



Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul

Catholic Archaeology, Saints Peter and Paul, and a New Era and Horizon of Catholic Evangelization on Long Island and Beyond

A Pastoral Letter to the People of God of the Diocese of Rockville Centre
Most Reverend John O. Barres, Bishop of Rockville Centre

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Catholic archaeology can offer compelling and motivating insights into how to renew the Church's living of its missionary identity as expressed in the thematic arc of teaching on missiology and evangelization from the Second Vatican Council's *Ad Gentes* (1965) to Pope Francis' *Evangelium Gaudium* (2013).

Those themes will be reconnected and reinforced on June 29th when we celebrate the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul in the universal Church.

The Solemn Blessing of the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul reads: "So that by the keys of Saint Peter and the words of Saint Paul, and by the support of their intercession, God may bring us happily to that homeland that Peter attained on a cross and Paul by the blade of a sword."

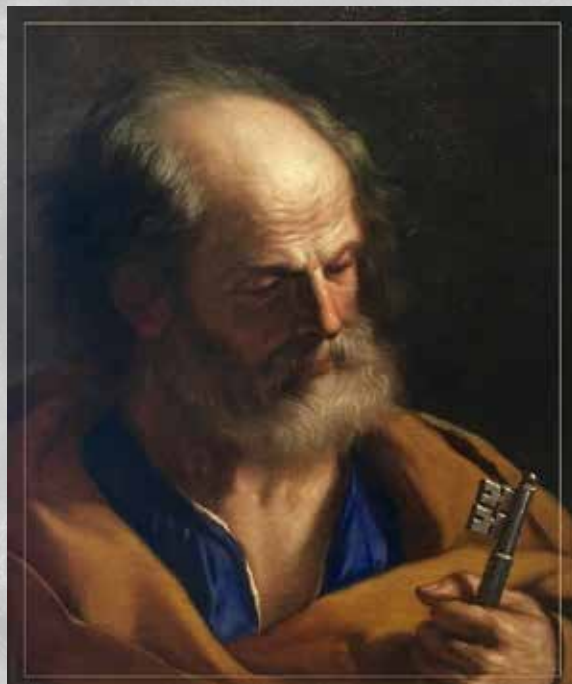
The Lord called Peter from his fishing nets and Peter responded immediately and decisively. He left his nets behind and followed Jesus.

And yet, it perhaps is not Peter's immediate response to the Lord but his weaknesses that are what comfort and encourage us the most. He was stubborn, impulsive, verbally imprudent, unreliable and cowardly. When Jesus needed him most, Peter denied Him three times.

Yet, despite these shortcomings, Peter became the Rock of the Church, a zealous and effective preacher of the Risen Christ, a courageous man who was crucified upside down outside the walls of Rome because of his humility and love for the Lord. The man who denied Christ three times went to his martyrdom in an act that has inspired Christians for 2,000 years.

Somehow when we pray, the figure of Peter in the Gospels reminds us that there is always hope for us despite our own, sometimes glaring faults, failures and flaws. We can humble ourselves and begin again many times – the way that Peter did.

Jesus accepted Peter where he was and worked with him, strengthened him and helped him to grow and change.





Think of Peter being called from his fishing nets. Think of Peter boldly proclaiming: “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Think of Peter sinking in the water and Jesus reaching out his strong hand to raise him. Think of Peter’s naïve but enthusiastic reaction to our Lord’s Transfiguration. Think of Peter hearing the cock crow after his threefold denial of Christ.

Think of Peter receiving the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven after he proclaimed that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Think of Peter running to the Empty Tomb of the Resurrection. Think of Peter in the Acts of the Apostles boldly expressing his love of the Risen Christ and think of the Angel who rescues Peter from prison, a double set of chains falling from his wrists.

Every one of these images stirs our faith and our hope in the Son of the Living God.

Very often when we pray, we experience distractions, boredom, weakness and “prayer attention deficit disorder.” We can be as impulsive, irresolute and moody as Peter was. We too can deny knowing Christ. Still, when we pray with all of these weaknesses, we know that Jesus sees right through us with his merciful eyes in the same way that he saw through Peter. He understands us the way that he understood Peter. And he strengthens and guides us just as he strengthened and guided Peter.

We ask for Saint Peter’s intercession that we might grow in a life of prayer and grow in our loyalty to Christ and His Church.

