

FROM SINNERS TO SAINTS: THE SOLEMNITY OF STS. PETER AND PAUL

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence. I ask your pardon for my sins and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

June is fraught with wonderful solemnities that draw us into the heart of Christ, and today we celebrate these two all-star saints who set the pace at the beginning of Christianity. They were the Christian leaders that entered into the pagan Rome, pagan world of the ancient Roman Empire. St. Peter, the first pope; St. Paul, that special apostle to the Gentiles. St. Josemaria says in his compilation of homilies *Christ is Passing By*, “Even to this day, St. Paul holds all of history in awe at what he accomplished through his heroic self-giving to the apostolate of Jesus Christ.”

As we speak to the Lord, as we invoke the Holy Spirit, these solemnities that include mysteries of faith, include our role models in discipleship, we ask the Holy Spirit, what do you want us to see? What can I bring to my daily life? Perhaps has the same resolutions we’ve been making, but grant us a conversion. We should be in a constant state of conversion, but these special occasions, special feasts and solemnities are an occasion and a motive and a stimulus to accelerate the conversion process which is ongoing.

We adore you, O Lord, in union with St. Peter and St. Paul. And, these are special saints because it draws our heart to the center of Catholicism, the center of Christianity. When we think of Rome, obviously, we think of Peter and his successors. Etched in stone throughout the heart of the city of Rome is that phrase, *pontifex maximus*. The Pope is very prominent. His image, his presence, is, as they say in modern parlance, in your face etched in stone wall over. In St. Peter's, at least, according to my sentiments, is definitely the heart of the city of Rome. But we can't help but recollect what had happened there two thousand years ago, nineteen centuries - 1817 - three hundred years to be exact. The blood of the martyrs were spilt there. We see the ancient Colosseum, back in its heyday, could seat up to a hundred thousand people. These Roman citizens would watch games of violence, plays of immorality. What we watch digitally, they watched in the Colosseum and other amphitheaters throughout that ancient world. And that Coliseum and throughout the city, or at least the ancient part of the city, the old city, it was the home of many, many martyrs, the first

martyrs - in a sense, the most famous martyrs in the history of the Church. The two most famous- or one of the most famous is St. Peter and St. Paul. And we salute that heroism, but we need to avoid an understandable pitfall.

I lived in Rome, and as you enter in the Vatican, as you walk along the main thoroughfare that leads to St. Peter's Square into the church, the experience is that of a breathtaking impression that somehow I'm in the right outfit. This is a winning operation - it's been around for over 2000 years and the excitement has not diminished. People throng that square, especially on Sunday at noon. People crowd that square just to get a glimmer of the Holy Father, to hang on his words. Rightfully so, understandably so. The entrance of St. Peter's Basilica are guarded by two representatives - a representative of a big statue of St. Peter with huge keys in his hands, and the other side, the other representative, is St. Paul with the huge sword. It's not a sort of violence, it's a symbol of the Word of God that cuts through the bone in the marrow. The Word of God is sharper than a two-edged sword.

But as you enter in, it's an experience of triumph - the best artists of the history of humankind put their best efforts in that locale. It's an architectural wonder, it's an artistic wonder. The best of the human spirit has been expressed in that location - painting, architecture, sculpture. And somehow you realize that there's something very supernatural. Just by way of anecdote, I've inside information - I know a friend, an Argentinian priest, who's a friend of our present Holy Father, Pope Francis. He tells me he would stay, you know, we would come for business in the Vatican, when he was Archbishop of Buenos Aires, he would stay, you know, in a residence for priests, very simple, blended in with everybody else. And it was near Piazza Navona which is probably a good twenty-five minute walk to the Vatican. And he would walk, I presume, but when he'd walk, virtually no one would notice him, no one would greet him, no one knew that he was the Archbishop of Buenos Aires. All the Bishops have that chain but in Rome, Bishops are a dime a dozen; the Holy Father is the center of attraction.

He becomes Pope. At least the last time I was in Rome a couple of years ago for an audience, you would have to get there an hour and a half early just to get into the square. There's something supernatural. Now that he's Pope he can't show his face without attracting a big throng of people, understandably so. But the pitfall is not to see reality, the extravagant architecture and the magnificent display of art. And those two statues of two incredible hulks guarding the entrance of St. Peter's Church can give the false impression that holiness and evangelization is the work of extraordinary individuals, that there's no way we can identify with individuals endowed with spectacular gifts, not that St. Peter and Paul were not. And so, we could admire. If we are believers, we can allow ourselves to be impressed. But without penetrating the trajectory of their discipleship

of how they arrived at personal holiness, how they were actually empowered to spread this Kingdom of Christ in such a hostile environment.

