

FEAST OF SAINTS PETER & PAUL

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WISDOM OF THE HOLY FATHERS

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†461

~ from a homily delivered in Rome, on the Feast of Ss. Peter & Paul ~

THE WHOLE WORLD, dearly-beloved, does indeed take part in all holy anniversaries, and loyalty to the one Faith demands that whatever is recorded as having been done for all men's salvation should be everywhere celebrated with common rejoicing. But, besides that reverence which today's festival has gained throughout all the world, it is to be honored with special and peculiar exultation in our city of Rome, that there may be a predominance of gladness on the day of their martyrdom in the place where the chiefs of the Apostles met their glorious end. For these are the men through whom the light of Christ's gospel shone, and through whom teachers of error were made disciples of Truth. These are your holy Fathers and true shepherds, who gave you claims to be numbered among the heavenly kingdom, and by whose zeal the first foundations were laid. These are they who promoted you to such glory, being made a holy nation, a chosen people, and a priestly and royal state. (*cf. 1 Peter 2:9*)

For the good, just, and almighty God, Who has never withheld His mercy from mankind and has always instructed all people alike in the knowledge of Himself by the most abundant benefits, has by a more secret counsel and a deeper love shown pity upon the wanderers' voluntary blindness and proclivities to evil, by sending His co-equal and co-eternal Word, Which, becoming flesh, so united the divine Nature with the human nature that He, by lowering His Nature to the uttermost, has raised our nature to the highest. But that the result of this unspeakable Grace might be spread abroad throughout the world, God's Providence made ready the Roman Empire, whose growth has reached such limits that the whole multitude of nations are brought into close connection. For the divinely-planned work particularly required that many kingdoms should be gathered together under one empire, so that the preaching of the world might quickly reach to all people, when they were held beneath the rule of one State. And yet that State, being ignorant of the Author of its own magnification, was enthralled by errors. And hence, its emancipation [during the reign of Constantine] through Christ was all the more wondrous, in that it had previously been bound so fast by Satan.

For when the twelve Apostles, after receiving through the Holy Spirit the power of speaking in all tongues, had distributed the world into parts among themselves and undertaken to instruct it in the Gospel, the most blessed Peter, chief of the Apostolic band, was appointed to the citadel of the Roman Empire, that the light of Truth which was being displayed for the salvation of all the nations, might spread itself more effectively throughout the body of the world from the head itself. What nation did not have representatives living here in Rome at that time? What peoples did not know of what Rome had learned? Here it was that the tenets of philosophy needed to be crushed, here it was that the follies of earthly wisdom needed to be dispelled, here it was that the cult of demons needed to be refuted, here it was that the blasphemy of all idolatries needed to be rooted out, here where the most persistent superstition had gathered together all the various errors which had anywhere been devised.

The most blessed Apostle Peter did not fear to come to this city. And the Apostle Paul, his partner in glory, who had been occupied with guiding the other Churches, entered into this forest of roaring beasts, this deep, stormy ocean, with greater boldness than when Peter walked upon the sea. And Peter, who had been frightened by the high priest's maid in the house of Caiaphas, had no fear of Rome, the mistress of the world. Was there any less power in Claudius or any less cruelty in Nero than there was in the judgment of Pilate or the Jews' savage rage? So then, it was the force of love that conquered their reasons for fear; and they did not think those whom they had undertaken to love should

be feared. And nothing else was demanded of their earnest purpose than that they should bestow the same food through which they had been enriched, by feeding His sheep whom they did love.

Peter's confidence was also increased by many miraculous signs, by many gifts of grace, and by many proofs of power. Peter had already taught the people who, through circumcision, had believed; he had already founded the Church at Antioch, where first the dignity of the Christian name arose. He had already instructed Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, in the laws of the Gospel-message; and, not doubting the success of his work and with full knowledge of the short span of his life, he carried the trophy of Christ's Cross into the citadel of Rome, where by the divine ordinance he received the honor of great power and the glory of much suffering.