We pray that as we gaze on the Face of Christ in prayer that we could say with Peter’s bold faith and conviction: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” And while we recognize that Peter’s denial came after that bold proclamation, we also recognize that every time Peter stumbled in his faith, he got back up again and continued to follow the Lord, and we therefore can ask for his intercession to help us get back up again every time we too stumble.

Saint Paul, by contrast, did not start out as a disciple of Christ. Instead, Paul began his career as an effective and militant persecutor of Christians. Yet his iron-willed determination to persecute Christians was broken down and transformed as he encountered the Risen Christ on the Road to Damascus.

The conversion of Saint Paul - celebrated on January 25th each year - teaches us that even the most unlikely people can receive the gift of conversion. The Risen Lord can lead us to our own “road to Damascus” conversions. He can break down our prideful and egocentric resistances to God’s grace and transform our lives with a fresh new commitment to Christ and the mission of His Church.

Paul teaches us in Galatians 2:20: “It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.” When we open ourselves at a deeper level to the presence, power and peace of Jesus Christ within us we join the saints at the crossroads of history and live Christ in every moment of our lives and perhaps particularly in moments of crisis.



Paul teaches us in 2 Timothy 2:9 that “The Word of God cannot be chained.” Pope Francis echoes this insight when he says in *The Joy of the Gospel* that “God’s word is unpredictable in its power.”

And so we open ourselves joyfully to “God’s perpetual surprises” as we open ourselves to daily immersion and prayer in the Word of God.

Paul teaches us to love the Cross. He had many weaknesses and many struggles. He was somewhat temperamental, sensitive and easily hurt. Some today might call him “too intense.” He had an unspecified “thorn in his flesh.”

But he also teaches us that God wants to use us precisely with our weaknesses, our failures, our falls, our struggles, our problems and our limitations. We discover Christ’s glory shining in our lives with a joyful embrace of his holy Cross.

In his June 28, 2008 homily on the Vigil of the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul, Pope Benedict XVI eloquently expressed the relationship between the Cross and the courageous witness to the truth in the lives of Saints Peter and Paul: “In a world in which falsehood is powerful, the truth is paid for with suffering. The one who desires to avoid suffering, to keep it



at bay, keeps life itself and its greatness at bay; he cannot be a servant of truth and thus a servant of faith. There is no love without suffering - without the suffering of renouncing oneself, of the transformation and purification of self for true freedom. Where there is nothing worth suffering for, even life loses its value. The Eucharist - the center of our Christian being - is founded on Jesus' sacrifice for us; it is born from the suffering of love which culminated in the Cross. We live by this love that gives itself. It gives us the courage and strength to suffer with Christ and for him in this world, knowing that in this very way our life becomes great and mature and true. In the light of all Saint Paul's Letters, we see how the prophecy made to Ananias at the time of Paul's call came true in the process of teaching the Gentiles: 'I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.' His suffering made him credible as a teacher of truth who did not seek his own advantage, his own glory or his personal satisfaction but applied himself for the sake of the One who loved us and has given himself for us all."

Paul teaches us that a love for the Eucharist ignites a love for the entire Body of Christ. Our reverent and humble love for the Body and Blood of Christ opens us up to Christ's cosmic power and our call to be missionary disciples.

May the fire that the Holy Spirit cast down into the heart of Saint Paul, which in turn lit up the earth, inflame our hearts to be vibrant and effective global missionaries.

May we, with Saint Paul, pour out our lives like a libation. And may we finish the race, keep the faith and believe deeply that eye has not seen, ear has not heard what God has prepared for those who love him.

You might ask what does all of this have to do with Catholic archaeology. The short answer is "everything." In 1939, Pope Pius XII organized an archaeological dig beneath the Vatican and the cemetery streets of ancient Rome to find the bones of Saint Peter.

