

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS”    7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter -C-  
Acts 7: 55-60   Psalm 97   Revelation 22: 12-14, 16-17   John 17: 20-26  
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Stephen was one of the deacons assigned to the daily care and feeding of the needy children and widows of the community. But his work and words put him at odds with the Jewish authorities. His death is recounted in today’s reading from the Acts of the Apostles. It comes after a long speech in which he reviews the religious history of Israel and accuses the religious leaders of continuing their rejections of the prophets by their rejection of Jesus. They have, according to Stephen, “always opposed the Holy Spirit”(7:51). The preacher would do well to read chapters 6 and 7 of Acts to get the flavor of the whole account.

Luke writes of Stephen’s martyrdom in Acts in a very conscious imitation of the way Jesus’ death was described. There is a comparable trial scene with false witnesses against the accused concerning the destruction of the Temple. “We have heard him claim that Jesus the Nazorean will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses handed down to us” (Acts 6:14) Both Jesus and Stephen are led to their execution outside the city and both die praying for their executioners.

Seeing Stephen’s story so closely identified with Jesus’ would be a reassurance to the fragile and persecuted early church. They would be encouraged to see their own sufferings in the light of Jesus’ life and his bringing of the reign of God. The fact that Stephen sees Jesus “standing at God’s right hand” (and not “sitting”) stirs an image of Jesus at the ready to stand for his church as they testify about him to a hostile world and therefore suffer with Stephen the consequences of their testimony.

We celebrate Stephen, the first martyr for the faith. The martyrs believe in something strong enough to die for it. They not only confront the opposing voices of society, they also confront our church and each member as well. They cause us to ask what we hold and how strongly we hold it. A question is put to us by their witness: Are we willing to sacrifice all for what we believe? Christ is described in Revelations today as, “the Alpha and Omega”, the beginning and the end. In him we have our being and towards him we journey together. With him as our lens, we

view the world and our lives in it. Belief in him requires us to speak and act on what he teaches us. We cannot keep our faith tucked quietly away for special moments at church on Sunday or in private prayer.

Jesus' prayer in the Gospel, at the Last Supper, is for his disciples and for "all who will believe in me through their word." What we witness in Stephen's martyrdom in Acts is the fruition of Jesus' prayer. Stephen has responded to the message of the disciples, and he in turn gives testimony to Christ. And so it goes, to our present age, we who have believed the words (and actions) of those who preceded us. Stories about great women and men in the church give us confidence that Christ continues to act powerfully through other humans. Jesus, as he promised, continues to reveal God to us. These witnesses are the proof of God's love for us and God's ability to use our human nature in powerful ways to continue to reveal the God of love.

The preacher will want to recount a story or two of modern witnesses, those who gave their lives for the truth. (Remember, "witness" is the New Testament word for martyr.) These stories will concretize God's continued presence and will show the fulfillment of Jesus' prayer and promise. "To them I have revealed your name, and I will continue to reveal it so that your love for me may live in them, and I may live in them." Here are suggestions of modern witnesses/martyrs.

Iqbal Masih, a 13 year old Christian Pakistani girl who was murdered in 1995 after she had traveled to Boston and Stockholm to speak against child labor practices. (For more information on child labor: "Human Rights for Workers" [www.senser.com](http://www.senser.com))

Here is an Op-Ed piece that appeared in a San Francisco Bay area newspaper about human rights workers in Central American and the recently martyred Bishop Juan Gerardi in Guatemala. A preacher could start a preaching by telling this story and then likening it to Stephen's martyrdom for the truth and lastly relate it to the fulfillment of Jesus' prayer for subsequent generations of believers.

### "Killing the Truth: Crimes of Commission and Omission"

The April 26 assassination of Bishop Juan Gerardi in Guatemala, another martyr for his faith, marks the latest tragedy in the tortuous path of the Guatemalan

people toward peace and stability. It also provides an object lesson in the incalculable cost of past and present U.S. policy.

Two weeks ago, the Sentinel featured the story of Dorothy Granada, a heroic ex-Santa Cruzan whose service to the cause of nonviolent social change was recognized with the Pfeffer International Peace Prize. In her acceptance speech, she described her work in Central America, including a desperate search for a young woman who had started the Mutual Support Group for family members of the disappeared and then disappeared herself. She described a late-night encounter with the phantoms of a Guatemalan police "death squad." What she would never forget, she said, "...were their eyes. They weren't human. They weren't animal. They just weren't alive. Something happens when a human being is sucked in by violence..."

