

A SCHOLAR AND A FISHERMAN: TWO PILLARS OF THE CHURCH

Reflection for the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul

The solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul honors two great saints who, between them, represent the Church's mission to both Jews (Peter's leadership was exercised from the Jerusalem church) and Gentiles (Paul is known as the "apostle to the Gentiles"). Saint Peter, who is called by Jesus "rock," and who is revered by Catholics as the first Pope, enjoys first place among the apostles and has a profound significance for the Church. St. Paul is likewise a towering figure, whose theological genius, evangelical fervor, and tireless pastoral ministry were so instrumental in the founding of the Christian religion. When we honor Peter and Paul, in truth we honor the Church as well, for their contributions have forever marked the faith and life of God's people.

Reflecting on today's solemnity, Fr. King writes:

Peter was a poor man with little or no education. He became a follower of Jesus, a Rabbi from Nazareth, although he wasn't quite sure why and often did not understand what Jesus taught. He tried to get Jesus to tone down some of His messages and in the end denied he ever knew Jesus. It was on the shoulders of this man that Jesus established His new Church.

The other man is much different. He was a well educated Rabbi himself, and also a skilled craftsman—a tentmaker. He was respected by his community and wrote and preached very well. He led the first persecutions against Christians. He was Paul of Tarsus, whom the Lord called to preach the good news to us Gentiles.

The fisherman and the scholar. Their selection by God show us how God uses individuals of every kind of background, intellect and talent to be his "messengers."

Fr. Dennis McBride writes:

One night in the middle of July in the year 64 A.D. a fire started in Rome, the fire spread rapidly and burnt for a week. By the time it was stopped, it had destroyed half the imperial city. There was little doubt in people's minds that the emperor Nero was responsible, and in response to the public outcry Nero set up a commission which quickly found that a new religious minority was responsible for the arson: the Christians. There started a series of terrible persecutions. To be a Christian was to be an outlaw; to profess the name of Jesus was to incur the penalty of death. Two leading outlaws were executed under Nero's persecution, two men we celebrate today as Saint Peter and Saint Paul.

Peter, the leader

All four Gospels were written after the death of Peter and they all acknowledge the special role he enjoyed during the life of Jesus. In the earliest Gospel, Mark, Peter is the first to be called by Jesus. Although Jesus is from Nazareth in Galilee, he centers his early mission in the town of Capernaum, beside the lake. And the address of his first mission center is the house of Peter, the same house where he cures Peter's mother-in-law. Peter's boat serves as Jesus' earliest pulpit. Even Peter's name is given to him by Jesus.

All the Gospels see Peter as the spokesman for the apostolic group. He is portrayed as the most vivid character who acts on behalf of others. He is not a cardboard figure who can do no wrong: he is a man aware of his own sinfulness but keenly aware too of the power of God at work in Jesus.

In today's Gospel, we have Matthew's version of Peter's famous confession of Jesus. The Church is seen to be built on Peter's confession: *he is the one who is enabled by God to say who Jesus is*. The Gospel acknowledges that not only does Peter confess Jesus, he also denies Jesus. But the importance is that he can do both and *still* be a rock. He can use his failure as a source of strength for others. After the resurrection, we see that because of his love for Christ Peter can be chief pastor to the people of Christ.

It is Peter who heads the movement of the early church after Pentecost. Even though there is opposition to some of his

ideas, he is acknowledged as the chosen leader and the center of unity. Both his authority and his love are confirmed in his greatest act of witness when he dies as a martyr for the sake of Christ.

Paul, the pilgrim

Unlike Peter, Paul never met Jesus of Nazareth. Paul never had the experience of seeing Jesus, hearing him preach, witnessing his great deeds. Instead, Paul was dedicated to the elimination of Jesus' followers. As he admits himself, he was so bent on suppressing the Jesus movement that he would pursue Christians into foreign cities to track them down. He was an accomplished fanatic.

His physical appearance is described in the *Acts of Paul*, which was written about a hundred years after his death: "a little man. His legs were crooked, but his bearing was noble. His eyebrows grew close together and he had a big nose. A man who breathed friendliness." whether friendliness was all that Paul breathed is doubtful! After his conversion, he brought the same dynamism to the spread of the Christian message as he had brought to its suppression. Paul was driven to share the exciting truth of the Gospel: that in his death Christ had gained freedom for all people.

