of God," Acts 7.57, J.87.18-19). Gregory's response was a quote from Psalm 35.10, "In your light we shall see light." Note the phrase "*in* your light." Mariette Canevet says that "Si Etienne est `en' l'Esprit, il ne le voit pas"⁸. However, it is this Spirit which "enables us to perceive the glory of both the Father and Son" (J.90.13-14). A few lines later Gregory again mentions the *Pneumatomachoi* when he brings up the problem of seeing God, a feat impossible and to which both the Old and New Testaments bear witness. With an eye towards refuting his old enemies, the *Pneumatomachoi*, Gregory says that "Stephen beholds God not in human nature and power but is united by grace to the Holy Spirit who elevates him in order to comprehend God" (J.91.3-6).

Not only is the bishop of Nyssa confronted with those persons who deny the Holy Spirit's divinity, he must also deal with others who "condemn the Only Begotten [Son], for they consider the One present in the Father's glory to be inferior to his authority" (J.91.11-13). Gregory gives them the name of *Christomachoi*, "fighters against Christ," another term for the Eunomians who perceived the Son as being inferior to the Father and therefore ultimately lacking divinity. Gregory proceeds to quote a number of Old and New Testament passages (J.91-2) concluding with the observation that "the teaching [re.

⁷⁷ Refer to **Early Christian Doctrines** (New York, 1978) by J.N.D. Kelly who gives some historical background into this matter, pp.258-63. Also, **The First Seven Ecumenical Councils** (Wilmington, DE, 1987), by Leo Donald Davis, pp.108-15.

⁸⁸ **Gregoire de Nysse et L'Hermeneutique Biblique** (Paris, 1983), p.181.

Christ's divinity] is the Spirit of truth which was present in divinely inspired persons" (J.92.8-9). He then gives a physical example, namely, the human body, especially with reference to hips which enable us to sit and rise (J.92): "Thus this image is valid if it appears to be a satisfactory archetype" (J.93.16-94.1). Gregory concludes his first homily rather abruptly at this point by saying that we share the Holy Spirit in the same way as Stephen whose participation serves to counter those who deny this third person's divinity.

Although it is impossible for us to see God, the Holy Spirit is instrumental in allowing us to participate in his divine nature:

For Stephen beholds God not in human nature and power but is united by grace to the Holy Spirit who elevates him in order to comprehend God (J.91.3-4)

Such a process of elevation is, as Walther Volker has observed⁹, is reminiscent of the word *prokope*, "advancement" especially as it applies to greater comprehension of the spiritual life. Although the two homilies on St. Stephen do not expressly deal with this *prokope*, it is nevertheless an essential component in Gregory's more mature works as the following passage from his **Commentary on the Song of Songs** demonstrates:

When the Word raises his bride to such a point through her ascents, he leads her even further, saying that her garments have the scent of frankincense. (J.280)

At times this process of continual advancement or growth assumes exceptional intensity or moments of ecstasy when one's relationship with God becomes very clear. For Gregory, Moses, along with David and St. Paul, are some of the principal figures of these intense moments of union, and the first homily is of no exception. We compare an excerpt with one from Gregory's **Commentary on the Song of Songs**:

What especially incited this group and fomented their illness was that Moses to whom they were especially devoted was a mentor for their teaching...He [Stephen] exited human nature and before he left the body, with pure eyes gazed upon heaven's gates and the temple's interior, the revelation of divine glory and the effulgence of his glory. **First Homily on St. Stephen**, J.86-7

As the prophet says [Ps 35.9], those who drink from the richness of God's

⁹ "Zur weiteren Charakteristik der *prokope* wäre noch auf ein Dreifaches hinzuweisen. Es ist von grundlegender Bedeutung für das richtige Verständnis des Aufstiegs, da er den Abstieg Christi, die Inkarnation." **Gregor von Nyssa als Mystiker** (Wiesbaden, 1955), pp.186-7.

house and the stream of his delight become inebriated. Similarly, the great David became inebriated because he went out of himself and into ecstasy: he saw the invisible beauty and exclaimed in that inspired voice of his, "Every man is a liar" [Ps 115.2]. **Commentary on the Song of Songs**, J.309

The second homily is slightly over half as long as the first and focuses more upon the role of the Church and Apostles. In contrast to the *Christomachoi* or Eunomians who denied Christ's divinity, at the beginning of his second sermon Gregory employs the word **Christophoroi**, bearers of Christ (J.97.8). Stephen (*Stephanos*), the first Christian martyr is the "first fruits of what has been cultivated in the form of a crown (*stephanos*), a theme reminiscent of Gregory's Treatise on First Corinthians 15.28¹⁰. The term "first fruits" (*aparche*) represents, as Jean Danielou has pointed out ¹¹, that unity of the **kosmos noetes** where the angels dwell. Here is a passage from **Treatise on First Corinthians** which shows the relationship between Christ as *aparche* and our human nature:

When we are removed from evil in imitation of the first fruits [Christ], our entire nature is mixed with this same fruit. Our body has been formed with the good as predominant; our body's entire nature is united to the divine, pure nature. This is what we mean by the Son's subjection: when, in his body, Christ rightly has the subjection brought to him, he effects in us the grace of subjection. (M.1316B-C)¹²

Although the theme of struggles against "the council of impiety" (J.98) are resumed, Gregory does not continue the topic of an athlete. We also see that Stephen is assumed into the angelic chorus and his name, *Stephanos*, or crown, is related to his heavenly inheritance:

The angels have received a member of their chorus, rather, they took him up with praise while the Jews below stoned him. However, Stephen

¹⁰1 Cf. P.G.#44.1304-26. For the critical text, refer to **The Treatise of Gregory of Nyssa. In Illud: Tunc et Ipse Filius. A Critical Text with Prologomena** (Cambridge, MA, 1947).

