

Solemnity of Ss. Peter and Paul Apostles Vigil Mass A/2014

All the readings of this vigil of the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul focus on their teachings and work through which they have contributed to the growth of the church and the spreading of the good news. They invite us to imitate those heroes of our faith by putting our gifts and talents to the service of the kingdom of God.

The first reading of the Acts of the Apostles describes a miraculous healing of a crippled man by the hands of Peter and John. It highlights in particular the fact that while the crippled man was hoping for alms from them, he was unexpectedly healed from his disease in the name of Jesus. It equally shows how, after being healed, he went on in praising God at the astonishment of those who knew him before.

What is behind this text is the idea that the name of Jesus Christ is powerful and capable of operating marvelous deeds beyond human understanding. Another idea is the truth that the disciples are instruments in the hands of God who can use them in order to reach out to many and to advance the glory of his kingdom. The last idea is related to the truth that individual gifts and talents of the disciples are precious assets which can be put at the service of God's kingdom.

This text allows us to better understand today's Gospel as Jesus recommends the care of his sheep to Peter. First of all, the Gospel starts with the mention of Jesus' apparition to his disciples after his resurrection from the dead. Then, it signals the triple question of Jesus to Peter if he loves him and the triple recommendation of Jesus that he feed his sheep. It also highlights the response without ambiguity of Peter who, in spite of his weakness, confessed his love of Jesus. In the end, the Gospel reports the prediction of Jesus about the type of death by which Peter would glorify him.

What do we learn from these readings? Today, I want to talk about the heroism of faith. Let me start this way. Each nation on earth has its heroes and its champions. Heroes and champions are admired and celebrated for their bravery and their virtue. The excellence of their commitment and the integrity of their lives make them the models to imitate for young generations and the symbols to admire for old generations.

It is not only nations that have champions, but the Church too has its heroes. The two apostles we celebrate today are the heroes of the Church. They have played a big role in the life of the Church and shaped its structure by their teaching and work. They have contributed to the advancement of the kingdom of God, the growth of the Church and the reception of eternal salvation.

Both were animated with courage, abnegation and the sense of the mission received from the Lord Jesus. In the course of their spiritual journey, they were guided by God through the power of his Holy Spirit to brave dangers and accept sacrifices for God's sake. They gave the best of themselves, each according to his gifts and talents, for the good of the Church

In spite of their differences in skills and abilities, they were all guided by a single desire, namely to serve Christ's Church by serving their brothers and sisters for whom he gave his life on the cross.

By bringing Peter and Paul, in one single celebration, the Church wants to remind us that the Church is one, but has different ministers and charismas. Each minister has received his own vocation and gifts, but they all work for the same cause, which is the kingdom of God. That is how St Paul gave his life for the good news of Jesus in the gentile lands, as witness his different letters, while St Peter dedicated his for the Jews, his brothers. For that reason, the workers in the vineyard of the Lord complete each other.

This is true today as it was in the past. We are all called to work together as one people and for the glory of Jesus, in spite of our differences. Our differences, indeed, should not be used to compete or to oppose each other, but as a way of enriching the Church with our gifts. When we forget such a truth, we destroy rather than build the Church.

In that perspective, I can say that the heroism of faith is not a heroism that seeks its own glory because someone has talents, but a heroism that is at the service of the kingdom of God.

At the heart of the heroism of faith is Jesus and not the individual, talented as he might be. An individual is just an instrument that God uses for his glory. In that sense, the person of Jesus meant a lot to Paul and Peter, as we saw in the first reading. Moreover, when they preached, they always put him and his glory first. They never looked for their own glory. That is why in the first reading, Peter tells the crippled man that he could not give him money he did not have, but only what he had, that is, Jesus.

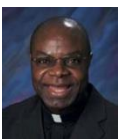
The means of the heroism of faith is love, that is, the love of God and of our brothers and sisters. Without that love, the minister becomes a mere functionary fulfilling a human duty which is, at times, easy and, at other times, heavy.

That is why before leaving the responsibility of the Church to Peter, Jesus wanted, first, to make sure that he loves him. As Peter denied him three times, Jesus asked three times if he loved him. As love obtains the forgiveness of sins so that the one who loves less is less forgiven and the one who loves more is more forgiven, Jesus gave to Peter the chance to wipe out the memory of the threefold denial by a threefold declaration of love.

But, what is interesting with love is that it creates a task, because we cannot prove to Jesus that we love him without loving others. Moreover, love is the greatest privilege in the world, but it also brings the greatest responsibility, because it is impossible to love without caring and without accepting sacrifice. In truth, we do not really love Christ unless we are prepared to face his task and take up his cross.

Like Peter to whom Jesus gave the responsibility to feed his sheep, Christ invites us to feed our brothers and sisters with his word through the work of evangelization. Let us pray for Pope Francis that he assumes with courage the task he has received for the glory of God. May he lead us to the whole truth of Jesus Christ! God bless you all!

Acts 3: 1-10; Galatians 1: 11-20; John 21: 15-19



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