



The Holy See

SOLEMNITY OF STS PETER AND PAUL

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

Tuesday, 29 June 1999

1. *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!"* (Mt 16:16). Peter, speaking on behalf of the group of Apostles, proclaims his own faith in Jesus of Nazareth, the long-awaited Messiah, Saviour of the world. In response to his profession of faith, Christ entrusts him with the mission of being the visible foundation on which he would build the whole edifice of the community of believers: *"You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church"* (Mt 16:18). This is the faith which down the ages has spread around the world through the ministry and witness of the Apostles and their successors. This is the same faith that we proclaim today as we celebrate the solemn memorial of Peter and Paul, the Princes of the Apostles. Following an ancient and venerable tradition, Rome's Christian community, which has the honour of preserving the tombs of these two Apostles, the "pillars" of the Church, expresses its devotion to them in a single liturgical feast and venerates them together as its heavenly patrons.

2. Peter, the fisherman from Galilee, was called by Jesus with his brother Andrew at the beginning of his public ministry to become a *"fisher of men"* (cf. Mt 4:18-20). Peter witnessed the most important moments of Jesus' public life, such as the Transfiguration (cf. Mt 17:1-2) and his prayer in the Garden of Olives just before the Passion (Mt 26:36-37); after the paschal events Christ entrusted him with the task of tending God's flock in his name (cf. Jn 21:15-17). From the day of Pentecost Peter governed the Church, watching over her fidelity to the Gospel and guiding her first contacts with the world of the Gentiles. His ministry was expressed in a particular way at the crucial moments that marked the growth of the apostolic Church. Indeed, it is he who welcomed into the community of believers the first convert from paganism (cf. Acts 10:1-48), and it was he who spoke authoritatively in the Jerusalem assembly on the problem of freedom from the obligations of the Jewish law (cf. Acts 15:7-11). The mysterious plan of divine Providence led the Apostle Peter to Rome where he shed his blood as a supreme witness of faith and love for the divine Teacher (cf. Jn 21:18-19). In this way he fulfilled his mission to be a sign of fidelity to Christ and of the unity of all God's People.

3. Paul, the former persecutor of the newborn Church, was touched by God's grace on the road to Damascus and became the tireless Apostle of the Gentiles. During his missionary journeys he continually preached the crucified Christ and drew groups of faithful in various cities of Europe and Asia to the Gospel cause. His intense labour did not prevent the *"Apostle of the Gentiles"* from engaging in extensive reflection on the Gospel message, which he applied to the various situations he encountered in his preaching. The Acts of the Apostles describes the long journey which led

him from Jerusalem first to Syria and Asia Minor, then to Greece and finally to Rome. It is precisely here, at the centre of the then-known world, that his witness to Christ was crowned with martyrdom. As he himself says in the second reading proclaimed a few moments ago, the mission entrusted to him by the Lord is to take the Gospel message to the pagans: "The Lord stood by me and gave me strength to proclaim the word fully, that all the Gentiles might hear it" (2 *Tm* 4:17).⁴

According to a well-established custom, on this day dedicated to the memory of the Apostles Peter and Paul, the Pope confers the pallium on the Metropolitan Archbishops appointed during the past year, as a sign of communion with the See of Peter. It is therefore a great joy for me to greet you, beloved Brothers in the Episcopate, who have come to Rome from various parts of the world for this happy event. With you I would like to greet the Christian communities entrusted to your pastoral care: under your wise guidance they are called to offer a courageous witness of fidelity to Christ and his Gospel. The gifts and charisms of each community are a treasure for everyone and together form one hymn of praise to God, the source of all good. One of the most important of these gifts is certainly that of unity, well symbolized by today's conferral of the pallium.⁵

Moreover, the longing for Christian unity is underscored by the presence of delegates from the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, who have come to share the joy of today's liturgy and to venerate the Apostles, patrons of the Church in Rome. I address my respectful greetings to them and, through them, I greet the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I. May the Apostles Peter, Paul and Andrew, who were instruments of communion in the early Christian communities, sustain all of Christ's disciples on their journey towards full unity by their example and intercession. The imminence of the Jubilee of the Year 2000 invites us to make our own the prayer for unity which Jesus offered to the Father on the eve of his Passion (*Jn* 17:20-23). We are called to accompany our petition with concrete signs that encourage the progress of Christians towards full communion. For this reason I have asked that a day of prayer and fasting for the Jubilee be included in the calendar of the Year 2000 on the vigil of the feast of the Transfiguration, as His Holiness Bartholomew I suggested. This initiative will be a practical expression of our intention to join in the initiatives of our brethren in the Orthodox Churches and of the desire that they take part in ours. May the Lord, through the intercession of the Apostles Peter and Paul, grant that the ecumenical commitment be intensified in the hearts of believers, so that everyone will forget the errors committed in the past and attain the full unity that Jesus desired.⁶

"Blessed is the Lord who delivers his friends" (*Response, Responsorial Psalm; Italian Lectionary*). In their apostolic mission, Sts Peter and Paul were obliged to face difficulties of every kind. But, far from deterring their missionary activity, these difficulties reinforced their zeal for the Church's welfare and for the salvation of mankind. They were able to overcome every trial because their trust was not based on human resources but on the grace of the Lord, who, as the readings of today's solemnity recall, delivers his friends from every evil and saves them for his kingdom (cf. *Acts* 12:11; 1 *Tm* 4:18). It is this same trust in God which must also sustain us. Yes, the "Lord delivers his friends". This awareness must instil courage in us as we face the difficulties encountered in proclaiming the Gospel in daily life. May our holy patrons, Peter and Paul, sustain us and obtain for us that missionary zeal which made them witnesses of Christ to the ends of the then-known world. Pray for us, holy Apostles Peter and Paul, "pillars" of God's Church! And you, Queen of the Apostles, whom Rome venerates with the beautiful title of "*Salus Populi Romani*", place the Christian people under your protection as they advance towards the third millennium. Support every sincere effort to promote Christian unity and watch over the journey of the disciples of your Son, Jesus. Amen! © Copyright 1999 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana