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Angelus: the martyrdom of St. Stephen remains present in the present-day history of our Church

On the feast day of St. Stephen, the first martyr, Pope Francis prayed the Angelus with the faithful and pilgrims present in St. Peter's Square, and recalled that the witness of the martyr "continues "in the history of the Church, from Stephen to our times".

"Today's Gospel speaks to us of this witness. Jesus announced in advance to His disciples the rejection and persecution they would encounter", said the Holy Father. "But why does the world persecute Christians? The world hates Christians for the same reason it hated Jesus: because He brought the light of God but the world preferred the darkness, to conceal its evil works". He observed, "We recall that during the Last Supper, Jesus Himself prayed to the Father that He might defend us from the evil worldly spirit. There is a conflict between the mentality of the Gospel and the world. The protomartyr Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, was stoned because he confessed his faith in Jesus Christ, Son of God. The Only-Begotten Who came into the world invites every believer to choose the way of light and life. ... The deacon Stephen chose Christ, Light and Life for every man. In choosing truth, he became at the same time a victim of the mystery of wickedness present in the world. However, in Christ, Stephen triumphed".

"Today too the Church, to bear witness to light and truth, experiences harsh persecution in many places, to the supreme trial of martyrdom. how many brothers and sisters of ours suffer abuse, violence and hatred because of Jesus! I tell you, today's martyrs are greater in number than those of the first centuries. When we read the history of the first centuries, here in Rome, we read of great cruelty to Christians. Today let us think of those who suffer persecution, and be close to them with our affection, our prayer and also our tears. Yesterday, Christmas Day, persecuted Christians in Iraq celebrated Christmas in their destroyed cathedral: this is an example of fidelity to the Gospel. Despite trials and dangers, they courageously bear witness to their belonging to Christ and they live the Gospel in their efforts in favour of the least, the most neglected, doing good to all without discrimination; thus witnessing charity in truth".

"In making room in our heart for the Son of God Who gives Himself to us at Christmas, we renew our joyful and courageous will to follow Him faithfully as our sole guide, persevering in living according to the evangelical mentality and refusing the mentality of the powerful of this world", Francis concluded, commending our journey to Mary, Mother of God and Queen of Martyrs.

