

Vigil of Saints Peter & Paul June 28

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

Introduction

The Lord built His Church on the foundation of the apostles. Today we celebrate two of the greatest of the apostles, Peter and Paul. Peter, the Rock, was the Chief of the Apostles, their leader and our first Pope. Peter was executed in the reign of Nero between A.D. 64 & 67. There is no historical evidence for the tradition that he was crucified, either upright or upside down, but this is no reason to discount the tradition. His tomb was believed, since before the time of Constantine, to have been under what we now call the Vatican. In 1968 Pope Paul VI announced that the skeletal remains of St. Peter had been found beneath the high altar of the Vatican.

Paul, the Pharisee who was converted on his trip to Damascus was also executed in the reign of Nero in A.D. 67 or 68. Possibly at the same time as St. Peter. The place of martyrdom in local Roman tradition is the site of what is now known as the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls. Since he was a Roman citizen, the mode of execution according to the same tradition was decapitation.

1st Reading - Acts 3:1-10

Our first reading today takes place very early in the history of the Catholic Church - before it had spread much beyond Jerusalem. The disciples would meet daily in the Temple courts and would celebrate the Eucharist in their homes (Acts 2:46-47).

3:1 Now Peter and John were going up to the temple area for the three o'clock hour of prayer.

One of the appointed times for Jewish prayer. The Apostles are following the Jewish precepts.

2 And a man crippled from birth was carried and placed at the gate of the temple called "the Beautiful Gate" every day to beg for alms from the people who entered the temple.

The Beautiful Gate is the gate on the Eastern front of the Temple (the side facing the Mount of Olives). It was made of Corinthian bronze and separated the courts of the women and the gentiles.

³ When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked for alms. ⁴ But Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, “Look at us.” ⁵ He paid attention to them, expecting to receive something from them. ⁶ Peter said, “I have neither silver nor gold, but what I do have I give you:

He has no silver or gold, he has something even more valuable: knowledge of the source of salvation, the name of Jesus.

in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean, (rise and) walk.”

By invoking the name of Jesus, Peter is empowered by the Lord to work the cure. The name is not a magical surrogate for Jesus, subject to earthlings’ control, but the medium of the heavenly Christ’s direct action.

⁷ Then Peter took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles grew strong. ⁸ He leaped up, stood, and walked around, and went into the temple with them, walking and jumping and praising God. ⁹ When all the people saw him walking and praising God, ¹⁰ they recognized him as the one who used to sit begging at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, and they were filled with amazement and astonishment at what had happened to him.

2nd Reading - Galatians 1:11-20

The Letter to the Galatians is the first of the so-called “great” epistles of the Apostle to the Gentiles. It is dated somewhere between A.D. 49 and 57. It provides the best commentary to the decisions of the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:23-29). It was at that gathering that the apostles, with the “help” of the presbyters (priests) of the local Jerusalem Church (in union with the Holy Spirit), decided that Christians of gentile origin were under no obligation to conform to Jewish precepts. The Church has come to realize that they are not merely a part of Judaism but the fulfillment of it. They are a product of God’s action in history; they have been grafted onto the ancient trunk of the chosen people.

¹¹ Now I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel preached by me

The gospel proclamation that salvation is available to all through faith in Christ

is not of human origin. ¹² For I did not receive it from a human being, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

The revelation on the road to Damascus illumined Paul about Christ and His meaning for humanity – about the essential character of the gospel, not necessarily about its form.

¹³ For you heard of my former way of life in Judaism,

Paul's former way of life hardly provided the type of psychological background from which the gospel would have developed naturally. As a Pharisee, he would have rejected resolutely what was opposed to Mosaic Law and the traditions of the fathers.

how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it,

In the Old Testament (Numbers) the term "church" (assembly) refers to the assembly of the People of God in the desert. As used by Paul, it is an honorific title for the Jewish-Christian churches in Jerusalem and Judea, the Christian counterpart of the old cultic assembly.

