

CELEBRATION OF FIRST VESPERS
OF THE SOLEMNITY OF THE HOLY APOSTLES PETER AND PAUL

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Basilica of St Paul Outside-the-Walls

Thursday, 28 June 2007

*Your Eminences,
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

At this First Vespers of the Solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul, let us commemorate with gratitude these two Apostles whose blood with that of so many other Gospel witnesses made the Church of Rome fruitful.

On their memorial, I am glad to greet you all, dear brothers and sisters, starting with the Cardinal Archpriest and the other Cardinals and Bishops present, Father Abbot and the Benedictine Community to which this Basilica is entrusted, the clerics, the women and men religious and lay faithful gathered here.

I address a special greeting to the Delegation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, which is reciprocating the presence of the Holy See's Delegation in Istanbul for the Feast of St Andrew.

As I had an opportunity to say a few days ago, these meetings and initiatives are not merely an exchange of courtesies between Churches but are intended to express the common commitment to do everything possible to hasten the time of full communion between the Christian East and West.

I address with these sentiments Metropolitan Emmanuel and Metropolitan Gennadios, sent by my beloved Brother Bartholomew I, to whom I express a grateful and cordial thought.

This Basilica, which has hosted profoundly significant ecumenical events, reminds us how important it is to pray together to implore the gift of unity, that unity for which St Peter and St Paul spent their lives, to the point of making the supreme sacrifice of their blood.

A very ancient tradition which dates back to apostolic times claims that their last meeting before their martyrdom actually took place not far from here: the two are supposed to have embraced and blessed each other. And on the main portal of this Basilica they are depicted together, with scenes of both martyrdoms.

Thus, from the outset, Christian tradition has considered Peter and Paul to have been inseparable, even if each had a different mission to accomplish.

Peter professed his faith in Christ first; Paul obtained as a gift the ability to deepen its riches. Peter founded the first community of Christians who came from the Chosen People; Paul became the Apostle to the Gentiles. With different charisms they worked for one and the same cause: the building of Christ's Church.

In the Office of Readings, the liturgy offers us for meditation this well-known text of St Augustine: "One day is assigned for the celebration of the martyrdom of the two Apostles. But those two were one. Although their martyrdom occurred on different days, they were one. Peter went first, Paul followed. We celebrate this feast day which is made sacred for us by the blood of these Apostles" (*Sermon 295, 7, 8*).

And St Leo the Great comments: "About their merits and virtues, which surpass all power of speech, we must not make distinctions, because they were equal in their election, alike in their toils, undivided in their death" (*In natali apostol., 69, 7*).

In Rome, since the earliest centuries, the bond that unites Peter and Paul in their mission has acquired a very specific significance. Like Romulus and Remus, the two mythical brothers who are said to have given birth to the City, so Peter and Paul were held to be the founders of the Church of Rome.

Speaking to the City on this topic, St Leo the Great said: "These are your holy Fathers and true shepherds, who gave you claims to be numbered among the heavenly kingdoms, and built you under much better and happier auspices than they, by whose zeal the first foundations of your walls were laid" (*Sermon 82, 7*).

However humanly different they may have been from each other and despite the tensions that existed in their relationship, Peter and Paul appear as the founders of a new City, the expression of a new and authentic way of being brothers which was made possible by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For this reason, it can be said that the Church of Rome is celebrating her birthday today, since it was these two Apostles who laid her foundations.

Furthermore, Rome in our day perceives with greater awareness both her mission and her greatness. St John Chrysostom wrote: "Not so bright is the heaven, when the sun sends forth his rays, as is the City of Rome, sending out these two lights (Peter and Paul) into all parts of the world... Therefore, I admire the City... for these pillars of the Church" (*Homily on St Paul's Epistle to the Romans, 32, 24*).

We will commemorate St Peter specifically tomorrow, celebrating the Divine Sacrifice in the Vatican Basilica, built on the site of his martyrdom. This evening we turn our gaze to St Paul, whose relics are preserved with deep veneration in this Basilica.