Two days later, the bodies of the young woman, her brother and her two-year-old son were found, tortured and mutilated. They were three of the 150,000 victims of the war that the security forces waged against the Guatemalan people. And it all began in 1954 when a CIA coup overthrew a democratically-elected, reformist government.

With peaceful reform of Guatemala's semi-feudal society pre-empted by U.S.-sponsored repression, guerrilla movements emerged, beginning in the 1960s. None ever mounted a serious threat to oligarchic rule, but they did serve as a pretext for successive governments to annihilate organized opposition among the poor. The victims mounted. Thousands of students, labor organizers, opposition politicians were simply "disappeared." In the highlands, more than 440 indigenous villages were destroyed. Despite the slaughter, labor, peasant, indigenous, and human rights groups continued to organize. An indigenous leader, Rigoberta Menchu, even won the Nobel Peace Prize. But the killing never stopped.

A peace agreement signed over a year ago between the government and guerrilla groups produced little in terms of social change. However it did nurture hope that the violence might at long last be curtailed and real political differences tolerated.

In this setting, Bishop Gerardi headed up the Recuperation of the Historic Memory project (REMHI) that seeks to apply the healing power of truth to the wounds of

the survivors of the official terror. It is rooted in the conviction that a rigorous look at the past is essential to reconciliation and that a society that denies its past sins may well repeat them in the future.

On April 24, after three years of work, Bishop Gerardi released the REMHI report at a ceremony that included the unveiling of a public monument in honor of the thousands of victims of the conflict. Two days later he was murdered as he returned home at night, his face beaten to a bloody pulp to emphasize that the powers of darkness had chosen their victim carefully.

Many of us who have followed the Guatemalan people's tragic journey weep for this latest victim, for his colleagues, for all those who continue to struggle for a just peace. We also celebrate the extraordinary courage of those who pay the ultimate price for their dogged insistence on a simple conviction: all are equal in the eyes of God and should be treated accordingly.

In the U.S., we can be grateful for the relative security and freedom which we - at least most of us - enjoy. But we would do well to ask what responsibility we may have today for this Frankenstein in Guatemala that was, after all, created in a U.S. laboratory. More to the point, we may wonder how on earth the Clinton administration can continue to drag its feet on declassification of CIA documents related to human rights violations in Guatemala. The efforts of U.N., Guatemalan and U.S. human rights groups to access that gold mine of information have been met with official foot-dragging. In whose name does our government persist in its collusion with the murderous Guatemalan military? What message is being sent? Whose security would be threatened by the release of the CIA's dark secrets? Readers may wish to ask President Clinton. And your senators and representative.

At the April 24 ceremony, Bishop Gerardi spoke of the hope that the REMHI project represented and added, "This path has been and continues to be full of risks, but the construction of the Reign of God is risky and can only be built by those who have the strength to confront those risks."

He rests in peace. Others will take his place. They need our support.

Phil McManus is Chair of SIPAZ (Servicio Internacional para la

Paz/International Service for Peace) whose International Office is in Santa Cruz.

#### ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

“Let Justice Roll Down Like Waters: Biblical Justice Homilies Throughout the Year”, by Walter Burghardt, S.J.. (New York: Paulist Press, 1998) 277pp., \$19.95. Biblically based homilies with social justice messages by one of the U.S.’s outstanding preachers.

#### QUOTABLE:

“The present collection...is an effort to demonstrate through actual homilies a long-standing conviction of mine: it is impossible to preach a good homily that is not a justice homily in the biblical understanding of justice.”

—Walter Burghardt, S.J., in the preface to “Let Justice Roll Down Like Waters”

#### ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: “FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR C” This compilation, from past “First Impressions,” includes two reflections on almost all Sundays and major feasts for this liturgical year. For more information and to purchase go to: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.com/>

2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use “First Impressions” in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)

3. Our webpage address: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.com/>  
(Where you will find “Preachers’ Exchange,” which includes “First Impressions” and “Homilias Dominicales,” as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)

4. “Homilias Dominicales”-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Leobardo Almazan, Juan Torres, OP , Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and

Doris Regan, OP. Like “First Impressions”, “Homilias Dominicales” are a preacher’s early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive “Homilias Dominicales” drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: [Jboll@opsouth.org](mailto:Jboll@opsouth.org) or [jboll@preacherexchange.org](mailto:jboll@preacherexchange.org)

5. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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