

Saints Peter and Paul

Matthew 16:13-19

Today we celebrate Saints Peter and Paul.

Saint Peter: “Prince of the Apostles”, i.e. **Rock**

Saint Paul: “Apostle to the Gentiles”, i.e. **Roll**

For this special feast day, when we celebrate two pillars of the Christian community,
we read this gospel passage which transmits to us this amazing, yet controversial,
exchange between Jesus and Peter.

In order to understand exactly what happens, it seems important to state from the outset,
that Jesus never does anything purely symbolic.

His actions may be rich in symbolism,
but there is always an effective communication of His love
in and through all that He does.

Jesus clearly says that things that are symbolic, that are metaphorical,
but his actions are a real sharing of Himself.

This encounter is no different.

This is precisely an *encounter*.

An encounter implies a real exchange: Jesus *gives* something.

After following Jesus, and, therefore, witnessing miracles and hearing teachings,
Jesus turns to his disciples to probe their hearts.

Jesus is not simply curious about public opinion.

“Hmm. I wonder what people think of me.”

Jesus is, in fact, not concerned whether or not he will be on the cover
of the first century Jewish equivalent of People magazine.

Jesus already knows the opinion of the public: loved and hated,
Jesus does not care about opinion.

Jesus cares about *persons*, i.e. those who have these various opinions.
and he works with them, regardless of their opinion.

In other words, Jesus accomplishes His mission no matter what.

In fact, it would be most precise to say
that Jesus accomplishes his mission not *despite* opposition,
but in *making use of* opposition.

His mission is to love, to communicate the mystery of God.

The Cross manifests supremely Jesus’ mission
and how He makes use of opposition to do so.

And so Jesus probes the hearts of His disciples.
All along the journey, Jesus seeks to draw His disciples
 into deeper and deeper relationship.
Jesus seeks to accomplish His mission in a special way
 (special does not mean superior or exclusive) with His disciples.
“**Who do people say that I am?**” is the initial probe.
In other words,
“have you been paying attention,
 i.e. taken to heart what others have expressed in my regard?”

“**Who do you say that I am?**” is the direct probe.
In other words,
“Who am I for you?” “What are you carrying in your hearts of what I have expressed?”
Jesus is seeking to elicit a declaration of faith.
Why? Because it is reassuring for Jesus to hear that they get it?
Not really.
A true declaration of faith is an *act* of faith.
A true act of faith *engages the heart and mind* in relationship with Jesus.
Jesus wants *relationship*—always!

Now, interestingly, Peter speaks on behalf of everyone.
And Jesus simply receives what Peter declares.
Jesus could have gone from Peter to the next disciple, then the next, and so on,
 to be sure that they each express what they think.
Peter’s declaration, however, is sufficient.
Why?
It suggests that they form a unified whole.
Their individualism is not lost, of course, but, in terms of their mission,
 they form a sacred team.

Jesus’ response to Peter interestingly—fully aware of the unity of the Twelve—
 singles out Peter—nonetheless in communion with the others.
Jesus establishes Peter as head of the group.

Jesus first praises Peter’s faith.
What Peter declares is not obvious to visual perception or to human reasoning.
Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, is *revealed*, is a *revelation*.
Jesus as a carpenter, the son of Joseph of Nazareth,
 a great teacher and peace-maker, can be obvious.

Jesus then makes a very bold statement—that can only be understood in faith,
i.e. with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus establishes Peter as the rock upon which He builds His church.

Jesus does not say, as some have claimed, that He builds his church upon Peter's *faith*.

Faith does not exist *in abstracto*. It is deposited in real people.

In order for Jesus to establish what he does, he, of course, needed Peter's faith,

for the gift of faith enables a person to receive things divine, i.e. God sharing himself.

Peter's faith enables him to receive what Jesus gives.

However, Jesus gives to *Peter*, and takes hold of *Peter*.

Jesus does not simply take hold of Peter's faith.

Jesus takes hold of Peter—illuminated by faith.

What does Jesus give to Peter?

Jesus gives Peter a share in his authority.

Peter is invested with a particular ability to lead to God,

and, in that, to be the visible guardian of the Church.

Why would Jesus do this when *He* is the Rock,

and, strictly speaking, has no need of a visible leader for the community?

Perhaps because the Church is a body and so to promote its oneness.

A body had a head.

The body that is the Church has a head: Jesus.

But so to ensure as much real oneness as possible—

for us who so easily get lost in our own heads,

Jesus establishes a visible universal shepherd.

I can recall one of my seminary professors often say,

“When God want to be merciful, He multiplies the instruments,

He makes use of more and more people.”

If Jesus has done this, then the one whom we believe to succeed Peter

ought to be on our radar.

The Pope ought to have a special voice in our lives.

It is fine not to agree with him.

But we ought to be willing to

- consider, even wrestle with, what he says
- intelligently cooperate with him
- love him as a special brother in Christ

In the end, it is about willingness, willingness

- to moved by the Holy Spirit
- to go beyond ourselves
- be let ourselves be loved to new depths
- to be sent as instruments of transformative mercy