

ZE09062505 - 2009-06-25

Permalink: <http://zenit.org/article-26282?l=english>

A Unity Transcending All Differences

Biblical Reflection for Sts. Peter and Paul

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

VATICAN CITY, JUNE 25, 2009 ([Zenit.org](http://zenit.org)).- Given the significance of the solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul, and the formal conclusion of the Year of St. Paul, I am offering a special reflection for the June 29 feast.

Peter's journey was from the weakness of denial to the rock of fidelity. He gave us the ultimate witness of the cross. Paul's pilgrimage was from the blindness of persecution to the fire of proclamation. He made the Word of God come alive for the nations.

To be with Peter means to preserve the unity of the Christian Church. To speak with Paul is to proclaim the pure Word of God.

The passion of both was to proclaim the Gospel of Christ. Their commitment was to create a place for everyone in Christ's Church. Their loyalty to Christ was valid to death. Peter and Paul are for us a strong foundation; they are pillars of our Church.

The crucial question

Today's Gospel story (Matthew 16:13-19) is about affirmation, identity and purpose. Jesus and his disciples entered the area of Caesarea Philippi in the process of a long journey from their familiar surroundings. Caesarea Philippi, built by Philip, was a garrison town for the Roman army, full of all the architecture, imagery, and lifestyles of Greco-Roman urban civilization. It was a foreign place to the apostles who were more familiar with towns and the lakeside.

Sexuality and violence ran rampant in this religious shrine town known for its worship of the Greek god Pan. In this center of power, sophistication and rampant pagan worship, Jesus turns to his disciples and asks what people are saying about him. How do they see his work? Who is he in their minds? Probably taken aback by the question, the disciples dredge their memories for overheard remarks, snatches of shared conversation, opinions circulating in the fishing towns of the lake area. Jesus himself is aware of some of the stories about him. He knows only too well the attitude of his own town of Nazareth, and the memory probably hurts him deeply.

The disciples list a whole series of labels that people have applied to Jesus. And these names reveal the different expectations held about him. Some thought of him as fiery Elijah, working toward a real confrontation with the powers that be. Others considered him more like the long-suffering Jeremiah, concentrating more on the inner journey, the private side of life. Above all, the question asked of the disciples echoes through time as the classic point of decision for every Christian.

Everyone must at some point experience what happened at Caesarea Philippi and answer Jesus' provocative

ZENIT

question, "You, who do you say I am?" What do we perceive to be our responsibilities and commitments following upon our own declaration of faith in Jesus?

Lightning strikes

In the year 35 AD, Saul appears as a self-righteous young Pharisee, almost fanatically anti-Christian. We read in Acts 7 that he was present, although not taking part, at the stoning of Stephen, the first martyr. It was very soon afterward that Paul experienced the revelation that transformed his entire life.

On the road to the Syrian city of Damascus, where he was going to continue his persecutions against the Christians, he was struck blind. Paul accepted eagerly the commission to preach the Gospel of Christ, but like many another called to a great task, he felt his unworthiness and withdrew from the world to spend three years in "Arabia" in meditation and prayer before beginning his mission.

His extensive travels by land and sea are recounted in his letters in the New Testament. Paul himself tells us he was stoned, scourged three times, shipwrecked three times, endured hunger and thirst, sleepless nights, perils and hardships; besides these physical trials, he suffered many disappointments and almost constant anxieties over the weak and widely scattered communities of Christians.

Legendary farewell

According to the ancient tradition, on the morning of June 29, Peter and Paul were taken from their common cell at Rome's Mamertine prison and separated. Peter was taken to Nero's Circus where he was crucified upside down, while Paul was taken east of Rome to the area now known as Tre Fontane. Artists through the ages have dwelt on their goodbye, often depicting the last embrace between the two friends.

The Golden Legend records their parting words:

Paul to Peter: "Peace be with you, foundation stone of the churches and shepherd of the sheep and lambs of Christ!"

