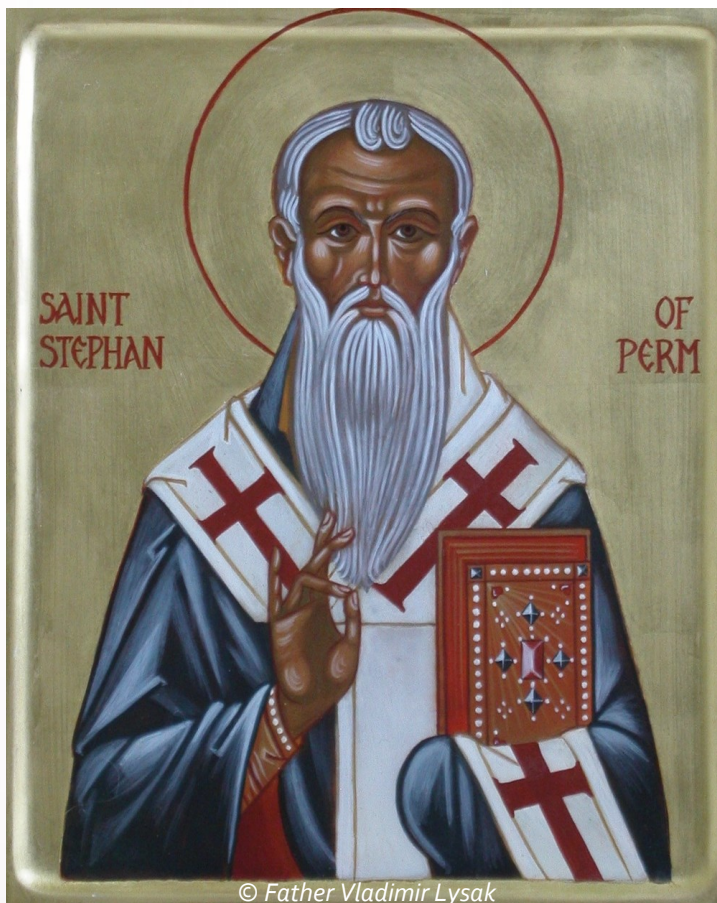


I SPY IN MY LITTLE ICON



By Kh. Jocelyn Abyad



What would you do if there was no written language for the words you spoke? How would you learn a new subject or recite prayers from the Divine Liturgy or the Psalms? This magazine, all of your books, or even a letter to a friend could not exist! This is the problem that faced St. Stephen of Perm, who we are featuring in this month's icon.

St. Stephen lived in Russia in the 1300's. Traditionally, it is believed that his father was from a Russian Christian family, but his mother came from an area of Russia called Komi where a large group of indigenous people lived. They were nomadic people, meaning they moved around a lot. They also worshiped many false gods, in particular they believed in tree spirits.

From a young age, St. Stephen showed a great interest in the Church and devoted himself to his prayers. After completing his education, he became a monk and took on the role of a copyist, someone who would work on translations of Holy Scripture. He had an extensive knowledge of several languages. This love of

the faith and gift for translating languages inspired him to go back to his mother's native homeland and teach them about the true God.

St. Stephen traveled to Perm, near Komi, and learned the language of the people. He created a written alphabet for them to use and translated the Divine Liturgy and other prayers into this language for them. He became well loved and respected among many of the people, but there were some in the community who resented his new leadership. In particular, one pagan priest, Pami, debated St. Stephen often and prevented a lot of people from being baptized. In one debate, Pami challenged St. Stephen to walk through fire. St. Stephen accepted the challenge, but asked Pami to hold hands and walk through the fire with him. Pami refused and this helped the people to realize that he was a false teacher. Many people were baptized into the Church after this incident.

St. Stephen was committed to teaching the people- both the new written language he created for them and the true Faith. He would not let anything stand in his way of doing this. Near his home, there was a particularly tall and strong birch tree that the people worshiped. After praying about how to stop the people from worshiping this false god, St. Stephen burned down the tree. In its place, he built a church dedicated to the Archangel Michael, our defender against all evil spirits, and a school to teach the people in. Eventually, he was installed as the first Bishop of Perm.

Now, we turn to the content of the icon before us this month. First, we see that St. Stephen is wearing an omophorion- the white vestment around his neck. The omophorion is a band of brocade fabric embellished with crosses. It is worn by all bishops and is the symbol of their authority in the Church. He also carries the Gospel book in his covered hand. In icons, we see that people's hands are covered when they are touching something (or someone) that is holy. St. Stephen holds the Gospel book as a symbol of his great teaching and preaching of the Word of God to all people, but especially the people of his mother's heritage, the Komi tribes.

In the icon, St. Stephen's hand is held out in blessing, showing his care for the people that he ministered to. His missionary work changed the lives of many people, not just for their religious conversion, but also for their ability to learn and have a written language. May his prayers continue to minister to us who ask him to intercede for our souls today.