Afterwards came also Peter's blessed brother-Apostle, Paul, that *chosen vessel*, (*Acts 9:15*) and the special teacher of the Gentiles; they were brought together at a time when all innocence, all modesty, and all freedom was in jeopardy under the rule of Nero, whose fury, inflamed by excess of all vices, hurled him headlong into such a fiery furnace of madness that he was the first to assail the Christian name with a general persecution, as if God's Grace could be quenched by the death of saints, whose greatest gain it was to win eternal happiness by contempt of this fleeting life. *Precious, therefore, in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints. (Psalm 115:6)* Nor can any degree of cruelty destroy the religion which is founded on the mystery of Christ's Cross. Persecution does not diminish but rather increases the Church, and the Lord's field is clothed with an ever-richer crop, while the grains, which fall singly, spring up and are multiplied a hundred-fold. Hence, how large a progeny have sprung from these two Heaven-sown seeds is shown by the thousands of blessed martyrs, who, rivalling the Apostles' triumphs, have traversed the city far and wide in purple-clad and ruddy-gleaming throngs, and crowned it as with a single diadem of countless gems.

And over this band of martyrs, dearly-beloved, whom God has set forth for our example in patience and for our confirmation in the Faith, there must be rejoicing everywhere in the commemoration of all the saints; but of these two Fathers' excellence we must rightly make our boast in louder joy, for God's Grace has raised them to so high a place among the members of the Church, that He has set them like the twin light of the eyes in the body, whose Head is Christ. Regarding their merits and virtues, which pass all power of speech, we must not make distinctions, because they were equal in their election, alike in their toils, undivided in their death. But as we have proved for ourselves, and our forefathers maintained, we believe, and are certain that, amid all the toils of this life, we must always be assisted in obtaining God's Mercy by the prayers of special interceders, that we may be raised by the Apostles' merits in proportion as we are weighed down by our own sins. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, Who lives and reigns unto ages of ages. *Amen.*



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~ from a homily on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans ~

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen. (Romans 16:24)

BRETHREN, observe in this verse how we ought to begin and end everything! For in this, blessed Paul laid the foundation of the Epistle and established its roof, at the same time praying for the mother of all good things for the Romans and calling the whole of Christ's loving-kindness to their mind. For this is the best proof of a generous teacher: to benefit his learners not by word only, but likewise by prayer, for which cause also the Apostles said, *We will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word. (Acts 6:4)*

Who is there then to pray over us, since Paul has departed? The answer is: those who are the imitators of Paul. Let us show ourselves worthy of such intercession, that it may not be that we hear Paul's voice here only, but that hereafter, when we are departed, we may be accounted worthy to see that wrestler for Christ. Or rather, if we hear him here, we shall certainly see him hereafter, if not as standing near him, yet see him we certainly shall, glistening near the Throne of the King, where the Cherubim sing the glory, where the Seraphim are flying: there shall we see Paul, with Peter, as a chief and leader of the choir of the Saints, and shall enjoy his generous love. When he was here, he loved mankind

so much that he chose to remain here, even when he had the choice of departing and being with Christ. Thus, in heaven much more will he display a warm affection for us. Though there are many reasons for praising Rome, I love that city for its greatness, and its antiquity, and its beauty, and its people, and for its power, and its wealth. But I let all of those things pass and esteem it blessed on this account: that in his lifetime, Paul wrote to the Romans and loved them so and talked with them while he was with us and brought his life to a close there. Wherefore that city is more notable for these things than for all others together. And as a body great and strong, it has as two glistening eyes: the bodies of Saints Peter and Paul. Even when the sun sends forth its rays, the heavens are not as bright as is the city of Rome, sending out these two lights into all parts of the world. From there both Peter and Paul were caught up. Just think, and shudder, at the thought of what a sight Rome will see, when Paul arises suddenly from his earthly deposition, together with Peter, and is lifted up to meet the Lord. (*cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:17*) What a rose will Rome send up to Christ! What two crowns will the city have about it! What golden chains will she be girded with! Therefore, I admire that city, not for its abundant gold, nor for its columns, nor for the other things displayed there, but for these pillars of the Church. Would that it were now granted to me to throw myself around the body of Paul and be riveted to the tomb, and to see the dust of that body that filled up that which was lacking after Christ (*cf. Colossians 1:24*), that bore the marks (*cf. Galatians 6:17*), that sowed the Gospel everywhere; yes, the dust of that body through which he ran to and fro everywhere! The dust of that body through which Christ spoke, and the Light shone forth more brilliant than any lightning, and the voice started out, more awful to the devils than any thunder! Through which he uttered that blessed voice, saying, *I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren (Romans 9:3)*; that voice through which he spoke *before kings, and was not ashamed (Psalm 118:46)*; that voice through which we come to know Paul and through which also we come to know Paul's Master! Thunder is not as awful to us as that voice was to the demons! For if they shuddered at his clothes (*cf. Acts 19:12*), much more did they at his voice. This led them away captive, this cleansed out the world, this put a stop to diseases, cast out vice, lifted the truth on high, had Christ riding upon it, and everywhere went about with Him. And Paul's voice was like the Cherubim, for as Christ is seated upon those Powers, so was He seated upon Paul's tongue. For it had become worthy of receiving Christ, by speaking only those things which were acceptable to Christ and flying as the Seraphim to heights unspeakable! For nothing is more lofty than that voice which says, *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. (Romans 8:38-39)* What wings does not this discourse seem to you to have? what eyes? It was owing to this that he said, *We are not ignorant of Satan's devices. (2 Corinthians 2:11)* Owing to this, the devils fled—not only at hearing him speak, but even at seeing his garments. This is the mouth through which Christ spoke the great and secret things, greater even than in His own person, through which the Spirit gave those wondrous oracles to the world! For what good thing did not that mouth effect? Devils it drove out, sins it loosed, tyrants it muzzled, philosophers' mouths it stopped, the world it brought over to God, savages it persuaded to learn wisdom, all the whole order of the earth it altered. It disposed things in Heaven also, binding and loosing whom it would, in the other world, according to the authority given to it. (*cf. 2 Corinthians 13:10*)