In 1942, a number of bones were found in a niche behind a "Graffiti Wall." This wall was so-called because on it were more than twenty ancient graffiti inscriptions which said "near Peter" and "Peter is here."¹

A scientific analysis of the bones provided even more evidence that these were the bones of the Prince of the Apostles. They were discovered to be the bones of a male between the ages of sixty and seventy.² The bones were also consistent with the bones of someone who would have been crucified upside down, the method by which Peter was executed according to tradition.³

Other evidence connected to this discovery also pointed to the significance of these bones. Remnants of a gold and violet cloth adhering to the bones indicated that the dye and weave of the cloth dated between the first and third centuries of Imperial Rome.⁴ Also, more than two thousand coins (one dating to 14 A.D.) and other Christian votive offerings were discovered in the surrounding necropolis.⁵

The fact that a nearly straight line may be drawn from the main altar of Saint Peter's Basilica to the site of these bones underneath was consistent with a long-held, but (until the 20th Century) never verified tradition that the original Basilica, which had been started in approximately 330 A.D., and its successor, the current Basilica, had been built directly above the ancient tomb of Saint Peter. One author once wrote of the altar:





It is a very simple altar, just a marble table with a bronze cross and seven candlesticks. It is overhung by the baldachino, the huge bronze canopy, made by Bernini. And over it all vaults the mosaic dome, like a lofty firmament. All the vertical lines converge toward one point in the centre, right above the grave of the man from Galilee – an immovable point that seems infinitely far away and from which a picture of the Triune God looks down on the tomb.⁶

The Italian word “Scavi” means excavation; and, when we have had the opportunity to make a Scavi tour beneath Saint Peter’s Basilica, the tour concludes at the underground necropolis where Saint Peter’s bones are still located. After such a tour, we never say the Creed quite the same way again.

According to tradition, Saint Paul - a Roman citizen, and thus exempt from brutal means of execution such as crucifixion - was executed by beheading. In 2006, Vatican archaeologists, after conducting four years of analysis, confirmed the presence of a white marble sarcophagus beneath the altar at Saint Paul at the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls. The large inscription on the sarcophagus read “PAULO APOSTOLO MART” (Apostle Paul, Martyr).⁷ There had always been a traditional sense that Paul’s remains were buried under the main altar at the Basilica, and in 2009, Pope Benedict XVI confirmed the authenticity of the discovery.⁸ Ultimately, it was only through the work of archaeologists and sophisticated 21st Century technology that the bones within the sarcophagus were able to be verifiably dated to the first century.



Since ancient times, Saints Peter and Paul have been celebrated together on this day. There is a tradition that “these pillars of the world” suffered martyrdom in Rome on the same day;⁹ and this would be consistent with the theological reality that their missionary work in building up the Church is inextricably linked. On the



Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul in 2008, Pope Benedict XVI stated: “By virtue of their martyrdom, Peter and Paul are in a reciprocal relationship forever.”¹⁰

As we consider the pivotal and foundational witness of Saints Peter and Paul, it is amazing that these precious relics of Peter and Paul could ever have been lost or forgotten about, but they were. They needed to be rediscovered through bold, new missionary archaeological expeditions.

There is a parallel with the mystical and missionary truths of our Catholic faith. Sometimes, in the course of history, certain dimensions of Catholic truth are not rejected but lost.

Like the bones of Saint Peter and the sarcophagus of Saint Paul, we need to conduct evangelizing archaeological expeditions to recover these truths, to bring them back to the surface of 21st century life and to live them vibrantly in our

time.

For instance, we have often lost sight of the world-changing truth that the Holy Spirit leads the Catholic Church at every moment of history to be the universal sacrament of salvation.

We are called together to pursue – indeed to excavate a contemplative, biblical, doctrinal, sacramental and moral archaeology of Catholic truth.

We are called to prayerfully, humbly, boldly and charitably share and propose these liberating truths to the world.

The Catholic Church is by its very nature missionary.

You and I, through our baptism, are called to be holy instruments of 21st century missionary transformation here on Long Island and throughout the world.

May the intercession and the missionary zeal of Saints Peter and Paul inspire and encourage us to answer this call.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

+ John O. Barres

Most Reverend John O. Barres
Bishop of Rockville Centre



Endnotes:

- 1 John O'Neill, *The Fisherman's Tomb* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, 2018), 135.
- 2 Ibid., 131.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid., 84-5.
- 6 James A. Van der Veldt, *The City Set on a Hill: The Story of the Vatican* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1944), 289.
- 7 https://www.vatican.va/various/basiliche/san_paolo/en/basilica/tomba.htm
- 8 O'Neill, 156.
- 9 Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 345.
- 10 Pope Benedict XVI, Homily on June 29, 2008.

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