



The Holy See

EUCCHARISTIC CELEBRATION

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Solemnity of the Apostles Peter and Paul

Monday 29 June 1998

1. The solemn memorial of the Apostles Peter and Paul invites us once again to make a spiritual pilgrimage to the Upper Room in Jerusalem, on the day of Christ's resurrection. The doors "being shut ... for fear of the Jews" (*Jn 20:19*), the Apostles present, already deeply troubled by the Teacher's passion and death, were disturbed by the news of the empty tomb, which they had heard throughout the day. And suddenly, although the doors were closed, Jesus appeared: "Peace be to you!", he said. "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.... Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (*Jn 20:21-23*).

He says this with *a power that leaves no room for doubt*. And the Apostles believe him because they recognize him: he is the same one they have known; the same one they had listened to; the same one who was crucified three days before on Golgotha and buried not far away. He is the same: he is alive. To assure them that it is really he, he shows them the wounds in his hands, feet and side. *It is his wounds that are the chief proof of what he has just said and of the mission he is entrusting to them.*

The disciples thus fully experience the identity of their Teacher and, at the same time, deeply understand the origin *of the power to forgive sins*, a power that belongs to God alone. Jesus once said to a paralyzed man: "Your sins are forgiven you", and healed him as a sign of his own power, in front of the indignant Pharisees (cf. *Lk 5:17-26*). Now he returns to the Apostles after working the greatest miracle, his resurrection, in which the power to forgive sins is inscribed in a remarkably eloquent way. Yes, it is true! Only God can forgive sins, but God has wished to do this work through his crucified and risen Son, so that every man, as he receives the forgiveness of his sins, will clearly know that in this way he is passing from death to life.

2. If we pause to reflect on the Gospel passage just proclaimed, we return to an even earlier period in Christ's life, to meditate on a highly significant episode that occurred near Caesarea Philippi, when he asked the disciples: "Who do men

say that the Son of man is? ... Who do you say that I am?" (*Mt* 16:13-16). Simon Peter replies on behalf of them all: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (*Mt* 16:16). This confession of faith is followed by Jesus' well-known words which were destined to mark the future of Peter and the Church for ever: "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (*Mt* 16:17-19).

The power of the keys. The Apostle becomes the depositary of the keys to a priceless treasure: *the treasure of redemption*, a treasure which far transcends the temporal dimension. It is the treasure of divine life, of eternal life. After the resurrection it was definitively entrusted to Peter and the Apostles: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (*Jn* 20:22-23). Anyone with keys has the ability and the responsibility of closing and opening. Jesus enables Peter and the Apostles to dispense the grace of the forgiveness of sins and to open definitively the gates of the kingdom of heaven. After his death and resurrection, they well understand the task entrusted to them, and with this knowledge they address the world, spurred by the love of their Teacher. They go everywhere as his ambassadors (cf. *2 Cor* 5:14-20), since the time of the kingdom has now become their inheritance.

3. Today the Church, especially the Church in Rome, is celebrating the memorial of Sts Peter and Paul. Rome, the heart of the Catholic community throughout the world; Rome, the place chosen by Providence for the definitive witness which these two Apostles would offer to Christ.

O Roma felix! In your long history the day of their martyrdom was certainly by far the most important. On that day, through the witness of Peter and Paul who died for love of Christ, God's plans were inscribed in your rich historical patrimony. The Church, approaching the beginning of the third millennium — *tertio millennio adveniente* — does not cease to proclaim these plans to all humanity.

4. On this most solemn day, the *Metropolitan Archbishops* appointed during the past year have gathered in Rome in accordance with a significant tradition. They have come from various parts of the world to receive the *sacred pallium* from the Successor of Peter as a sign of communion with him and with the universal Church.

I welcome you with great joy, venerable Brothers in the Episcopate, and I embrace you in the Lord! I express my deep gratitude to each of you for your presence, which shows in a singular way three of the essential notes of the Church: that she is *one, catholic* and *apostolic*; as for her *holiness*, this shines brilliantly in the witness of her "pillars", Peter and Paul.

In celebrating the Eucharist with you, I pray in a particular way for the ecclesial communities entrusted to your pastoral care: I invoke upon them an abundant outpouring of the Holy Spirit, so that he may lead them, filled with faith, hope and love, to cross the threshold of the third Christian millennium.

5. The presence of my venerable *Brothers of the Orthodox Church*, delegates of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, is a particular joy and comfort as well. I warmly thank them for this renewed sign of homage to the memory of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, and recall with deep feeling that three years ago His Holiness Bartholomew

I wished to come to Rome to join me for this solemn event: at that time we had the joy of professing our faith together at the tomb of Peter and of blessing the faithful.

These are providential signs of reciprocal spiritual closeness, especially during this period of immediate preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000: all Christians, and especially their Pastors, are invited to perform acts of charity, which, with respect for the truth, show the Gospel commitment to full unity and, at the same time, promote it according to the will of the one Lord Jesus. Faith tells us that the ecumenical journey remains firmly in God's hands, but calls for the thoughtful co-operation of men. Today we entrust its future to the intercession of Sts Peter and Paul, who shed their blood for the Church.

6. Jerusalem and Rome, the two poles in the life of Peter and Paul. The two poles of the Church, which today's liturgy has recalled to us: from the Upper Room in Jerusalem to the "upper room" of this Vatican Basilica. The witness of Peter and Paul began in Jerusalem and ended in Rome. This was the will of divine Providence which had previously freed them several times from the threat of death but let them finish their race in Rome (cf. *2 Tm* 4:7) and receive here the crown of martyrdom.

Jerusalem and Rome are also the two poles of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, to which this celebration brings us closer with the inner zeal of faith. May the witness of the holy Apostles remind the whole People of God of the true meaning of this goal, which is certainly historical, but transcends history and transforms it with the spiritual dynamism of God's kingdom.

In this perspective, the Church makes her own the words of the Apostle to the Gentiles: "The Lord will rescue me from every evil and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory for ever and ever. Amen" (*2 Tm* 4:18).

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