¹¹11 **Platonisme et Theologie Mystique** (Paris, 1944) p.181.

¹²12 With regard to this notion of "first fruits" and the unity of Christ's body, Reinhard Hubner says, "Die Tragweite der Leib-Christi-Theologie Gregors hangt ab von der Tragweite der Theologie der Gottebenbildlichkeit des Menschen, denn der Leib Christi der Endzeit ist die Vollzahl der in ihrer ursprunglichen Gottahnlichkeit Widerhergestellten, das Endstadium der Ruckfuhrung aller aus der Entfremdung in ihre naturliche erkenntnis abige und willentliche Verhaftung im allein Seienden und Guten, das ihr Seinsgrund ist, die Zentrierung des Blickes aller auf das eine Zeil." **Die Einheit des Leibes Christi bei Gregor von Nyssa** (Leiden, 1974), p.231.

received a heavenly inheritance after undergoing such noble struggles. To Stephen all these stones are suddenly woven together as a herald to the divine Gospel and with him are the martyrs who again shine with the beauty of salvation. (J.100.9-15)

At this juncture Gregory mentions the three Apostles, Peter, James and John who are also "crowns of the Church's glory" (J.100.18-19) with whom Stephen enjoys a special place of honor. Christ is then compared to a sun who not only "hides like stars those holy persons who were precursors, but it makes them shine more brightly" (J.101.17-18). John the Baptist is singled out as being a special luminary who appeared after the Apostles:

The Apostles of the Savior were neither lamps, lights nor stars but messengers of light not illumining one region or area but brightened every place under heaven. The most important leaders were Peter, James and John who were designated as witnesses by Christ. (J.102.10-15)

Gregory precedes at some length to describe the witness of each of these three Apostles after which he says that "If anyone attains the truth which is in accord with their teachings, this person serves to complete the form of one body" (104.10-13). Thus Gregory passes through his second homily with little or no mention of Stephen. Instead, he uses the occasion of his feast to expound upon the merits of Peter, James and John whom he considers not only as Apostles but as martyrs. The Church is a tower ("Those engaged in constructing an earthly tower must speak the same language when building the church's spiritual dwelling." J.77.19-18.2) composed of living stones which produces the unity of faith. Later in the second homily Gregory takes up this same theme as follows:

If anyone attains the truth which is in accord with their [Apostles] teachings, this person serves to complete the form of one body...Who does not gladly exult and is filled with the Holy Spirit once he has been deemed worthy of sharing the apostolic chorus, of guiding the entire world into the knowledge of truth, of filling the true religion's net with the world? (J.104.10-13 & 17-23)

This solidarity with members of the Church and founded upon the Apostles is intended to counter the heretical tendencies of both the *Pneumatomachoi* and *Christomachoi*. Gregory expresses the "form of one body" by using the analogy of a garment as in his **Commentary on Ecclesiastes**:

Paul knows the opportune time for cutting off the soiled part of the Church's garment and for sewing it back on again, that is, when we wash it

from defilement through our repentance. Realize from what we are cut off and are always sewn on. Having been severed from heresy, we are sewn on the true religion; for the robe of the Church, as we observe, is still whole, even when it has broken off any fellowship with heretics. (J.408-9)

Towards the end of his second homily Gregory says that we cannot simply admire their splendid witness to the faith but "fellowship with their memory implies agreement with their mind" (J.105.22-23). To assist us the bishop of Nyssa sets before his listeners the example of the Church's first witness, Stephen, whose death set an example for later generations of martyrs.

The critical text of the two homilies on St. Stephen was prepared by Otto Lendle and is found in **Gregorii Nysseni Opera, Sermones**, Pars II (Leiden, 1990), pp.75-105. The text by J.P. Migne, may be found in *Patrologia Graecae*, volume 46 (Paris, 1858), columns 701-736.

THE FIRST SERMON

[M.701 & J.75] How lovely is the inspiration exhibited by those who are good, and how sweet is the joy which they disclose! See, we acquire a feast from a feast and grace from grace. Yesterday the Lord of the universe welcomed us whereas today it is the [M.704] imitator [Stephen] of the Lord. How are they related to each other? One assumed human nature on our behalf while the other shed it for his Lord. One accepted the cave of this life for us, and the other left it for him. One was wrapped in swaddling clothes for us, and the other was stoned for him. One destroyed death, and the other scorned it.