Well, let's look at both these illustrious saints. And first, let's look at St. Peter. Peter and Paul ostensibly, were different, and only ostensibly in reality, but they share something fundamentally in common - both were sinful. And I'd leave it up to the experts, but just for simplicity sake, perhaps you could make the case that there were- they were easily the most grievously sinful followers of Christ; both needed to undergo profound repentance. They loved much because they were both forgiven much. That idea was conveyed on occasion of Mary Magdalene's deep repentance as she bathed Jesus' feet with her tears. We look at Peter, to his credit, he persevered, he was the recipient of the most reprimands of the Lord, the very severe one - in two occasions, Jesus associates Satan with Peter. First, he actually calls him Satan: "Get behind me, Satan. Your thoughts are thoughts of men and not of God." When he tried to dissuade Jesus from going to Jerusalem for the last time to undergo his passion, Peter tried to dissuade him. And Jesus reproached him severely. And then, at the Last Supper, Jesus told Peter Satan would sift- sift you like wheat, as faith would fail. And Peter's gut reaction was that even if the rest of his fathers would fail him, he would not. He would go to prison for him and die for him, to paraphrase that conversation.

Again, Jesus reprimands Peter saying that he will deny him three times. Before the cock crows twice, he will have denied him three times. Peter pushed back. And what do we see? Well, Peter's problem was that, in a certain sense, he on his own was strong enough, loving enough, to follow Christ. It was Peter who fell asleep in Gethsemane. And Jesus chided him and the other two, who were also giving in to sleep. "Watch and pray so you not enter into temptation." What kind of temptation? I don't think it was the temptation to break the Ten Commandments as much as the temptation to disbelieve and reject the Cross. You need a lot of divine strength to be a follower of Christ and he showed that he was going to rely on his own strength, you know. He would follow Christ even if the rest did not. He would even actually die. No way unless he received grace from God. And, he should have been praying during that painful hour. He should have taken the Lord's admonition to heart and struggled to pray and accompany the Lord and receive that strength to follow Christ.

And we see again it's Peter who unshields his sword and basically tries to kill a man. It's late at night, he missed his head - maybe the guy ducked and he sliced off his ear. It's the last reprimand Peter received, "Put away your sword." He who lives by the sword dies by the sword. Don't rely on your own efforts." And then the Gospel says something kind of nonchalant, but it has tremendous meaning, "And Peter followed him from a distance."

And, for the sake of time, I'll try to paraphrase beautiful Scriptural quotations because we still have St. Paul to do. He enters into the courtyard, again on a human level, he's the only one who actually

follows Christ into that courtyard adjacent to the high priest's house, and he can't handle the accusation that he's a follower of Christ. He's overcome by fear. And he does the worst thing he could do. And he's going to be the first pope. It's on that rock that the Master will build his Church. And in reaction to the servant woman's questioning, "Your accent betrays you, you're a Galilean." He curses and swears three times: "I have nothing to do with this man." He announces, he declares that he has no relationship with Jesus Christ. He curses and swears and says that he has no knowledge of him and wants everybody to recognize that he has no connection to him. And so, he betrays Christ not to the extent of a Judas, but betrays him in a very grievous way.

And as Jesus was being escorted from the house of the high priest, the gospels say- St. Luke's Gospel says, "And Jesus looked at Peter and Peter went off and wept bitterly." Now, Peter will start to make progress. He is doubting that he could be a fisher of men. Jesus said, "Do not be afraid, I will make you a fisher of men. You will not make yourself a fisher of men. I will make you a fisher of men." That leads Peter to face Christ again. He's fishing. Now, Jesus is resurrected, so you know it's not business as usual. They sort of recognize him. John recognizes him, says "It is the Lord." Peter, who's impulsive by nature and passionate, he's not going to wait for the boat to be brought in to shore. He jumps in the water and swims to shore. And Jesus is cooking breakfast. Sure, they- everybody's exchanging pleasantries and he's resurrected, it's not recorded. Then, after they're finished, Jesus gets down to business and invites Peter to repentance. It's a painful repentance, but it's a catharsis: 'Alright, you claim that you were better than the others. Do you love me? Son of John, do you love me more than the others?' Peter didn't say, 'Yes, I do.' He says, "You know that I love you."