At the beginning of the *Letter to the Romans*, as we have just heard, St Paul greeted the community of Rome, introducing himself as "*a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle*" (1: 1). He uses the term "servant", in Greek, *doulos*, to indicate a relationship of total and unconditional belonging to the Lord Jesus; moreover, it is a translation of the Hebrew, *'ebed*, thus alluding to the great servants whom God chose and called for an important and specific mission.

Paul knew he was "called to be an apostle", that is, that he had not presented himself as a candidate, nor was his a human appointment, but solely by a divine call and election.

The Apostle to the Gentiles repeats several times in his Letters that his whole life is a fruit of God's freely given and merciful grace (cf. I Cor 15: 9-10; II Cor 4: 1; Gal 1: 15). He was chosen to proclaim "the Gospel of God" (Rom 1: 1), to disseminate the announcement of divine Grace which in Christ reconciles man with God, himself and others.

From his Letters, we know that Paul was far from being a good speaker; on the contrary, he shared with Moses and Jeremiah a lack of oratory skill. "His bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account" (II Cor 10: 10), his adversaries said of him.

The extraordinary apostolic results that he was able to achieve cannot, therefore, be attributed to brilliant rhetoric or refined apologetic and missionary strategies.

The success of his apostolate depended above all on his personal involvement in proclaiming the Gospel with total dedication to Christ; a dedication that feared neither risk, difficulty, nor persecution.

"Neither death, nor life", he wrote to the Romans, "nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (8: 38-39).

From this we can draw a particularly important lesson for every Christian. The Church's action is credible and effective only to the extent to which those who belong to her are prepared to pay in person for their fidelity to Christ in every circumstance. When this readiness is lacking, the crucial argument of truth on which the Church herself depends is also absent.

Dear brothers and sisters, as in early times, today too Christ needs apostles ready to sacrifice themselves. He needs witnesses and martyrs like St Paul. Paul, a former violent persecutor of Christians, when he fell to the ground dazzled by the divine light on the road to Damascus, did not hesitate to change sides to the Crucified One and followed him without second thoughts. He lived and worked for Christ, for him he suffered and died. How timely his example is today!

And for this very reason I am pleased to announce officially that we shall be dedicating a special Jubilee Year to the Apostle Paul from 28 June 2008 to 29 June 2009, on the occasion of the bimillennium of his birth, which historians have placed between the years 7 and 10 A.D.

It will be possible to celebrate this "Pauline Year" in a privileged way in Rome where the sarcophagus which, by the unanimous opinion of experts and an undisputed tradition, preserves the remains of the Apostle Paul, has been preserved beneath the Papal Altar of this Basilica for 20 centuries.

It will thus be possible to have a series of liturgical, cultural and ecumenical events taking place at the Papal Basilica and at the adjacent Benedictine Abbey, as well as various pastoral and social initiatives, all inspired by Pauline spirituality.

In addition, special attention will be given to penitential pilgrimages that will be organized to the Apostle's tomb to find in it spiritual benefit. Study conventions and special publications on Pauline texts will also be promoted in order to make ever more widely known the immense wealth of the teaching they contain, a true patrimony of humanity redeemed by Christ.

Furthermore, in every part of the world, similar initiatives will be implemented in the dioceses, shrines and places of worship, by religious and by the educational institutions and social-assistance centers which are named after St Paul or inspired by him and his teaching.

Lastly, there is one particular aspect to which special attention must be paid during the celebration of the various moments of the 2,000th Pauline anniversary: I am referring to the ecumenical dimension. The Apostle to the Gentiles, who was especially committed to taking the Good News to all peoples, left no stones unturned for unity and harmony among all Christians.

May he deign to guide and protect us in this bimillennial celebration, helping us to progress in the humble and sincere search for the full unity of all the members of Christ's Mystical Body. Amen.