Brethren, let us hasten to the stadium [J.76] where the great athlete contends against the wicked adversary of human life by stripping himself in the arena by his confession [of faith] [cf. 1Cor 4.9]. Indeed, as Paul has said [Heb 12.4], Stephen [*Stephanos*] has become a spectacle to the world, angels and to men. He was the first to have received the crown [*stephanos*] of martyrdom, the first to have paved the way for the chorus of martyrs and the first to have resisted sin to the point of shedding blood. It seems to me that the entire host of transcendent powers, angels, and myriads both assist and accompany them [i.e., the martyrs]. If we hear anything honorable in the heavens

from among the principalities, powers, thrones, ruling forces and the entire heavenly assembly, their words provide an athletic spectacle by contending with an opponent [cf. Col 1.16 & Eph 1.21].

Let human life resemble a stadium for the contestants where one person contends against another. That antagonist which showed himself hostile to human life from the fall of our first parents until the time of Stephen strove to be victorious over men, yet the great athlete of faith considered his assaults as nothing [cf. Wis 2.24]. Both took up arms against each other: the inventor of death confronted a threat to death, whereas the disciple of life confessed his faith. For who could not help but admire this new type of [J.77] struggle when truth judged between life and death chronicled the truth? For while the herald of a life hidden [in God] remained unknown, he nevertheless divulged it to men. At once he forsook this life and rightly judged it better to exchange a more honorable life for the present one.

It would be beneficial to accurately record his contest in order to disclose the order of our method by a series of miracles. Recently a powerful wind from heaven scattered every airy, deceptive power of the demons and filled the Apostles' house. Tongues of fire resided in each man corresponding with the number of those who received the grace of the Spirit. All were overcome by shock and confusion with the widely diverse languages immediately which the disciples spoke according to the sound and wonder of tongues and to the astonishment of those from every nation who were dwelling in Jerusalem [cf. Acts 2.2-5]. This was not a result of training and study but was a gift in the form of speaking which suddenly came from the Spirit's [J.705] inspiration. Those engaged in constructing an earthly tower must speak the [J.78] same language when building the church's spiritual dwelling. And so, the Holy Spirit's wonderful dispensation introduced grace in order to diffuse it, thereby providing a common benefit for everyone through the medium of the human voice. In this way the preaching of piety might not be limited to one tongue and remain unprofitable for those persons who spoke various tongues.

Even at this early point the Pharisees did not believe with their own ears and concocted to trip up persons astonished by these miraculous events as though new wine had made them [the Apostles] insane [cf. Acts 2.13]. Then Peter's solitary defense captured three thousand souls for Christ [cf. Acts 2.41], after which the church grew in the number of those who had been delivered. Those who were saved opened the temple's Beautiful Gate for the man born lame [cf. Acts 3.2 ff] because his miraculous healing both increased and led to the faith persons lame in soul. As a result, many flocked when the faith was preached and sought help from the diverse profusion of grace at which point Stephen, who was wealthy in wisdom and grace by the Spirit, was summoned to assist the Apostles [cf. Acts 6.5]. Let no one think that the name of minister [*diakonia*] made him inferior to the dignity of the Apostles. Since Paul realized that he was a minister of the mysteries of Christ [cf. 1Cor 4.1] and the Lord of the universe brought salvation by

assuming human **[J.79]**, he was not ashamed to be called a minister. As the Apostle says, he was in their midst as one who serves [cf. Lk 22.27] and as one who provides a variety of ministries [cf. 1Cor 12.5-6].

Just as fire consumes useful material and bright flames rise on high, so did the Holy Spirit make the rays of grace shine brighter through Stephen's nobility. Similarly, all turned to him because he was gifted with knowledge and training. Those few persons who gathered together seemed to be a dense crowd much like a phalanx which attempted to assail Stephen who was equally serene whether in the company of many or few persons. Then certain persons under the guise of Alexandrians, Libertinians, Cyrenians and men from every place engaged the athlete in a debate regarding the truth. The father of lies assumed a human form and rose against truth which Stephen had spoken [cf. Jn 8.44]. However, the truth brought forth trophies against such lies, and its excellence wonderfully put to flight every assault of deception. The minister of **[J.80]** truth sought the truth **[M.708]** about the enemy who concealed his substance; rather, he made the truth appear as something which lacks substance.

How does this ruse affect the preacher? I believe that it comes from the devil. If any of you shares his strength, the truth destroys it in Stephen. But if that truth is loftier than your machinations, why are you deceitfully planning evil against the vessel of truth in order to destroy what remains of it? Dogs do this when they open their mouths for stones cast to them, yet they cannot touch the person whom they threw them. Since true facts repulsed such a lie and could no longer find another champion of deception, all who looked squarely at the manifest truth remembered his own struggle. Stephen directed his energy against his accusers who passed judgment upon him, for they brought false accusations against him while being marked by rage and slander. The Jews brought various accusers against Stephen including judges who were either elected or who were subservient to death and did not know the impact of a ruinous vote leveled against Stephen. For just as experienced athletes bring down their more formidable opponents through vigorous training and **[J.81]** thereby make them fall, so did the great Stephen who lay prostrate upon the ground overcome his adversary with difficulty.

