

Sts. Peter and Paul  
(Acts 12:1-11; 1 Tim 4:6-8,17-18; Mat 16:13-19)

Our antiphon for these two saints proclaims that they loved each other in life and are not separated in death. Whenever we sing that antiphon, I think that no doubt it is true that they loved each other, but they certainly had their differences. Paul writes of Peter that “I opposed him to his face because he was clearly wrong. For, until some people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to draw back . . . , because he was afraid of the circumcised” (Gal 2:11-12). This incident at Antioch underlines differences in the missions and temperaments of these two great apostles, these great pillars of the Church.

As Paul explains the outcome of the Council of Jerusalem, “that we [Paul and Barnabas] should go to the Gentiles and they [Peter, James, and John] to the circumcised” (Gal 2:9); this was in accord with the missions to which each had been “entrusted” (v. 7).

This is not the only times saints have been at odds; for instance, Paul himself later quarreled with Barnabas, and we all know of other examples. In the case at hand it was not a matter of turf or jurisdiction but of pastoral concern. Paul’s concern had to do with making Christianity palatable to Gentile converts, present and future. Peter’s behavior in withdrawing from table fellowship with Gentiles could make them feel they were not really welcome. Beyond that

was the doctrinal issue, so important to him, that faith in Jesus is all that is asked of anyone.

Peter, on the other hand, was dealing with the sensitivities of those, who though now Christians, had been raised according to strict Jewish ways, and letting go of them did not “feel right.” Perhaps there is a little of that for us Catholics in continuing to have fish on Friday. More clearly is the case of changes introduced by Vatican II. How many Catholics want to adhere to Latin in the liturgy, though that clearly isn’t a doctrinal matter? Other changes have provoked schismatic movements, such as the LeFevrites. Even in NT times there were the “Judaizers” that Paul opposed, those Christians who continued to insist the circumcision and at least some aspects of the Law were necessary for Christians. Later there appeared a schismatic Christian sect that insisted on Jewish observance, perhaps comparable to the Lefevrites. In any case, we see each of these two, Peter and Paul, carrying out the role God had called them to.

The conversion of St. Paul was certainly one of the Holy Spirit’s greatest gifts to the Church. It was so important an event that now it is celebrated with a feast day of its own, and rightly so. It turned a persecutor into one of our greatest apostles. It would be difficult to exaggerate the labor undertaken by Paul in traveling through most of the then known civilized world to proclaim the gospel. He himself leaves a dramatic account of his trials and hardships, which we have often heard. Perhaps we can be

even more impressed if we simply think of the many miles he traveled, perhaps most of it on foot, day after day, in those four great missionary journeys. To these labors we must add his power as a thinker, theologian, and teacher.

Although we celebrate Sts. Peter and Paul together, their careers were vastly different; Peter was one of the first of the disciples called by Jesus, persevered through His ministry, and was a witness of Jesus resurrection, whereas Paul never knew Jesus in the flesh. St. Peter's missionary career is less clearly known and possibly less spectacular than Paul's. No record, at least as far as I am aware, is left of it, aside from the reference to his being in Rome, where he was martyred.

Peter's importance thus rests first of all on his primacy among the apostles and in the Church. He is often the first of the disciples to speak (as when Jesus asked "who do people say the Son of Man is?"); that occasion led to Jesus famous "upon this rock I will build my Church," a preeminence given Peter which John affirms in Jesus' triple "feed my lambs, feed my sheep." In Luke Jesus tells him, "you must strengthen your brothers." After Jesus' resurrection he was the spokesman for the early Church; he it was who made that first early address to the crowds on the occasion of Pentecost, and he was the first to baptize Gentiles and so admit them into the Church. He was both bold and timid. When he saw Jesus walking on the waters and asked to do the same, he did, but then began to fear, to

sink, and needed to be rescued. When Jesus was taken prisoner, he bravely drew a sword in His defense, but shortly later, out of fear, he denied three times he knew Him. When Jesus extracted that three-fold affirmation of love, as a way of forgiving him, we perhaps have a foretaste of what the Church will always be, “semper reformanda,” always in need of reform. We will always have conservatives and liberals, but that need not, should not impede the Church’s progress toward its goal of converting the world through love.

“In life they loved one another” and no doubt they loved each other also to the end. Each shed their blood for the faith, each for the love of Jesus, though they knew him in different ways. May we all advance in the faith, in love, and in unity, as we follow their example of zeal.

For peace throughout the world, let us pray  
For the rebuilding of all that has been destroyed, we  
For all who have been orphaned or bereaved, we  
For ALL to aid Our Holy Father in his attempts to reform,  
For all seeking employment, we pray  
For vocations ... to fill our empty choir stalls, we pray ...  
For Teri’s and Jack’s recovery, we pray