

Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul

Today we celebrate the solemnity of St. Peter and St. Paul, who guided the early church just after the time of Jesus.

Both died as martyrs for the faith in Rome, in the early 60's, just thirty years after the death of Jesus. Peter was crucified upside down in the courtyard to the left of St. Peter's Basilica (in the courtyard behind the arch where the Swiss Guards stand on duty) and Paul was beheaded between Rome and the sea, in a place now called Tre Fontane (Italian for three fountains after the legend that the three springs in the spot mark the three places where Paul's head bounced after being beheaded). Peter was buried in the nearest cemetery which was on top of Vatican Hill and St. Peter's Basilica was later built on top of Peter's tomb, the main altar being directly on top of his tomb. Paul was also buried in the nearest cemetery and the Basilica of St. Paul's outside the Walls was later built on top of his tomb, the main altar being directly on top of his tomb.

Each of these two saints is important for different reasons. Peter is important because he was the first Pope and kept the church united which was growing very rapidly in the years following Pentecost. In the first years after Pentecost it was Jews who accepted Jesus as the Savior and so the early church was a very Jewish church. But as time went on Paul began to preach also to non-Jews, the Gentiles as they were called. All of us are Gentiles. His preaching was very successful and he brought huge numbers of non-Jews into the church, so much so that the number of Jews in the church was greatly outnumbered by non-Jews. It is because of Paul that we are now in the Church. So both Peter and Paul had very important tasks in the early church, Peter maintaining the unity in the church which during his lifetime had already spread throughout the Middle East and Europe, and Paul who taught the Jews that Jesus is the fulfillment of their Old Testament hopes and taught the non-Jews that Jesus is the Savior. Whenever you see statues of Peter and Paul, usually Peter is holding a key, symbolizing his

duty as head of the church, and Paul is holding the Bible, symbolizing his preaching.

It is interesting to note the personalities of both Peter and Paul. Peter was impetuous, telling Jesus that he would die with him on Holy Thursday night if necessary (John 13:37) but later that night he denied he knew him. We also remember Peter's objection to Jesus' prediction that he would suffer and die in Jerusalem and Jesus said 'Get behind me Satan because the way you think is man's way and not God's way' (Matt 16:23). Yet what made Peter a suitable candidate for Jesus' call was his love, so three times Jesus asked him if he loved him and asked him to look after the flock.

Paul was a controversial character in his own way. He had a fiery personality. In his early life he channeled that fire towards persecuting the Christians in Jerusalem, even witnessing the death of Stephen, the first martyr for Jesus (Acts 8:1). After his conversion Paul's preaching was fiery and upset the churches. In Acts we read that Paul then returned to Tarsus, and the next sentence says it all, "the churches throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria were left in peace" (9:31). Paul spent 10 years back in Tarsus before he began his preaching. It was a time for him to cool down and learn what the death and resurrection of Jesus meant for us all. Why did God call Paul? Paul was a highly educated Pharisee and it would be only someone like him who could see that faith in Jesus demanded a totally new relationship with God for Jews, and also he had a very strong personality which he needed to help the Jews to accept that Jesus was the Savior of all peoples, and that because of Jesus there is no difference between Jew and non-Jew.

As we look at the personalities of Peter and Paul, we see that God called them to use their personalities to spread the Gospel, Peter to use his impetuous love to look after the flock, and Paul to use his training as a Pharisee and his strength of character to ensure that the non-Jews would be welcomed into the church. It is a reminder to us that our talents and our weaknesses too can become God's means of helping others, if we allow. We

don't have to be perfect for God to work through us, God can work through us, faults and all, as he did with Peter and Paul.

Apostles of the Lord, witnesses of the first hour, they lived those initial moments of expansion of the Church and sealed with their blood their loyalty to Jesus. Let us hope that we, Christians of the 21st century, also know how to be reliable witnesses of the love of God in the midst of men, as these two Apostles were, along with so many others of our fellow citizens.

In one of his first interventions addressing the Cardinals, Pope Francis told them that we must 'walk, build and confess'. That is, we must move forward in our way of life, by building up our Church and by confessing the Lord. But the Pope warned: "we can walk as much as we want, we can build many things, but if we do not confess Jesus Christ, nothing will avail. We will become a compassionate NGO but not the Church, the Bride of Christ»

We have heard in the Mass Gospel a central fact for the life of Peter and the Church. Jesus asks that fisherman of Galilee an act of faith in his divine status and Pedro does not hesitate to say: "You are the Christ, the son of the living God" (Mt 16:16). Immediately, Jesus institutes the Primacy, by telling Peter that he will be the firm rock upon which the Church, throughout the ages, will be built (cf. Mt 16:18) and by giving him also the power of the keys of the Kingdom, the Supreme authority.

Although Peter and his successors are assisted by the force of the Holy Spirit, they still need our prayers, because their mission is of great significance for the life of the Church: they must be a strong foundation for all Christians throughout the ages; we must, therefore, also pray, every day, for the Holy Father, for his person and for his intentions.