From this point began the Apostles' journey throughout the entire world and their preaching. If it were not for [Stephen's] murder and the Jews' rage against the Apostles, perhaps the grace of the Gospel would have been confined to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Having been driven out by the Jews to another nation, the teaching of the [Christian] mysteries expelled the devil from the world. Thus Samaria received the preaching [cf. Acts 8.14]; salvation reached the eunuch through Philip [Acts 8.26ff]; Paul was a great vessel of election armed against the devil's wrath and his threats against whose arrows he raised a shield [Acts 9.15], thereby abolishing him from the entire earth and making all places accessible to the faith of Christ. As a result, Egyptians, Syrians, Parthians, Mesopotamians, Galatians, Illurians, Macedonians as well as nations from

everywhere hastened to hear the preaching. Do you see Stephen's athletic prowess and how the adversary was brought down to ruin although he appeared more excellent than his adversary by making false accusations?

But let us return again to the stadium. How do the calumniators **[J.82]** enflame the people? They say, "He does not cease to speak words against this holy place and the Law. For we have heard **[M.709]** him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs which Moses handed down to us" [Acts 6.13-14]. Such is the allegation presented by the devil's speech, but who pays attention to such rubbish? Against whom do they rage so vehemently and what evil can they detect in his words? They even brought forth another indictment against [Stephen] claiming that he boasted that this place would be destroyed and that the institutes of Moses would be changed. What outrage do these words contain whether they happen to be true or false? If false, there is no cause for alarm; if true, what unjust ground is there for denunciation? For what had transpired will indeed happen again whether or not we remain silent. Can the murder of him who was denounced earlier relieve persons who are grieving? For example, Jesus the Nazarene was condemned by the same vote of reprisal leveled against Stephen. If he who is unjust vents his wrath, gives place to injustice and alters customs, Stephen is not responsible for these acts but it is Jesus, as the accuser says, and the court is compelled to pass judgement against him who is accused. Oh, what an unfair verdict for those who are listening! Since Jesus, says the judge, changes the laws, Stephen should then **[J.83]** be stoned. How did Jesus abrogate the Law when he affirmed its antiquity by saying, "I did not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it" [Mt 5.17]? Who strengthened his disciples according to the Law? He forbade them to become angry and to commit murder [cf. Mt 5.21-22], rejected adultery out of desire [cf. Mt 5.39], ordered that grief not be repaid since unjust hands cannot lay hold of you [cf. Mt 6.19 ff] and wiped out passion, a result of greed, and taught mastery over it. Why were these neither mentioned nor examined when judgement was passed? I do not wish the crowd of those bloodstained judges to be present and do not want to know about places associated with such malevolent persons, the celebrated temple's location, the huge amount of stones, the gold left over which equaled the small amount left in the temple, the sacrifices according to the Law such as the ram, calf, lamb, heifer, dove, turtle-dove and he-goat for averting evil [cf. Lev 16.20 ff]. Therefore if they condemn Stephen to death in order to deflect their sadness, they reveal their fruits through **[J.84]** that terrible murder. If nothing is left, they claim that the vote counts, not the murder.

But let us see in the succeeding struggles how he who was covered by stones as if they were snow had warded off his murderers and how he returned a variety of thunderbolts against those who cast stones. The Jews knew the Christians' weapons which the great Stephen used to ward off their attacks and who made it the law of life. They were all fierce, standing in a circle, looked at him with a hysterical gaze and brandished **[M.712]** a weapon against Stephen in their hands. However, he resembled a

priest according to the spiritual law, was a pure sacrifice, submissive, and offered his own body instead of an offering of sprinkled blood. He saw God in the celestial sanctuary, made petition on behalf of those who mistreated him, exchanged their bloodthirstiness for a good deed and cried out in their ears, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" [Acts 7.60]. By this prayer he expiated their sin which the murderers committed by their transgression and who were exasperated at his prayer. However, this did not prevent them from casting stones until the great Stephen fell into a sweet, blessed sleep as though he were surrounded by tender flowers or by gentle dew.

The athletes have achieved victory before we see those crowned who had engaged in fierce struggles since before seeing the contest, we have attained **[J.85]** the goal of their struggles. I believe that we must not neglect them without mentioning the outstanding nature of their witness. This gathering of murderers was so filled with rage that they resorted to bloodshed; their evil was so strong that it restricted their breathing; their glance, appearance and passion was manifested by their teeth as divine Scripture says concerning enraged hearts which gnashed their teeth against him [cf. Acts 7.54]. Being in their midst, he girded himself against their hostile, murderous intent, surmounted their contemptuous intentions, resisted their wrath with patience and their threats with disdain, the fear of death with contempt, hatred with love, ill-will with benevolence and slander with truth.

Not only did the true athlete reveal one type of victory but combated by countless virtues every form of evil which the Jews devised, thereby resulting in victory. I hear about various contests of strength in gymnasiums when athletes strip themselves naked in the arena and achieve victory against their contenders. Such martyrs are sovereign in the stadium, resisting with their own power every adversary and are as a beacon of triumph for all to see. The false wisdom of the Libertinians, Cyreninas and sages **[J.86]** from Alexandria [Acts 6.9] contend against him who is triumphant through true wisdom: courage overcomes fear, disdain conquers threats, charity subdues savagery and truth is victorious over falsehood. They sought to murder him, and their hands were already armed with stones; their glance and breathing through their teeth **[M.713]** held tightly together revealed their brutality. Nevertheless, he saw them as brothers and greeted them as fathers saying, "Men, brothers and fathers, listen [Acts 7.2]!"