However, Paul's Gospel vision brought him into conflict with many people. He seemed to have a charisma for causing a riot wherever he went. His first attempt at preaching in Jerusalem made him a target of assassination and the local church had to get him out fast. Luke tells us in the Acts that after Paul was shipped back to Tarsus: "The churches throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria were now left in peace" (9:31). Apparently you could have Paul or you could have peace, but it wasn't easy to have both!

Paul was an intellectual as well as a man of action; he personally thought through great questions of faith and communicated the Gospel with passion and intelligence. He came into conflict with religious authority even to opposing Peter "face to face"; but he never questioned Peter's authority to lead the whole community. In the end he and Peter gave the ultimate witness to Christ in dying for his name.

In celebrating Peter and Paul we bless God for gracing them for their mission in the life of the Church. Today the Church still needs their different gifts and their shared commitment. Christians throughout the world still need a Petrine figure to unite the different factions in the community and be a source of unity and strength. Christians still need apostles like Paul, people on fire with the love of Christ, who can reach out to all people with a faith that is energetic.

Neither Peter nor Paul put a torch to Nero's city of Rome. But they did light a fire that has not gone out. For that we praise God.

Persecution and Paul

About two years before Peter's imprisonment, the church in Jerusalem was visited by a new convert, Paul of Tarsus. Paul had been an accomplished persecutor of the followers of Jesus and was feared for his fanatical commitment to his cause. But he had experienced a conversion in which Christ had spoken to him in a vision appoint him as his chosen instrument to the Gentiles. Paul went to Jerusalem to tell his experience to the apostles, but he stayed in the city for only fifteen days. Luke tells us why: When Paul arrived "he tried to join the disciples, but they were afraid of him; they could not believe he really was a disciple (Acts 9:26).

Nonetheless, Paul started to preach in the city, but he so angered the Greek-speaking Jews that they sought to kill him. it is worth noting that this was the same group that had stoned Stephen to death, the same group that had placed Stephen's clothes at the feet of Saul, the persecutor. Now the persecutor had become the persecuted. To save his life, members of the Jerusalem church took him to the port of Caesarea and shipped him back to Tarsus where he came from. And as Luke tells us: "The churches thought Judaea, Galilee and Samaria were now left in peace."

Throughout his ministry, Paul always claimed that he was in truth an apostle of Jesus, on an equal footing with the Twelve. Most of his letters open with his defensive claim: "From Paul . . . An apostle who does not owe his authority to men or his appointment to any human being but who has been appointed by Jesus Christ . . ." (Gal. 1:1,2). Perhaps more than any imprisonment or lashing, Paul's real pain arose from his awareness that he would never be accepted

without reservation in his lifetime. He always had to struggle to prove himself an authentic apostle, not a spy planted by his former employers. Perhaps that agony was his cross.

Love without reserve

Peter had denied Jesus three times, but he had returned as a rock to strengthen and lead the Christian community. Paul had persecuted Christ, but he had changed his ways to become the energetic apostle who pushed the reaches of the Gospel far beyond the confines of Judaea and Samaria. Both men had fallen; both men had risen again to new heights. Peter was Jesus' choice to lead the Christian community and be its source of unity; Paul was Jesus' choice to take his message to the Gentiles.

Both apostles were martyred in Rome under the persecution of the emperor Nero. In their final witness there is nothing doubtful about their love; in the end they are equal in love. Both of them had a love without reserve.

That is why we honor both of them without reserve. In honoring Peter and Paul, we also celebrate the ancient foundation of the church in Rome, which was to become the mother of all the Christian churches. The Church in Rome had these two great apostles and martyrs at its beginning, a fact the community regarded as a unique privilege. In their foundation they had a double dimension: apostolic leadership and evangelic energy, both marks of the Church today. That is why in the Roman canon of the Mass (the Eucharistic Prayer) the first two apostles who are mentioned are not Peter and Andrew, but Peter and Paul. Paul does get his unreserved recognition in the very canon of the Mass! As today we celebrate them. Together. In one breath.

Jubilee Year of St. Paul

Pope Benedict has designated this year a Jubilee Year of the Apostle Paul, honoring the 2,000 years since his birth. As stated above, Paul was the great Apostle to the Gentile world. Last weekend we had on sale a book called *St. Paul—A Study Guide for Catholics*, by Fr. Mitch Pacwa, a \$9 book we are selling for \$5. copies available at the parish office.