



# The Holy See

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JOHN PAUL II

## GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Wednesday , 27 June 1979*

***The Apostles Saints Peter and Paul, Witnesses to the Love of Christ*** Pretiosa in conspectu Domini mors sanctorum eius. "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints" (Ps 116:15). With these words of Psalm 116 allow me to begin today's meditation, which I wish to dedicate to the memory of the Holy Founders and Patrons of the Roman Church. In fact the solemn day of 29 June is approaching, in which the whole Church, but especially Rome, will remember the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul. This day has been consolidated in the memory of the Roman Church as the day of their death. The day that united them with the Lord, whose Coming they awaited, whose Law they observed, and from whom they received "the crown of life" (cf. 2 Tim 4:7-8; Gal 1:12). The day of death was for them the beginning of the New Life. The Lord himself revealed this beginning to them with his own resurrection, to which they became witnesses by means of their words and their works, and also by means of their death. Everything together: the words, the works, and the death of Simon of Bethsaida, whom the Lord called Peter, and of Saul of Tarsus, who after his conversion was called Paul, is, as it were, the *complement of Christ's Gospel*, its penetration into the history of mankind, into the history of the world, and also into the history of this City. And really there is matter for meditation in these days, which the Lord, by means of the death of his Apostles, permits us to fill with a special memory of their lives. "Felix per omnes festum mundi cardines / apostolorum praepollet alacriter, / Petri beati, Pauli sacratissimi, Quos Christus almo consecravit sanguine, / ecclesiarum deputavit principes" (*Hymnus ad officium lectionis*). "There shines forth in all places of the world / the happy solemnity of the Apostles, / of blessed Peter and holy Paul, / whom Christ consecrated with fruitful blood / and assigned as heads of the churches" (*Hymn at the Office of Readings*).<sup>2</sup> When, after the resurrection, Christ had with Peter that strange conversation described by the Evangelist John, Peter certainly did not know that the words he heard then and the ones he himself spoke would be fulfilled just *here—in the Rome of Nero*. Three times, Christ asked him "Do you love me?", and Peter gave an affirmative answer three times. Even if at the third time "Peter was grieved" (Jn 21:17), as the Evangelist notes. Some people, thinking of the possible cause of this grief, suppose that it lies in the triple denial, of which Peter is reminded by Christ's third question. In any case, after the third answer, in which Peter did not so much give assurances of his own love, as humbly refer to what Christ himself knew in this connection—"Yes, Lord you know that I love you" (Jn 21:15)—after this third answer, there follow the words which were to be fulfilled one day, precisely here, in Rome. The Lord says: "when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you

are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go" (Jn 21:18). These mysterious words can be understood in different ways. However the Evangelist suggests their precise meaning, when he adds that in them Christ indicated to Peter "by what death he was to glorify God" (Jn 21:19). For this reason, *the day of the Apostle's death*, which we commemorate the day after tomorrow, reminds us also of the fulfilment of these words. All that took place first—all the apostolic teaching and service of the Church in Palestine, then in Antioch, and finally in Rome—all this constitutes the fulfilment of that triple answer: "Lord, you know that I love you" (Jn 21:15). Day after day, year after year, all this together with all the joys and exaltations of the Apostle's soul when he looked upon the growth of the cause of the Gospel in souls; but also all the worries, the persecutions, the threats—beginning already with the one in *Jerusalem*, when Peter was imprisoned by order of Herod, to the last one, *in Rome* when the same thing was repeated by order of Nero. However, on the first occasion he was set free by the Lord by means of His Angel, whereas no longer so this time. Probably the *earthly measure of love promised to the Master has been fulfilled* sufficiently with Peter's life and ministry. Also this further part of the words then spoken could be fulfilled: "... another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go" (Jn 21:18). According to tradition. Peter like Christ, died on the cross, but being aware that he was not worthy to die like the Master he asked to be crucified upside down.<sup>3</sup> Paul came to Rome as a prisoner, after appealing to Caesar against the sentence of condemnation passed in Palestine (cf. Acts 25:11). He was a Roman citizen, and he had the right to appeal in this way. Therefore it is possible that he spent *the last two years of his life* in the Rome of Nero. He continued to teach by means of the spoken and written word (by means of the letters), but perhaps he was no longer able to leave the city. His missionary journeys, which had brought him to the main towns of the Mediterranean world, were over. In this way the announcement about the "chosen instrument to carry my name (the Lord's) before the Gentiles..." (Acts 9:15), was fulfilled. In the course of just over thirty years from Christ's death, from his resurrection and ascension to the Father, the region of the Mediterranean Sea and therefore the area of the Empire had gradually been populated with the first Christians. All this was, to a considerable extent, the *result of the missionary activity of the Apostle of the Gentiles*. And if, among all these solitudes, the desire "to depart and be with Christ" (Phil 1:23) did not abandon him, it was just here in Rome that this desire came true. The Lord directed him *to Rome* at the end of his life, in order that he might be a witness to *Peter's ministry* not only among the Jews, but also among the pagans, and to bring there the living testimony of the development of the Church "to the end of the earth" (cf. Acts 1: 8), so as to outline the first form of *her universality*. The Lord brought it about that he, Paul, the indefatigable Apostle and servant of this universality, should pass the last years of his life here, near Peter, who has taken root like a rock in this place, to be the support and the stable point of reference for this same universality. "O Roma felix, quae tantorum principum / es purpurata pretioso sanguine, / non laude tua, sed ipsorum meritis / excellis omnem mundi pulchritudinem (*Hymnus ad Vesperas*). "O happy Rome, red with the precious / blood of such great princes, / not because of your fame, but because of their merits / you excel all the beauty of the world" (*Hymn at Vespers*).<sup>4</sup> At the approach of 29 June, feast of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, many thoughts crowd into our minds and many feelings into our hearts. Above all, the need of prayer increases, in order that Peter's ministry may find new understanding in the Church of our times, and that the dimension may always increase of the missionary universality which St Paul, by staying here as a prisoner in the last years of his life, brought to such a great extent to the history of the Roman Church. And the Lord, who promised Peter to build his Church "on the Rock" continues to be propitious to this Rock which has taken its place in the soil of the Eternal City, made fertile with the blood of its