They persuasively devised all sorts of calumny by convening a council of murderers against the truth. [Stephen] neither reproved them out of fear, was unconcerned with impending dangers nor did he consider death; rather, having his soul raised on high and appearing as though he were senseless to everyone gazing upon him, he taught them as though they were foolish children and demonstrated the error of their doctrines with regard to faith. In their presence [Stephen] briefly recounted the story of Abraham as well as the saints who followed him [cf. Acts 7.2-7]. He also added Moses, his birth, upbringing, education, initiation on the mountain, smiting the Egyptians, service

to the Israelites and prophesy concerning the mystery of the Lord [cf. Acts 7.20-22, 30, 34, 36-37]. What especially incited this group and **[J.87]** fomented their illness was that Moses to whom they were especially devoted was a mentor for their teaching. They rose up against him in order to quiet him, something which Stephen desired in order to end his bitterness. He exited human nature and before he left the body, with pure eyes gazed upon heaven's gates and the temple's interior, the revelation of divine glory and the effulgence of his glory [cf. Acts 7.55-56]. The stamp of the Father's glory [cf. Heb 1.3] could not be described, and the athlete saw his brilliance among men which accommodated itself to human nature. Thus being outside human nature, he shared the angelic nature which seemed like a miracle to these murderers. His face was changed to assume that of the angels and seeing invisible reality, he proclaimed the grace he had beheld [cf. Acts 7.56]. But they blocked their ears and did not wish to see this with their eyes, preferring their own self-righteous since they were not capable of hearing this divine report. However, he shared the grace with those present although he alone was worthy of it: "I see the heavens open and the Son of Man standing at God's right hand" [Acts 7.57]. They exclaimed with a great voice, blocked their ears and unanimously **[J.88]** rushed upon him. History recounts a similar uproar in order to show how their actions coincide with the Sodomites, for the judge [God] hears their wicked cry when he says, "The cry of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah have reached me" [Gen 18.20-21]. Therefore they shouted out in order that the cry against Stephen might be heard.

The athlete fully realized the benefit hidden beneath the murderers' bitterness because they **[M.716]** who stood in a circle ready to stone him provided him with a crown much like a victor's crown plaited at enemy hands. Therefore [Stephen] warded off their murderous intent by a blessing and being fully aware of their plan to slay him, was prepared to suffer death at their hands. Furthermore, he believed that his enemies had the opportunity of conferring a benefit upon him. For this reason the person who knows Christ wishes to bring his enemies into submission. [Stephen] knew that the Lawgiver was patient, recalled his command to love one's enemies, to do good to those who bear hatred and to pray for one's enemies [cf. Mt 5.44]. But the athlete's goal does not consider human glory; rather, he seeks to overcome the entire world by the magnificence of his triumph and to outstrip human endurance, thereby rejecting every type of praise.

Although [Stephen] acquires victory in accord with every human manner of praise **[J.89]**, we should pay attention to the narrative which pertains to the salvation of souls. Just as there are some athletes who have ceased their activity and train youths for athletic competitions through skillful technical maneuvers to vanquish their adversaries, so I think we should be trained by the great Stephen in piety that we might escape the grips of spiritual adversaries [*pneumatomachoi*]. For those who are mad with rage detract from the Spirit's glory claiming that Stephen is an advocate of their error when he gazed intently at heaven and saw God's glory and Jesus standing at his right hand [Acts 7.55].

They claimed that he perverted the teachings of piety when, if the Spirit should be included along with the Father and Son, why did not Stephen see in his vision the Spirit with the Son? Therefore how did Stephen cause such distress by uttering these words with his hands outstretched? How does his reasonable tactics counteract such distressing words since he countered the incredulity of his adversaries at that very spot? Do you seek, oh *pneumatichos*, when the Father's glory appears and the Son stands at his right, the location of the Spirit? If the Spirit were present within you, you would not fail to notice what is proposed [of the Spirit] much like those with defective vision who are ignorant of gold lying at their feet. At any rate I have now gotten wind of this and [desire] that you do not subscribe to the rumor devised by the Jews.

How did Stephen see transcendent glory? Who laid bare **[J.90]** heaven's gates for him? Was this the work of men? Which of the angels enabled inferior [human] nature soar to that height? Stephen was not alone when he was generously filled with power **[M.717]** coming from the angels which enabled him to see what he saw. What was recorded? "Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit and saw the glory of God and his Only-Begotten Son" [Acts 7.55]. As the Prophet says, light cannot be seen unless one is filled with light: "In your light we shall see light" [Ps 35.10] (If observation of the light does not share this same light, how can anyone deprived of the sun's rays see it?). Since the Father's light makes this possible, the Only Begotten [Son's] light emanates through the Holy Spirit which makes it visible. Therefore the Spirit's glory enables us to perceive the glory of both the Father and Son. But can we say that the Gospel is true which says that "No man has ever seen God" [Jn 1.18]? How do the Apostle's words agree with the following, "No man has seen nor can see [God]" [1Tm 6.16]? If human nature and power can perceive the glory of the Father and Son, their vision must indeed be mistaken. However, history is true **[J.91]** and cannot lie. The evil deed of the *pneumatomachoi* is indeed made clear because Scripture bears witness to similar situations. For Stephen beholds God not in human nature and power but is united by grace to the Holy Spirit who elevates him in order to comprehend God. Therefore, one cannot say that Jesus is Lord apart from the Spirit, as the Apostle says [cf. 1Tm 6.16, 1Cor 12.3]. One cannot contemplate the Father's glory because where the Spirit is the Son is seen and is grasped the Father's glory.