He asked him twice. The second time, "Son of John, do you love me?" "Lord, you know that I love you." He asked him the third time, because corresponding to the triple denial, gospel says, "And Peter was greatly saddened." Obvious reasons. And he says, "Lord, you know all things, you know that I love you." And Jesus says, "Feed my sheep. Now you could extend the kingdom now that you will rely on me."

It's kind of interesting... when I was in St. Peter's Church, in front, I had a lapse of memory of history of the Church, and I was looking at the ceiling over the sanctuary and, you know, if you look at it quickly, briefly, it's basically, you think it's- it is a crucifixion scene. But I could see how many people could think that this is Christ's crucifixion scene. But if you look carefully, probably everybody's look carefully but me, but if you look carefully, you realize that the crucifix looks a little odd. And for two reasons, there's only one. The two criminals on Jesus' right and left are not there. And the main torso is towards the bottom. Oh, a light goes on, that's Peter- Peter is on the cross upside down.

Tradition has it that under Nero when he was captured or arrested and executed by crucifixion where the Vatican is, Vatican Hill. That's why the true cross is on top of that obelisk. Tradition has it the obelisk was what Peter saw when he was being crucified on up- upside down, so way on the tippy top is the true cross, a piece of it. And he asked the execution for a favor that he would not be crucified the way Jesus was because he was unworthy. He wanted to be crucified upside down. So, we see that greatness, true greatness, is in function of repentance. And how relevant these words of St. Josemaria are: "How you have fallen this time. Begin the foundation's from down there, be humble. A contrite and humbled heart, oh God, you will not despise."

We go to St. Paul. He also has an exciting story. He terrorized Christianity, he- he initiated the age of martyrdom that would last for three hundred plus years, he was a fanatic, a young, energetic fanatic, a Pharisee, arguably a genius, brilliant, brimming with energy and zeal. And his desires were to destroy Christianity. He was driven by an ardent hatred of Christ and hatred of everything he taught. And customarily, if you would- you would avoid arresting women and children. But, in his fanaticism, he cleaned out Jerusalem. Every known Christian was arrested, women and children. He supervised the first martyrdom of St. Stephen. After getting the job done, he asked permission from the high priest to go to another city where witnesses had it that Christians had escaped to the city of Damascus. Yes, they escaped all over. But, you know, many went to Damascus, relatively far away from Jerusalem, relatively. And, he managed to get a horse. I mean, you really need to be an important person to do that, you know. Usually donkeys would do, camels would do, but if he's going to race over to Damascus, he needs a horse. And, in his process of trying to destroy Christianity and showing his hatred for Christ by persecuting his followers, Jesus also looks at him and he's knocked off his horse.

There's a beautiful painting of the conversion of St. Paul by Caravaggio in one of the many churches in Rome, St. Mary of the People. And it's- I find it mesmerizing because the artist captures Paul's wonder and his submission. It- captured in the expression of his face is, 'I give up.' I never saw Christianity in this light that he's looking at Christ, he's fascinated by Christ. There's so many emotions in that magnificent gaze of St. Paul looking at Christ, looking at the light as he's on his back, thrown off his horse, hearing these words addressed to him: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" And, in the Acts of the Apostles, for the sake of time I can't read within the time limit his conversion story, but just to summarize, in the Acts of the Apostles, St. Luke says, 9:15, "But the Lord said to him, to Ananias who is supposed to give him spiritual direction and direct him and orient him, and he's- the Lord is speaking to Ananias in a dream, but the Lord said to him, 'Go, go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry up my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel, for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.'"

And, Peter gets a very similar message. And Jesus says to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you. When you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go.” This he said to show by what death he was to glorify God. So, both are intimately linked with the Cross and they both share in common, as we wind down our prayer, this reliance on Our Lord. Both were excellent repenters. And they were not activists, even though they were active. They were in love with Christ. They were saints who relied on prayer to trust that Our Lord, who went through Jesus Christ, through their union with him, Eucharistic union, contemplating the Word of God, nourishing themselves with the Word of God, they showed what it meant to be a disciple of Christ.

And we can end our prayer asking Our Lady to ingrain this point of *The Way* in our hearts that is so appropriate for today's solemnity: “Depend on Jesus for everything. You have nothing, are worth nothing, are capable of nothing. He will act, if you abandon yourself to him.”

I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations you have communicated to me in this meditation. I ask your help in putting them in to affect. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.



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