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Founders.

*To various groups:* At today's Audience I see a great many Religious present, and among them a group of Canons Regular of the Immaculate Conception, gathered for their General Chapter, and the Superiors of the houses of the

Confederation of the Oratory of St Philip Neri. To you beloved Religious, and also to all the sisters, I extend my sincere thanks for what you do in favour of the Church, while I express the wish that you will always be fervent in spirit and joyful and courageous witnesses of Christ in the world. I then extend a welcome to participants in the study meeting organized by the Italian Association of Catholic Teachers! May the Divine Master always illumine your minds with his light, strengthen your wills and your hearts with his grace, and make your generous educational effort fruitful in good! I am happy, furthermore, to greet, among the many pilgrimages, those of the dioceses of Caltanissetta, Parma, and Pavia, led by their respective Bishops. Let my grateful appreciation for this visit reach everyone. I address my fatherly exhortation to all to strengthen their Christian faith at the tomb of the Apostle Peter. I invoke abundant heavenly favours of joy and prosperity on all and willingly impart my Blessing as a token thereof. *To young people:* And now a hearty greeting to all the boys and girls present here. Beloved in Christ, the hope you represent for the Church and society will be fulfilled if you really understand that, "Jesus Christ being the truth of the whole man", faith in him must become the source of the criterion to deal with all the problems of existence. I exhort you, therefore, to let faith inspire your behaviour in every circumstance. May my blessing accompany you. *To the sick:* Beloved sick friends, I address particularly affectionate greeting to you and I recall to you the words of St Peter to the first Christians: "If when you do right and suffer for it you take it patiently, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps" (1 Pet 2:21-22). They are words that are always relevant and always valid for you and for everyone! May they give you light and comfort. I bless you all willingly. *To newlyweds:* Beloved newlyweds! Thank you for your presence! To you who are beginning a new life in this society of ours, which is certainly not an easy one I wish to recall St Paul's words to his disciple Timothy: "God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control; Do not be ashamed then of testifying to our Lord,... but share in suffering for the gospel in the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling" (2 Tim 1:7-8). Be courageous, you too, in bearing witness to your faith and your commitment of sanctification. May my blessing sustain you in this effort. *To a group of pilgrims from Nigeria:* My special welcome goes to the pilgrimage from the Archdiocese of Onitsha. God bless you and all Nigeria. *To members of the United States military:* I offer a particular word of greeting also to the officers and men of the aircraft carrier "Eisenhower", and to the members of the United States military stationed in Germany, as well as to the directors of the USO, under the auspices of the American Catholic Club of Rome, celebrating its thirty-first anniversary. May the Lord assist you in your activities of service.

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