But history presents us with another problem, namely, the weapon of impiety coming from the *Christomachoi* who condemn the Only Begotten [Son], for they consider the One present in the Father's glory to be inferior to his authority. What about Paul? How shall I answer them? What does the prophet David who lived earlier say when he explained the glory of the Only Begotten [Son] by the teaching of the Spirit? David says, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand'" [Ps 109.1]. The Apostle says that the Lord is seated at the right hand of God's throne [Col 3.1, Heb 1.3]. If this represents either a place of inferiority or a seat of honor, testimony concerning **[J.92]** its magnificence is added in order to signify the loftiness of honor and the reception of true

piety. For the Spirit's grace teaches all these things. Stephen, being filled with the Holy Spirit, saw everything and spoke about what he knew. While in the Spirit, David calls "Lord" as the Gospel says [Mt 22.43]; when Paul, speaks of him, he mentions mysteries in the Spirit [1Cor 14.2]. Therefore if there is one teacher who is in complete harmony, the teaching is the Spirit of truth which was present in divinely inspired persons. Then how can any dissonance be present in teachings? But there is another seat and position which I can easily point out and will now mention it. Instead of showing concern for the body, these words should refer to what is incorporeal. With regard to man, the seat signifies that part of the body's hips which enables it not to continuously bear strain and thereby become weighed down and crooked. On the other hand, an upright position upon one's knees signifies that a person does not rest upon his hips when seated. But when it comes to transcendent nature, sitting and standing have no place with such concepts since each is separate and should be understood respectively. We neither subscribe to a bent position regarding incorporeal **[J.93]** nature nor a sitting down with regard to what is formless; rather, we devoutly understand that each represents stability and being unmoved in every good. For standing and sitting apply to God and do not pertain to a difference of words concerning concepts which teach that God is firmly standing and sitting unmoved in the good. The prophet David and the apostle Paul do not comprehend the sitting of the Only Begotten [Son] in the same manner because the Father is standing and the Son is sitting. Indeed, by mentioning only the fact that the Son is sitting, Scripture tells us about the standing of the Son and no longer suggests the sitting of the Father. For just as Paul and David both confessed the Father sitting through the Son's standing at his right, indeed nothing is taught beforehand concerning the Father which is also true regarding Stephen where the Son is standing and revealed in the Father's glory. Thus this image is valid if it appears to be a satisfactory **[J.94]** archetype. Goodness is present in what is good, light is present in the light it reflects and primeval beauty is present in everything supported by an appropriate image. Thus we should clearly understand the image of the Son's sitting, the Father's sitting and the standing in the standing which differs from the archetype's properties.

Brothers, you should ponder our words and thoughts and hold them as introductory remarks since Stephen's vision provokes reflection. We are not only spectators of Stephen's contest but since we are full of the Holy Spirit, we share his grace and eradicate adversaries for the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ to whom be glory and power forever and ever. Amen.

THE SECOND SERMON

[M.721 & J.97] Upon entering the world, Christ brought salvation and founded the Church. The witness to the truth shone forth as well as those witnesses to such a great providence. The disciples followed their Teacher by following in his footsteps, for after Christ there came bears of Christ [*Christophoroi*]; after the Son of Justice [cf. Mal 3.20], they illumine the world. Stephen was the first to flourish on our behalf, not from the thorns of the Jews, but he was the first fruit for the Lord from the Church's fertility. The Jews placed a crown woven from thorns on the Savior's head [Mt 27.29] since the Cultivator of the vine considered their fruit to be evil. With regard to this the prophet says, "For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the man of Judah is his pleasant planting. I have looked for grapes but behold, it produced thorns" [Is 5.7]. But the works of the evangelical truth are a foretaste of piety and offer to the Lord the holy man Stephen [*Stephanos*] as the first fruits of what has been cultivated in the form of a crown [*stephanos*] from the harmony of many and various virtues. First this wonderful man bore witness to suffering [M.724] and was chosen as a faithful man by [J.98] the Apostles; he was filled with the Holy Spirit by whose power he became wise. He showed diligence for preaching the divine word, and great wonders of divine power confirmed his teachings. Scripture says, "Stephen, being full of faith and power, performed great signs" [Acts 6.8]. He did not consider sufferings to be an impediment and did not hesitate to demonstrate zeal for his task; as a result, he became a great wonder and had the advantage of assuming hardship with a spirit of love. He endured sufferings, was concerned for souls, nourished them with bread, taught with words, offered bodily nourishment and set a spiritual feast because he was a good man and full of the Holy Spirit. [Stephen] was sustained by the goodness of his will to serve the poor and curbed enemies by the Spirit's power of the truth. Every [thought] ought to be rejected and every premeditation against the truth ought to be dispersed. As it is written, "he cast down arguments and every proud obstacle to the power of God" [2Cor 10.5]. Holy Scripture testifies to such power and mastery of speaking so that "no one can resist the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke" [Acts 6.10]. However the herald of truth stirred up the council of impiety. We should take notice of the protomartyr in order to give him his due which, because of the body's weakness, could not be completed yesterday. Today we wish to make memory of him along with the holy Apostles. Neither can praise of the