And a person would not be wrong to call the heart of Paul the heart of the world—a fountain of countless blessings, and a beginning, and element of our life. For the spirit of life was furnished from it and was distributed through the members of Christ, not as being sent forth through arteries, but by a free choice of good deeds. This heart was so large as to take in entire cities and peoples and nations. *For my heart, he says, is enlarged. (cf. 2 Corinthians 6:11)* Yet, even the very love that enlarged this heart was a source of affliction and anguish for him. For he says, *Out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you. (2 Corinthians 2:4)* I desire to see that heart which burned for each one that was lost, which was in travail over the lost [among the Galatians] (*cf. Galatians 4:19*), which saw God—for *the pure in heart shall see God (cf. Matthew 5:8)*, which became a Sacrifice—for *a sacrifice to God is a contrite heart (cf. Psalm 50:17)*, which was loftier than the heavens, which was wider than the world, which was brighter than the sun's beam, which was warmer than fire, which lived the new life—for he says, *it is no longer I who live, but Christ Who lives in me. (Galatians 2:20)* So, Paul's heart was Christ's heart and a tablet of the Holy Spirit and a book of grace, which trembled for the sins of others, which was counted worthy to love Christ as no other man loved Him: a heart which was most enduring. I desire to see the dust of the hands that were in chains, hands which wrote the divine Scriptures, those hands from which the serpent fell off into the fire. I desire to see the dust of those eyes which were blinded gloriously; which recovered their sight again for the salvation of the world; which even in the body were counted worthy to see Christ; which saw earthly things, yet saw them not; which saw the things which are not seen; which saw not sleep; which were watchful at midnight; which were not effected as eyes are. I also desire to see the dust of those feet which ran through the

world and were not weary; which were bound in the stocks when the prison shook; which went through parts habitable or uninhabited; which walked on so many journeys. I desire to see the tomb where the armor of righteousness is laid up, the armor of light, the limbs which now live, but which in life were made dead. I desire to see the dust of those parts in which Christ lived, which were crucified to the world, which were Christ's members, which were clad in Christ, which were a temple of the Spirit—a holy building, *bound in the Spirit (Acts 20:22)*, riveted to the fear of God, and which bore the marks of Christ. That body is a wall to that City which is safer than all towers and thousands of battlements. And with this body is the body of Peter, for Paul honored him while alive. I desire to see the spiritual Lion, for like a lion breathing forth fire, he rushed upon the clan of demons and philosophers.

And consider how Satan sent forth his own acolytes against Paul. He says to the Ephesians: *We are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness. (Ephesians 6:12)* Then, too, he places our prize in Heaven, for he tells us that we struggle not for things of the earth, but for Heaven, and the things in the Heavens. Let us then, laying all this to heart, stand nobly; for Paul was a man, partaking of the same nature with us, and having everything else in common with us. But because he showed such great love toward Christ, he went up above the Heavens, and stood with the Angels. And so, if we too would rouse ourselves up a little and kindle in ourselves that fire, we shall be able to emulate that holy man. For were this impossible, he would never have cried aloud, and said, *Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. (1 Corinthians 11:1)* Let us not only admire him or be struck with him, but imitate him, that we too, when we depart hence, may be counted worthy to see him, and to share the unutterable glory which God grants: through the grace and love toward mankind of our Lord Jesus Christ, through Whom, and with Whom, be glory to the Father, with the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. *Amen.*