¹⁴and progressed in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my race, since I was even more a zealot for my ancestral traditions. ¹⁵ But when (God), who from my mother's womb had set me apart and called me through his grace,

Saint Paul compares his calling to that of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:5) or even the Servant of Yahweh (Isaiah 49:1). Paul had been destined for the call by the Father that antedated his very existence.

was pleased ¹⁶ to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him to the Gentiles,

Paul connects his apostolic commission with the revelation of Christ in that he insisted that he had "seen" the Lord (1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:8) and was therefore an apostle.

I did not immediately consult flesh and blood,

Paul is making an emphatic denial of any human origin of his commission and goes on to explain this denial by giving chronological and geographical details.

¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me;

His basic insight into Christ does not stem from the center from which the "word of the Lord" went forth. Saint Paul is conscious that he is the "least important" of the apostles, but this doesn't make him an apostle of 2nd rank.

rather, I went into Arabia and then returned to Damascus. ¹⁸ Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to confer with Kephas and remained with him for fifteen days.

Quite possible to learn more about Jesus' teaching and ministry and maybe about the "traditions" of the Jerusalem church

¹⁹ But I did not see any other of the apostles, only James the brother of the Lord.

This means that he is not James, son of Zebedee, or James, son of Alphaeus. James "the brother of the Lord" was the first Bishop of Jerusalem, but not one of the twelve. In Hebrew

and Aramaic usage, a “brother” was any kinsman or relative.

²⁰ (As to what I am writing to you, behold, before God, I am not lying.)

Gospel - John 21:15-19

This is Jesus’ last resurrection appearance in the Gospel of John. His first resurrection appearance to the apostles in this Gospel was when He gave them the commission and power to forgive sin. Now, He is ready to leave them and is ensuring that His Church will not be without a visible leader. This appearance takes place by a charcoal fire (John 21:9). The only other charcoal fire in the gospels is also in John’s gospel (18:18) where Peter denied Jesus three times. What is significant about this reading is that Greek has three words for “love”: *Agape* = self-sacrificing love; *Philiias* = brotherly love; *Eros* = sexual love.

¹⁵ When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter,

This three-fold affirmation beside the charcoal fire is a reversal of Peter’s three-fold denial beside a charcoal fire.

“Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?”

Agape = self-sacrificing love

He said to him, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

Philiias = brotherly love

He said to him, “Feed my lambs.” ¹⁶ He then said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

Agape

He said to him, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

Philiias

He said to him, “Tend my sheep.” ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was distressed that he had said to him a third time, “Do you love me?”

Philiias

and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.”

(Jesus) said to him, “Feed my sheep.

The interplay with words is interesting but the commentaries do not show what the significance is. To me it seems as though Jesus is showing Peter what true love is and Peter is unable at this point to make this commitment. He did however, live out a self-sacrificing love which manifested itself in Peter’s crucifixion for the faith. What is certain however, is that Jesus, the good shepherd, is turning His earthly flock over to His duly appointed visible minister – “Feed my lambs ... tend my sheep ... feed my sheep.” Lambs will not wander far from the flock but need to be fed, sheep need guidance (tending) as well as nourishment. The primacy was given to Peter directly and immediately. The Church has always understood, and Vatican I defined: “We therefore teach and decree that, according to the testimony of the Gospel, the primacy of jurisdiction over the universal Church of God was immediately and directly promised and given to Blessed Peter the Apostle by Christ our Lord ... And it was upon Simon Peter alone that Jesus after His resurrection bestowed the jurisdiction of chief pastor and ruler over all His fold in the words: ‘Feed my lambs; feed my sheep’.”

18 Amen, amen, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to dress yourself and go where you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.”

Jesus declares that Peter will fulfill his earlier promise to follow Jesus even to death (John 13:37-38).

19 He said this signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when he had said this, he said to him, “Follow me.”

Walk in my footsteps, all the way to the cross. This is the oldest written attestation of the tradition of Peter’s martyrdom by crucifixion. The words “Follow me” would have reminded the Apostle of the first call he received (Matthew 4:19) and of the fact that Christ requires of His disciples complete self-surrender: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up the cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23).