

## **Saints Peter & Paul, apostles A/2008**

We will be celebrating Independence Day this week. Independence Day reminds us of the freedom the American people won from the former colonial empire. But, it reminds us also that without the genius of the founding fathers, their love of liberty, their sense of sacrifice and their pursuit of ideal for all, this country would not have been what it is in the face of the world.

In this regard, the founding fathers can be legitimately considered as the heroes of the nation. They have excelled in virtue, quality and patriotism that they are the models to imitate. It is not only nations that have heroes, but also the Church.

Today the Church celebrates two important heroes who have played a big role in the life of Church and shaped its structure by their teaching and work, namely Peter and Paul. The readings of this feast lead us, each one in its own way, into the life and the teaching of these heroes, and show how they have contributed to the enhancement of God's kingdom and the growth of the Church.

While St Paul, as a missionary, devoted his life to the conversion of the Gentiles, St Peter consecrated his to the evangelization of his compatriots, the Jews. All over their spiritual journey, they have been both guided by God through the power of his Holy Spirit. Thus, they have given the best of themselves, according to their ability, braving danger and accepting sacrifice, for the glory of God.

The letter to Timothy gives us a picture of the spiritual journey of St Paul, how he worked tirelessly for the glory of God. After having given all he could in the service of God's kingdom, his time of departure was near. His life had reached a point where it must be sacrificed like a libation as Christ did on the cross. St Paul acknowledges that he competed well and finished the race by keeping the faith intact. For that, God will reward him with an unfading crown of victory.

In spite of dangers and numerous threats, Paul did not give up his mission. The Lord stood by his side and rescued him when he was in need. Paul is also convinced that the Lord, who has allowed him to complete the proclamation of his word to the Gentiles, will keep him safe until he enters his heavenly kingdom.

This picture of the life of St Paul is completed by the spiritual journey of St Peter. Like Paul, Peter also went through suffering, but in all that the Lord always rescued him, as we heard in the Acts of the Apostles. All the disciples of Jesus likewise accepted hardships and trials for Jesus' sake. Among this group, Peter emerged as a leader whose wisdom and sense of discernment brought him esteem and appreciation of all.

Today's Gospel relates one of the episodes in which the leading role of Peter is evidenced by his answer to the question of Jesus. In fact, after having gone around Galilee, in towns and villages preaching and doing miracles, Jesus' fame spread all over the country and abroad. People were enthusiastic and came to him, looking for healing and consolation. Now Jesus wants to know if all these people have come to know him.

Unfortunately, what people think of him, according to the variety of their opinions, is not what Jesus truly is. To which Peter reacted, on behalf of his colleagues, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”. For Jesus, such a response is a result of God’s revelation and not from human endeavor. What this passage teaches us is that we have to give a personal answer to the question of Jesus: “Who do you say that I am?” It means also that being Christian does consist in knowing about Jesus, but it consists in knowing Jesus, in a more personal way. That is why, in our faith journey, we cannot be content only with what we have heard about Jesus. Jesus demands of us a personal verdict about him.

Assured by Peter’s confession, Jesus can confide to him: “You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it”. As it appears, the initiative of making Peter a rock comes from God, and that role is assumed by the popes, direct successors of Peter. If today the Church continues to prosper, it is with God’s assistance. In that sense, God is the foundation of his Church and Peter is made a rock on which it is founded.

Peter is given also the keys to the kingdom of heaven. It means he is given special power in order to keep the Church in unity, truth and right teaching. The symbolism of keys means he is given a responsibility. It is only to trusted friends that we leave the keys of our house so that they take care of it when we are on vacation. We give the key of our car to a son only when we are sure that he can drive well. In this regard, the privilege of the keys means that Peter is made the steward of the household of God, opening the door to all to enter into the kingdom. The duty of binding and loosing makes him a decision-maker about all matters concerning the life of the Church. The reading of the Acts of the Apostles shows that Peter has played that role, which is continued today by the popes.

Let me finish by saying that by celebrating both Peter and Paul in one feast, the Church reminds us that the Church is one, but has different ministers and different charismas. Each minister has received his own vocation and gifts, but they all work for the same cause, which is the kingdom of God. For that, the workers in the vineyard of the Lord complete each other.

This is true today as it was in the past. We are called to work together as one people in spite of our cultural, racial, and intellectual backgrounds. Our differences can never be used to compete or to oppose each other, but always as a way of enriching the Church with our talents. When we forget that truth we destroy rather than build the Church. In this particular feast, we pray for our Pope Benedict that the Lord blesses him to lead the Church in the way of truth. May also those who have a particular responsibility inside the Church work together for the glory of God! May God bless you all!

**Acts 12, 1-11; 2 Timothy 4, 6-8, 17-18; Matthew 16, 13-19**



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