saints be bound by days or time because "the memory of the just man remains forever" [Ps 111.6]. As a result, their significance will remain unaltered. Therefore [praise of] the martyrs will not be without the apostles nor will the apostles be without the martyrs. The apostles are teachers of the martyrs, whereas the martyrs **[J.99]** are images of the apostles. Indeed blessed Stephen bears their image and the stamp of the cross and was first to receive the crown of martyrdom through death. However, the martyr's endurance is a sign for teachers and has indeed become a crown on their behalf. The crown of beautiful teachers is not honor due to celebrity but growth for the Church so that as the divine Apostle says, "My dearly beloved, my joy and crown, stand firm" [Phil 4.1]. But let us return to the task at hand.

The bearer of Christ [*Christophoros*] has entered the assembly of those slain for Christ; the sheep has entered the pack **[M.725]** of wolves but not every sheep fell prey and was handed over to the wolves. For they ripped apart and tore asunder the flock by biting it with accusations; rather, they were cut into pieces by reproaches, threats and denunciations just like them. Let us not pass over these words without notice. I have spoken of this assembly of evil doers which with bold effrontery comprises this pack of wolves and to which applies the reprimand, "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit as your fathers and those after you" [Acts 7.51]. Thus he who appeared on earth gazes heavenward and being clothed with human nature, has been transformed into the appearance and form of an angel (there is nothing unseemly here; indeed, in the protomartyr it is becoming **[J.100]** that the martyrs' dignity become apparent that we may know the effects of such a new grace). The martyr's yearning is not only pleasing to the angelic dignity but opens heaven's gates; no longer are souls handed over to death, but they commend their spirits into Christ's hands. For the man who is Lord cries out on the cross to his Father, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" [Lk 23.46]. Stephen, the servant of Christ, extends his hands to the Lord saying, "Jesus, receive my spirit" [Acts 7.59]. Having said these words, he hands over his soul. The angels have received a member of their chorus; rather, they took him up with praise while the Jews below stoned him. However, Stephen received a heavenly inheritance after undergoing such noble struggles. To Stephen all these stones are suddenly woven together as a herald to the divine Gospel and with him are the martyrs who again shine with the beauty of salvation. We have earlier mentioned the brilliance of piety which shines so brightly, namely, Peter, James, John and those leaders of the apostolic unanimity and crowns of the Church's glory. Far be it for me to obstruct [the meaning of] Stephen's name; rather, in many ways I will show how inexhaustible it is, for it knows no end to that perfect blessedness represented by crowns. Therefore, if in a spirit of loving the truth we again enjoy crowns from Stephen and share in their memory, then we hope to participate, **[J.101]** remain and be glorified with him, **[M.728]** for when a promise has been confirmed, fellowship in the faith increases.

Again, brothers, enjoyment of the good occurs when the martyrs' memory

illuminates the Lord's day of resurrection. Through these preceding remarks the brilliance belonging to the glory of Christ's Gospel has illumined our minds in which the rays of salvation invigorate justice and banish the gloom of impiety once they have shed light upon souls by knowledge of the truth. To me this is especially wonderful and noteworthy. We feel the sun which rises early and whose rays foreshadow the coming of day by casting its rays upon everything under heaven. It hides and obscures the stars' chorus so that we can no longer perceive their heavenly circuit. But our Lord Jesus Christ rises to us from on high as the prophet says of him, "whereby the sun's rising will visit up from on high" [Lk 1.78]. Not only does [the sun] hide like stars those holy persons who were its precursors, but it makes them shine more brightly and causes others to gleam more intensely. For the prophets radiated after his coming rather than before. Upon coming into the world the Savior illumined and rent the obscurity of prophecy with regard to the Scribes' decrees, having fulfilled the Law and prophets [cf. Rom 13.10], for he did not come to abolish the Law and the prophets but to fulfill them [Mt 5.17]. The Savior said with regard to himself concerning the new order of grace, **[M.729]** "I am the light of this world" [Jn 8.12]. The fountain of goodness coming from the good Father did not scorn to allow his servants participate in himself but said to his disciples, "You are the light of the world" [Mt 5.14], and "Let your deeds shine before men" [Mt 5.16]. We again confirm her our words by the Lord's grace: John **[J.102]** the Baptist was called a lamp [Jn 12.27], and in the Psalms [Christ] was announced and witnessed to by the Lord. The prophet says in the person of the Father in one of the hymns, "I have prepared a light for my Christ" [Ps 131.17, lxx]. That is, I have prepared a helper and precursor for the light. The Lord confirms this voice of the Father by saying, "He [John] was a burning lamp" [Jn 5.35]. However, such a light withdrew and became obscure at the Lord's coming who was the sun of righteousness [cf. Mal 3.20]. In this way, the baptist might radiate all the more as a proclaimer of [Christ's] divinity. John therefore was called a lamp because he illumined through one [sun] alone the house of Israel [cf. Mt 5.15]. The Apostles of the Savior were neither lamps, lights nor stars but messengers of light not illumining one region or area but brightening every place under heaven. The most important leaders were Peter, James and John who were designated as witnesses by Christ, running to the end of their lives and expending themselves by various forms of witness. For he whom the Lord designated as leader of the apostolic chorus obtained proper glory. By the cross he expressed the lordly image of the king (I mean the image of the cross of which he was not ashamed of suffering but took it as a great trophy. Neither we nor any other person, as Paul says, can say that Jesus Christ is our Lord. Thus Peter radiates with much holiness and reverence when he is suspended upside down on a cross in order not to equal himself with his Savior's glory which spread through his crucifixion to humanity in its entirety and whose embrace included the entire world. James was beheaded [cf. Acts 12.2] **[J.103]** out of love for Christ his true head. As the Apostle says, Christ is the head of man and the entire church [cf. 1Cor 11.3, Eph 5.23]. Blessed John endured many, diverse conflicts and succeeded in various positions with regard to

