In today’s 1st Reading, the Acts of the Apostles highlights the ministry of one of the churches first Deacons, Stephen. As the number of Christians increased daily, the demands on the apostles grew and they recognized they could not provide adequately for those in need and also devote sufficient time to prayer and the ministry of the word. It was important to distribute alms and to serve the poor, so the apostles sought men with a servant’s heart to become the first deacons in the church.

Seeking the input and wisdom of the community, Stephen and six others were chosen. “They presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid hands on them” (Acts 6:6). The laying on of hands comes from the Jewish custom of designating persons for a task and invoking upon them the divine blessing and power to perform it. In our Christian understanding, the laying on of hands is to invoke of the Holy Spirit and in this case ordain the men as servants. So, this ordination rite of Stephen and the other deacons sought the wisdom of the community, the approval of the Apostles and the blessing of the Holy Spirit. The Christians were solidly behind Stephen and the other deacons.

One direct result of picking 7 deacons to serve in a special ministry is that the faith continued to grow. “The word of God continued to spread, and the number of the disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly; even a large group of priests were becoming obedient to the faith.” (Acts 6:7). From the fruit of success, we can surmise the Apostles had more time for prayer and the ministry of the word.

Many demands and expectations were placed upon Jesus by people hungering for his teaching and his wisdom. To feed others, Jesus took ample time to pray. In the quiet of the night, he would often go to a mountain to pray in silence. This helped him to stay properly focused.

If we look to our own lives, we have Sunday as our day of rest. It is a day to focus on the Lord. The Sabbath is a day to gather with the community in prayer. And if there is any work to be done, it should be in a role of service with a corporal or spiritual work of mercy.

Amidst the pandemic, with many who are sick and millions who have lost their job, Corporal works of mercy are especially important. The needs are greater than the apostles could handle even with the help of deacons, so, all the baptized can help to feed the hungry, to give water to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to shelter the homeless, to visit the sick, to visit the imprisoned, and to bury the dead.

With social distancing in place, visiting might take the form of a phone call to pick a person’s spirit up. As I have devoted myself to the ministry of the word this past month, I am most appreciative of those who have helped me with reaching out to those who are homebound. From short notes sent into the church, I know that others really appreciate a simple gesture of care as someone reaches out to them.

Deacon Stephen was filled with grace and power and he had a special gift in proclaiming the Good News. His words were characterized by a spirit of wisdom and a peaceful demeanor. This was no easy task given that his proclamation of the faith stirred up the jealousies of the Sanhedrin and the Synagogue of Freedmen.

Jesus had warned of coming persecution, “Remember, you are not to prepare your defense beforehand, for I myself shall give you a wisdom in speaking that all your adversaries will be powerless to resist or refute” (Luke 21:13-15). And so, it is no surprise that Stephen is falsely accused and brought before the Sanhedrin by those who wish to silence him. Amidst the storm of controversy, Stephen remains calm. His face was like that of an angel.

In this little insight, we see that Stephen was an expert in the spiritual works of mercy. Among them, are to bear wrongs patiently. With the face of an angel, he shrugged off any
bitterness from the ill words spoken of him. Instead, he placed his hope in God enduring troubles with a compassionate spirit. A second spiritual work of mercy is to forgive injuries. In the Our Father, we ask for the forgiveness of our trespasses, and God invites us to forgive those who trespass against us. Truly, “forgiveness transforms hearts and lives.”

In tomorrow’s reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we will see Stephen continue to practice spiritual works of mercy as he instructs the ignorant, admonishes the sinner and prays for his persecutors.

Life is difficult and at times people will attack us with false accusations. We can learn from Stephen that turning the other cheek involves practicing corporal and spiritual works of mercy.

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