Blessed Nicolas Steno

The Steno Institute is named after Blessed Nicolas Steno (Steensen in Danish, Stensen in English) the 17th century Danish scientist, physician and bishop. He was a truly gifted person who used his talents and abilities to further the understanding of many areas of science as well as theology. Faith and reason were not at odds in his mind.

Blessed Nicolas is considered the father of modern geology and paleontology. He discovered laws and principles that explain why rock sedimentation occurs in layers (strata) and has been called the “Father of Stratigraphy”. Blessed Nicolas first explained the concept of the formation of fossils. The idea came to him when he was dissecting a shark’s mouth and noticed how closely the teeth resembled “tongue stones” which were fossils of teeth.[1] In the last century, a mineral, Stenonite, was named after him.[2]

Additionally, he made ground-breaking discoveries in anatomy and medicine. He was the first to describe the heart as a muscle.[3] All of us carry his name since we each have two salivary gland

ducts in our cheeks, which he first described and which are called ducts of Steno (or Stensen's ducts). Blessed Nicolas was commemorated with a Google doodle on the occasion of his 374th birthday.[4]

Eventually he was made a bishop and was known for his piety. Blessed Nicolas kept an austere lifestyle as a bishop, including selling his bishop's ring to help the poor.[5] He set a superb example in his life by honoring the dignity of the least of our brothers and sisters.
In his last discourse as a scientist, he said: "Beautiful is what we see. More beautiful is what we comprehend. Most beautiful is what we do not comprehend."[5]

Blessed Nicolas refused to accept all scientific dogma at face value; instead, he chose to research matters himself.[6] This drive to seek truth, and not uncritically accept what the scientific community has proclaimed as orthodoxy, inspires us to promote unbiased research supporting the dignity of human life. That is why Steno Institute exists.

References

1. Nicholas Steno. UC Berkeley. https://ucmp.berkeley.edu/history/steno.html. Accessed 4-10-25.
2. Scott, M. Niels Stensen (Steno). Strange Science. Updated October 12, 2013. https://www.strangescience.net/stensen.htm. Accessed 4-10-25.

3. Shillito, A.B. How the Heart Became Muscle: From René Descartes to Nicholas Steno. PhD Dissertation, University of South Florida. April 2019. https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=9136&context=etd. Accessed 4-10-25.
4. Steno remembered with a Google doodle. The Telegraph. January 11, 2012. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/google/google-doodle/9006549/Nicolas-Steno-remembered-with-a-Google-doodle.html. Accessed 4/20/25.
5. Bl. Nicolas Steno. The Catholic Scientist. Society of Catholic Saints. https://catholicscientists.org/scientists-of-the-past/bl-nicolas-steno/. Accessed 4-10-25.
6. Nicolaus Steno. Wikipedia. Referencing: Nicolaus Kooymans, L. 2007. Gevaarlijke kennis. Inzicht en angst in de dagen van Jan Swammerdam. Information from Steno's diary, called Chaos, written around 1659, and discovered in 1946 in a Florence library. https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicolaus_Steno#cite_note-2. Accessed 4-12-25.