

POPE RECALLS STEPHEN, ASKS LIBERATION OF THOSE SEQUESTERED

VATICAN CITY, 26 DEC 2008 (VIS) - At noon today, on the Feast of St. Stephen, Protomartyr, the Holy Father appeared at the window of his study to pray the Angelus with thousands of pilgrims gathered in St. Peter's Square.

In the account of the martyrdom of St. Stephen, the Pope said, there is a detail that "during this Pauline Year should be highlighted: the note that 'the witnesses laid down their cloaks at the feet of a young man named Saul'".

The Holy Father observed, "St. Paul appears here for the first time, with his Hebrew name of Saul, in the role of a zealous persecutor of the Church. ... Shortly after the martyrdom of St. Stephen and still driven by his zeal against Christians, Saul was struck down by a light from heaven, the extraordinary experience in which the risen Christ appeared to him, spoke to him, and changed his life".

"Saul persecuted the Church and had even participated in the stoning of Stephen. He saw him stoned to death but above all had seen the way in which he died, ever like Christ, that is, praying and forgiving his killers. On the road to Damascus Saul understood that in persecuting the Church he was persecuting Jesus who had died and was truly risen; Jesus, alive in His Church, was also alive in Stephen whom he had seen die but who now certainly lived together with his risen Lord. We can almost say that in Christ's voice he heard that of Stephen and, as well as by his intercession, divine grace touched his heart".

"In St. Stephen", Benedict XVI concluded, "we see come to fruition the first fruits of the salvation that the Nativity of Christ offered to humanity: the victory of life over death, of love over hate, of the light of truth over the darkness of deception. We give thanks to God that this victory still today allows many Christians not to return evil with evil, but to respond with the strength of truth and love".

