



The Holy See

SOLEMNITY OF SAINTS PETER AND PAUL

HOMILY OF POPE JOHN PAUL II

Sunday, 29 June 1997

1. *“You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church”* (Mt 16:18).

On today’s Solemnity of Sts Peter and Paul, the Liturgy of the Word presents two elements which seem to contradict one another but are actually complementary. On the one hand, we have the extraordinary vocation of the Apostles Peter and Paul and, on the other, the difficulties they had to face in fulfilling the mission they received from the Lord.

In the Gospel passage Jesus says to Simon Peter near Caesarea Philippi: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Mt 16:19). Thus Christ foretold the institution of the Church and founded her on Peter’s ministry, which consequently has an essential and enduring significance for her.

When Jesus asked who people thought the Son of God was, the Apostles reported several of the opinions current among the Jews. But when he asked them directly: “But who do you say that I am?” (Mt 16:15), Peter replied in the name of the Twelve: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:16).

Peter made his profession of faith in Christ and this faith constitutes the firm foundation of the People of the New Covenant. The Church is not primarily a social structure; she is the community of those who share the same faith as Peter and the Apostles: the community of those who proclaim the one apostolic faith. This common profession of faith is the real *raison d’être* of the Church herself as a visible institution: it motivates and sustains every project and initiative.

2. Let us listen once again to these words of Jesus on the day when we recall with veneration the holy Apostles Peter and Paul. The Fathers loved to compare them to two pillars supporting the Church as a visible construction. According to ancient tradition, the liturgy celebrates them together, commemorating their glorious martyrdom on the same day: Peter, whose tomb is on this Vatican Hill, and Paul, whose tomb is venerated in the vicinity of the Ostian Way. They both sealed with their blood the witness they bore to Christ by their preaching and ecclesial ministry.

Today's liturgy clearly emphasizes this witness and gives us a glimpse of the profound reason why it was necessary for the faith professed by the lips of the two Apostles to be also crowned with the supreme test of martyrdom.

3. This reason can be seen in the passage from the Acts of the Apostles proclaimed just now, as well as in the responsorial Psalm and the text from the Letter to Timothy, and it is presented to us in summary form in the response of the responsorial Psalm: "The angel of the Lord will rescue those who fear him" (Ps 34 [33]:7).

The first reading recalls Peter's miraculous release from the prison in Jerusalem, where he had been held by King Herod. In the second reading, Paul, as if summarizing his entire apostolic and missionary activity, says: "I was rescued from the lion's mouth" (2 Tm 4:17). Both testimonies show, in a certain sense, the common journey travelled by the two Apostles. Both were sent by Christ to proclaim the Gospel in an environment hostile to the work of salvation. Peter had already experienced this resistance in Jerusalem, where Herod, to win the favour of the Jews, had thrown him into prison, intending "to bring him out to the people" (Acts 12:4). But he was miraculously saved from Herod's hands, and thus he could complete his evangelizing mission, first in Jerusalem and later in Rome, putting all his energy at the service of the newborn Church.

Paul too, sent by the risen Christ to many pagan cities and peoples in the Roman Empire, encountered strong resistance from his compatriots and from the civil authorities. His Letters are a splendid testimony to these difficulties and to the great struggle he had to endure for the Gospel cause.

At the end of his mission, he could write: "My life is already being poured away as a libation, and the time has come for me to be gone. I have fought the good fight to the end; I have run the race to the finish; I have kept the faith" (2 Tm 4:6-7).

Peter and Paul, each with his own personal and ecclesial experience, testify that the Lord never abandoned them, even amid the harshest trials. He was with Peter to deliver him from the hands of his opponents in Jerusalem; he was with Paul in his constant apostolic labours to communicate to him the strength of his grace, to make him a fearless proclaimer of the Gospel for the benefit of the nations (cf. 2 Tm 4:17).

4. The Church is called to deepen her own link with the witness of the Apostles Peter and Paul. In celebrating today's liturgical solemnity, the Christian communities of the whole world strengthen their bonds of unity based on profession of the same faith in Christ and on fraternal charity. The rite for the conferral of the sacred pallium on the new Metropolitan Archbishops from various countries by the Successor of Peter is an eloquent sign of this ecclesial communion.

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate! I am pleased to welcome you to this solemn celebration, during which you will receive the pallium as a sign of unity with the See of Peter and of sharing in the mission, entrusted by Christ to the Apostles and to their successors, of proclaiming the Gospel to all peoples. Together with you, I would like to greet and affectionately embrace the ecclesial communities entrusted to your care, asking the Lord for an abundance of the Spirit's gifts for your faithful.

5. If the witness of faith and the arduous struggle which the Apostles Peter and Paul had to undertake for the cause of the Gospel are considered in merely human terms, they ended in defeat. In this too they faithfully followed Christ's example. Indeed, humanly speaking the mission of Christ, who was condemned to death and crucified, ended in defeat.

However, both the Apostles, with their gaze fixed on the paschal mystery, did not doubt that precisely what to the eyes of the world seemed a defeat, was in fact the beginning of the fulfilment of God's plan. It was the victory over the forces of evil won first by Christ and then by his disciples through faith. The entire community of believers relies on the firm foundation of the apostolic faith and gives thanks to Christ for the solid rock on which its life and mission are built.

May the Lord, who today gladdens us with the glorious memory of the Apostles Peter and Paul, enable us to listen to their teaching with a docile heart, preserve it with devotion and transmit it with fidelity, so that the Gospel message may reach to the ends of the earth.

Amen!