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The Pope's words at the Angelus prayer

At midday today, Feast of Saint Stephen, deacon and first martyr, the Holy Father Francis appeared at the window of his study in the Vatican Apostolic Palace to pray the Angelus with the faithful and pilgrims gathered in Saint Peter's Square.

The following are the Pope's words of introduction to the Marian prayer:

Before the Angelus

Dear sisters and brothers, *buongiorno*, happy feast day!

Yesterday we celebrated the Nativity of the Lord and the liturgy, to help us to welcome it better, extends the duration of the feast until 1 January: for eight days. Surprisingly, however, these same days commemorate some dramatic figures of martyr saints. Today, for example, Saint Stephen, the first Christian martyr; the day after tomorrow, the Holy Innocents, the children killed by King Herod for fear that Jesus would take away his throne (cf. *Mt 2:1-18*). In short, the liturgy really seems to want to steer us away from the world of lights, lunches and gifts in which we might indulge somewhat in these days. Why?

Because Christmas is not the fairytale of the birth of a king, but it is the coming of the Saviour, who frees us from evil by taking upon himself our evil: selfishness, sin, death. This is our evil: the selfishness we carry within us, sin, because we are all sinners, and death. And the martyrs are those most similar to Jesus. Indeed, the word *martyr* means *witness*: the martyrs are witnesses, that is, brothers and sisters who, through their lives, show us Jesus, who conquered evil with mercy. And even in our day, martyrs are numerous, more so than in the early times. Today let us pray for these persecuted martyr brothers and sisters, who bear witness to Christ. But it will do us good to ask ourselves: do I bear witness to Christ? And how can we improve in this? We can indeed be helped by the figure of Saint Stephen.

First and foremost, the Acts of the Apostles tell us that he was one of the seven deacons that the community of

Jerusalem had consecrated for table service, that is, for charity (cf. 6:1-6). This means that his first witness was not given in words, but through the love with which he served those most in need. But Stephen did not limit himself to this work of assistance. He spoke of Jesus to those he met: he shared faith in the light of the Word of God and the teaching of the Apostles (cf. *Acts 7: 1-53, 56*). This is the second dimension of his witness: welcoming the Word and communicating its beauty, telling how the encounter with Jesus changes life. This was so important for Stephen that he did not let himself be intimidated even by the threats of his persecutors, even when he saw that things were going badly for him (cf. 54). *Charity and proclamation*, this was Stephen. However, his greatest testimony is yet another: that he knew how to unite charity and proclamation. He left it to us at the point of his death when, following the example of Jesus, he *forgave* his killers (cf. 60; *Lk 23, 34*).

Here, then, is our answer to the question: we can improve our witness through charity towards our brothers and sisters, fidelity to the Word of God, and forgiveness. *Charity, Word, forgiveness*. It is forgiveness that tells whether we truly practice charity towards others, and if we live the Word of God. Forgiveness [in Italian *perdono*], is indeed as the word itself suggests, a greater gift [*dono*], a gift we give to others because we belong to Jesus, forgiven by him. I forgive because I have been forgiven: let us not forget this... Let us think, let each one of us think of his or her own capacity to forgive: how is my capacity to forgive, in these days in which perhaps we encounter, among the many, some people with whom we have not got along, who have hurt us, with whom we have never patched up our relationship. Let us ask the newborn Jesus for the newness of a heart capable of forgiveness: we all need a forgiving heart! Let us ask the Lord for this grace: Lord, may I learn to forgive. Let us ask for the strength to pray for those who have hurt us, to pray for those who have harmed us, and to take steps of openness and reconciliation. May the Lord give us today this grace.

May Mary, Queen of martyrs, help us to grow in charity, in love of the Word and in forgiveness.

After the Angelus

Dear brothers and sisters!

In the spiritual atmosphere of joy and serenity of Holy Christmas, I greet with affection all of you present here and all those who follow us through the media. I reiterate my wish for peace: peace in families, peace in parish and religious communities, peace in movements and associations, peace for those peoples tormented by war, peace for the dear and embattled Ukraine. There are so many Ukrainian flags here! Let us ask for peace for this suffering people!

This week I have received many messages of good wishes from different parts of the world. As I cannot respond to each one, I express my gratitude to all, especially for the gift of prayer.

I wish everyone a Happy Saint Stephen's Day, and please do not forget to pray for me. Enjoy your lunch, and *arrivederci!*