And Peter to Paul: "Go in peace, preacher of virtuous living, mediator and leader of the salvation of the righteous!"

The connection between the two saints is also evident in their respective basilicas. Emperor Constantine built the first six Christian churches in Rome from 313 to 328, and among them were St. Peter's Basilica and St. Paul's Outside the Walls.

Five of the churches face east, as was common in orienting churches at the time. St. Paul's faces west, so that across the city, both basilicas watch over the sheep and lambs of Rome.

A text from St. John Chrysostom is very appropriate at the end of the year dedicated to St. Paul. It comes from his final homily on St. Paul's Letter to the Romans. After expressing his ardent desire to visit St. Paul's tomb in Rome and see there even the dust of St. Paul's body, St. John Chrysostom exclaims:

"Who could grant me now this to throw myself around the body of Paul and be riveted to his tomb and to see the dust of that body which completed what was lacking in Christ's afflictions; which bore the marks (of Christ) and sowed the Gospel everywhere ... the dust of that mouth through which Christ spoke. [...]"

"Nor is it that mouth only, but I wish I could see the dust of Paul's heart too, which one should rightly call the heart of the world, the fountain of countless blessings and the very element of our life. [...] A heart which was

ZENIT

so large as to take in entire cities and peoples and nations [...] which became higher than the heavens, wider than the whole world, brighter than the sun's beam, warmer than the fire, stronger than the adamant; letting rivers flow from it, [...] which was deemed to love Christ like no one else ever did.

"I wish I could see the dust of Paul's hands, hands in chains, through the imposition of which the Spirit was given, through which this divine letter (to the Romans) was written.

"I wish I could see the dust of those eyes which were rightly blinded and recovered their sight again for the salvation of the world; which were counted worthy to see Christ in the body; which saw earthly things, yet saw them not; which saw the things that are not seen; which knew no sleep, and were watchful even at midnight. [...]

"I wish I could also see the dust of those feet, Paul's feet, which run through the world and were not tired, which were bound in stocks when the prison shook, which went through parts populated and uninhabited, which walked on so many journeys. [...]

"I wish I could see the tomb where the weapons of righteousness lay, the weapons of light, the limbs of Paul, which now are alive but in life were made dead (to sin), [...] which were in Christ's limbs, clothed in Christ, bound in the Spirit, riveted to the fear of God, bearing the marks of Christ" (St. John Chrysostom, "Homily 32 on the Epistle to the Romans," Migne, "Patrologia Graeca" 60, 678-80).

Built this Church

As ordinary men, Peter and Paul might have avoided each other from time to time. Peter was a fisherman from the Sea of Galilee and Paul a Greek-educated intellectual. But Jesus brought them together as a sign for his Church in which the entire spectrum of humanity would find a new place to call home. Together they worked to build the Church. Together they witnessed to Christ. Together they suffered the death of their Lord, death at murderous hands. Paul died by the sword and Peter was crucified head-down. They had a unity that transcended all differences. They teach us about the depth of Christian commitment. For Peter and Paul, insight into Jesus' true identity brought new demands and responsibilities.

In proclaiming this Year of St. Paul which now comes to a close, Benedict XVI invited each Catholic to hold up a mirror to his or her life and to ask, "Am I as determined and as energetic about spreading the Catholic faith as St. Paul was?" "Is spreading the faith both by example and by my conversations with friends, colleagues and acquaintances even a concern for me?" "What do I perceive to be my responsibilities following upon my own declaration of faith in Jesus?"

[The readings for the solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul are Acts 12:1-11; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 17-18; and Matthew 16:13-19]

* * *

Basilian Father Thomas Rosica, chief executive officer of the Salt and Light Catholic Media Foundation and Television Network in Canada, is a consultant to the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. He can be reached at: rosica@saltandlighttv.org.

--- --- ---

On the Net:

Salt and Light: www.saltandlighttv.org

A Unity Transcending All Differences

ZENIT

© Innovative Media, Inc.

Reprinting ZENIT's articles requires written permission from the editor.