

2021 Sts. Peter and Paul

1. The provocative gospel passage from St. Matthew once again flashes before the eyes of our heart (Mt 16:13-19). Jesus poses the question to the Twelve, "Who do you say that I am?" (Mt 16:15) Peter replies, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." To this response, Jesus links two other great realities: Peter and the Church: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church!" From this important dialogue emerge three big questions that weigh on people's minds today both inside and outside the Church.

Who do you say is Christ?

Who do you say is Peter, and who do you say is his successor?

Who do you say is the Church?

These questions have particular relevance today on this great solemnity. It leads us to a divine response in the crisis in the Church and in society.

2. What about Paul? To understand Paul's role, we need to step back and understand the meaning of the Church's apostolicity a little more. Scripture says that the Church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20). In 1 Corinthians 3:11, however, Jesus is also called the foundation! "For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ." How do we distinguish Jesus the cornerstone and foundation from the apostles who were also referred to as "foundation"?

3. Cardinal Raniero Cantalamessa does a beautiful job of this when he explains that "foundation" in Scripture has both a passive and an active sense. Christ is the foundation in the active sense: he initiates the building, he starts the plan. The apostles are

"foundation" in the passive sense: they receive the gift of the Church and Christ in trust - to govern and sanctify it until the founder returns!

For Cardinal Cantalamessa, Jesus is the founder! The apostles are the foundation! Jesus is the unfounded founder! The apostles are the founded founders!

And among the founded founders he sets St. Peter his successor as the anchor man for the Twelve.

4. So what about Paul? Like the word "foundation" which has both an active and a passive sense, so also apostolicity has an active and a passive sense. In its passive sense, the apostolicity of the Twelve, Paul included, has the task of establishing the Church in history in all its concreteness until the coming of Christ in glory. In its active sense, it has the task of taking Christ to the nations, of evangelizing. Paul, par excellence, is the great apostle to the nations. Jesus wished that these two great dimensions of Church life - her solidity in history under Peter and her missionary zeal under Paul - be united in one testimony of martyrdom in the city of Rome.

5. Where do we fit in this scheme of things? I would bring your attention to another important linkage that Jesus makes after hearing Peter's response: "the powers of death shall not prevail against it." (Mt 16:18) When Jesus chose Peter, he knew him in his strengths and weaknesses. When Jesus chose Paul he knew what was in him. When Jesus calls each of us he knows what is in us. To found his Church, Jesus takes Peter's denial and Paul's conversion and Paul's persecution and Peter's confession of love and he asks them to trust him. So Paul cries out at the end of his ministry, "I know him in whom I have placed my trust and I am certain that he, the just judge, has power to keep safe what he has entrusted to me, until that day." (2 Tim 1:12)

The crisis comes to us personally, or in the Church, through the power of evil trying to prevail against us or against her.

6. Such is our path to God in the mystery of his Church. And the Eucharist gives us our next step: the greatness of his divinity is submerged in the weakness of bread made by sinful human hands! Let us trust that he will accomplish his work in us with great perfection as he did with his beloved Peter and Paul.