

HOMILY FOR THE SOLEMNITY OF STS. PETER AND PAUL

The story is told about a government surveyor who brought his equipment to a farm, called on the farmer, and asked permission to take readings for use in constructing a proposed highway that would run through his land. The farmer objected. He was determined to do all in his power to prevent the project from coming to pass.

“I will *not* give you permission to go into my field,” said the farmer. Whereupon the surveyor produced an official government document which *authorized* him to do the survey. “I have the authority,” he said, “to enter any field in the entire county and take necessary readings.”

Faced with such authority, the farmer opened the gate and allowed the surveyor to enter the field. The farmer then went to the far end of the field and opened another gate, through which one of his fiercest bulls came charging.

Seeing the bull, the surveyor dropped his equipment and began to run for dear life. And he could hear the farmer triumphantly shouting after him, “Show him the paper. Show him *the paper*. Show him your authority.”

It is sort of the same with the devil. He has the *authority* to tempt us. But the *power* of the grace of Christ is much fiercer and stronger than the devil’s authority. The devil has *no chance* in the face of the grace of the risen Christ.

And that is shown very beautifully today in the celebration of two great sinners who became two great saints: Peter and Paul.

The New Testament clearly shows Peter as the leader of the apostles, chosen by Jesus to have a special relationship with him. With James and John he was privileged to witness the Transfiguration, the raising of a dead child to life and the agony in Gethsemani. His mother-in-law was cured by

Jesus. He was sent with John to prepare for the last Passover before Jesus' death. His name is first on every list of apostles.

And to him only was it said, "Blessed are you, Simon...No mere man has revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father. I for my part declare to you, you are Rock, and on this rock I will build my church, and the jaws of death shall not prevail against it. I will entrust to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you declare bound on earth shall be bound in heaven. Whatever you declare loosed on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

However, it is a great comfort for ordinary mortals like you and I to know that *Saint* Peter also had his human weakness and his sins, even in the presence of Jesus.

He had generously given up all things, yet he could ask, in childish self-regard, "What are we going to *get* for all this?" He receives the full force of Christ's anger when he objects to the idea of a *suffering* Messiah: "Get out of my sight, you satan, you enemy!" You are trying to make me trip and fall! You are not judging by God's standards, "but by man's."

Peter is willing to accept Jesus' doctrine of forgiveness, but suggests a limit of seven times. He walks on the water in faith, but sinks in doubt. He refuses to let Jesus wash his feet, then wants his whole body cleansed. He swore at the last Supper that he would never deny Jesus, and then swore to a servant maid that he had never known the man. He loyally resisted the first attempt to arrest Jesus by cutting off Malchus' ear, but in the end he ran away with the others.

Peter's worst sin, of course, was his denial of Jesus three times. Yet after the resurrection, he proclaimed three times that he loved the Lord Jesus. We do not have recorded the touching scene of Peter's forgiveness by Christ. And Peter, despite his betrayal, was not so proud and stubborn that

he did not accept Christ's forgiveness. In another gospel, we *see* his humility and love for Christ. Peter served as the leader of the early church in Jerusalem. He preached the first sermon after Pentecost, performed the first healing, and authorized the extension of the Christian mission to the gentiles. More than once he would be arrested and imprisoned, only to be delivered by miraculous means. According to ancient tradition, Peter, the first bishop of Rome, was martyred there during the reign of Nero. Eusebius, the historian, records the fact that Peter was crucified—upside down—believing himself unworthy of emulating his master.

Mother Teresa said: “The devil may *try* to use the hurts of life, and sometimes our own mistakes, to make you feel it is *impossible* that Jesus really loves you, because it is completely the opposite of what Jesus is really wanting, *waiting* to tell you. Not only that he loves you, but even more, he *longs* for you. He misses you when you don't come close. He thirsts for you. He loves you always, even when you don't feel worthy, / when not accepted by others, even by yourself sometimes. He is the one who always accepts you. Only believe that you are precious to him. Bring all you are suffering to his feet, only open your heart to be loved by him as you are. He will do the rest.” Peter was not so proud that he refused Christ's forgiveness.

Paul was a devout Jew of Tarsus. And Paul was no believer in half-measures. He was scandalized by the claims of Jesus' disciples and believed they constituted blasphemy. And so in the Acts of the Apostles we find him on the edge of a crowd that is stoning St. Stephen, the first martyr, to death. In the heat of their exertion the murderous mob had laid their garments at Saul's feet. Luke tells us that “Saul [Paul] was consenting” to the deed. In the next verse he is no longer a passive *witness* but a zealous *leader* in the

persecution of the church, even traversing the countryside in *search* of Christians to denounce.

It was on such an errand to Damascus that his life was suddenly changed. It came about with a flash of light that threw him to the ground and a voice that cried, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” When he asked for the identity of the voice, he heard, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.” The power of grace convinced Paul that Jesus was indeed the Christ. He asked to be baptized and after having devoted so much of his life to *persecuting* Christians, he went on to devote the remainder of his life to *servicing* Christians by preaching the Gospel.

When Paul was arrested at the end of his life by the Roman authorities in Jerusalem, he claimed the privilege of a Roman citizen and was transported to Rome for trial. Along the way he continued to write to the communities, exhorting them to courage, faith, and love toward one another. As he anticipated his *fate* in Rome, he felt *satisfied* with his life: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

According to early church tradition Paul was beheaded in Rome under the emperor Nero in the year 64. His letters, which continued to circulate, became foundational documents for the early church. The example of his *courageous* witness underscored the *credibility* of his faith:

“For I am sure that neither death, nor life, 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.”

Because Paul persecuted Christ, he could understand what St. Peter Chrysologus meant when he wrote: “Perhaps you are filled with shame for causing my bitter passion. Do not be afraid. This cross inflicts a mortal

injury, not on *me*, but on *death*. These nails *no longer* pain me, but only *deepen* your love for me. I do not cry out because of these wounds, but through them I draw you into my heart. My body was stretched on the cross as a symbol, not of how much I suffered, but of my all-embracing love. I count it no loss to shed my blood: It is the price I have paid for your ransom. Come, then, return to me and learn to know me as your father, who repays good for evil, love for injury, and boundless charity for piercing wounds. God desires not death, but faith; God thirst not for blood, but for self-surrender; God is appeased / not by slaughter, but by the offering of your free will.”

If Christ can work this conversion in these two sinners’ lives, he can work his conversion in us. The devil wants desperately for us to be discouraged by our sins so that we will give up trying. He wants us to think that our sins are so bad that they could not be forgiven. He wants us to lose confidence and trust in God. But Christ’s power, seen in his grace given to these two sinners whose lives we celebrate today, tells us that if we trust in God, we are free—free *from* any so-called “authority” the devil has over us. We are freed *by* the overwhelming force and power of Christ’s grace to live lives like Peter and Paul. We too can be enabled, just as they were, to give up everything for the Lord.