fostering the religion. He underwent [M.732] an unsuccessful attempt at being drowned¹³ and was judged to be numbered among the martyrs' chorus. [John] was held in esteem not by his suffering but by his desire to undergo martyrdom, a type of death which became an immortal tribute who by his death had graced the churches. It is indeed fitting to recall those special men not only with regard to their outstanding piety but their noble character. Together they hold special rank among the other apostles, and their courage does not belong to human reasoning but is in accord with the judgment of divine truth.

Such persons recognized by their great wonders are only known by the Lord in their steadfast fidelity and true witness. This was the vision on the mountain when the Lord was transfigured in resplendent, divine glory only before Peter, James and John [[cf. Mt 17.1ff.]. Both Moses and Elias were present with him, and his brilliance which was overshadowed by a cloud revealed the king's great image. Such was the case with Jairus' daughter whom [Jesus] brought back to life [cf. Mt 26.37], only in this instance they were witnesses to the miracle. Without delaying further, we see that [Jesus] took these same men at the time of his saving passion when he encouraged and confirmed them to be faithful by saying, "Now my soul is troubled" [Jn 12.27]. We do not relate these words to cast a bad light upon the rest of the apostles but as a testimony in remembrance of their virtue. If we must [J.104] speak truthfully, then we offer a common praise to the apostles, for excellency among the saints is not restricted by human discernment but by God's judgment and truth. We have been made worthy of sharing them by recalling such men and must give thanks not so much because we are obliged (this is impossible) but in so far our capacity (this indeed is possible). The saints accept our honor not in order to gain something but only that we might share a common benefit. Again I think we should recall not only Peter, James [M.733] and John but celebrate the memory of all the apostles. If anyone attains the truth which is in accord with their teachings, this person serves to complete the form of one body. As the Apostle says, "if one member is glorified then all the others are glorified" [1Cor 12.26]. Thus truth is especially present in those blessed, perfect men who share the same faith and the same blessing of piety and who solemnly participate in the truth. Who does not gladly exult and is filled with the Holy Spirit once he has been deemed worthy of sharing the apostolic chorus, of guiding the entire world into the knowledge of truth, of filling the true religion's net with the world? Such a person has ensnared with traps whatever belongs to the truth in order to seize every type of evil which afflicts mankind and to lead men to him who both tames and saves them? "To every place on the earth goes their sound" [Ps 18.5]. Here are the foundations of the Church, the columns and supports of truth which are the eternal fountains of salvation from which with great abundance the streams of divine teaching flows. With regard to these matters the prophetic voices says to us, "You will draw water with joy from the fountains of salvation" [Is 12.3].

¹³This phrase is obscure in the critical text.

Peter, the chief of the Apostles, is recalled and the remaining members of the Church are glorified with him for indeed the Church of God is established upon him. This is accord with the Lord's words who made him the firm and most solid rock upon which he had built his Church [cf. Mt 16.16 ff]. Then we have mention of James, John and **[J.105]** as sons of thunder whom the Savior had named and who had brought rain clouds; for the gathering of clouds by necessity herald rain. Thus the clouds represent Apostles and prophetic words; although times of preaching differ, nevertheless the laws of true religion are in harmony and one spirit is the source of various gifts. But who can explain for those who are incapable their courage and worthily recall apostolic virtue? We do not refer to Simon who was known for his fishing or for his ambition to receive praise but to his steadfast faith which made the entire Church firm. Neither again do we mention the sons of Zebedee but the *Boanergoi*, that is, the Sons of Thunder. How does such a faint sound is now so insufficient transformed into thunderous words which penetrate every ear? Therefore we desire to dismiss an ineffective silence with regard to studying the saints **[M.736]**, being fully aware that their memory makes us worthy of being with them and of imitating their virtue. We do not celebrate their lives by words but by keeping their manner of life in ours minds. We show ourselves as worthy disciples not through irrational words but by reverence, good speech, by having the same opinion and ardor. Do you honor the martyrs' memory and hold them in veneration? Fellowship with their memory implies agreement with their mind. Does not the light of knowledge by the Gospel's glory concerning Christ illumine such persons [cf. 2Cor 4.4, 6]? Is not grace poured out by them? Their commands, way of life, struggle, judgement of truth are one and make us worthy by the prayers and intercession of the saints whom we recall through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory and power forever. Amen.