



The Holy See

FEAST OF SAINTS PETER AND PAUL

**HOLY MASS FOR THE IMPOSITION OF THE SACRED PALLIUM
ON METROPOLITAN ARCHBISHOPS**

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Vatican Basilica

Friday, 29 June 2012

[\[Video\]](#)

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*Your Eminences,
Brother Bishops and Priests,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

We are gathered around the altar for our solemn celebration of Saints Peter and Paul, the principal Patrons of the Church of Rome. Present with us today are the Metropolitan Archbishops appointed during the past year, who have just received the Pallium, and to them I extend a particular and affectionate greeting. Also present is an eminent Delegation from the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, sent by His Holiness Bartholomaios I, and I welcome them with fraternal and heartfelt gratitude. In an ecumenical spirit, I am also pleased to greet and to thank the Choir of Westminster Abbey, who are providing the music for this liturgy alongside the *Cappella Sistina*. I also greet the Ambassadors and civil Authorities present. I am grateful to all of you for your presence and your prayers.

In front of Saint Peter's Basilica, as is well known, there are two imposing statues of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, easily recognizable by their respective attributes: the keys in the hand of Peter and the sword held by Paul. Likewise, at the main entrance to the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, there are depictions of scenes from the life and the martyrdom of these two pillars of the

Church. Christian tradition has always considered Saint Peter and Saint Paul to be inseparable: indeed, together, they represent the whole Gospel of Christ. In Rome, their bond as brothers in the faith came to acquire a particular significance. Indeed, the Christian community of this City considered them a kind of counterbalance to the mythical Romulus and Remus, the two brothers held to be the founders of Rome. A further parallel comes to mind, still on the theme of brothers: whereas the first biblical pair of brothers demonstrate the effects of sin, as Cain kills Abel, yet Peter and Paul, much as they differ from one another in human terms and notwithstanding the conflicts that arose in their relationship, illustrate a new way of being brothers, lived according to the Gospel, an authentic way made possible by the grace of Christ's Gospel working within them. Only by following Jesus does one arrive at this new brotherhood: this is the first and fundamental message that today's solemnity presents to each one of us, the importance of which is mirrored in the pursuit of full communion, so earnestly desired by the ecumenical Patriarch and the Bishop of Rome, as indeed by all Christians.

In the passage from Saint Matthew's Gospel that we have just heard, Peter makes his own confession of faith in Jesus, acknowledging him as Messiah and Son of God. He does so in the name of the other Apostles too. In reply, the Lord reveals to him the mission that he intends to assign to him, that of being the "rock", the visible foundation on which the entire spiritual edifice of the Church is built (cf. *Mt* 16:16-19). But in what sense is Peter the rock? How is he to exercise this prerogative, which naturally he did not receive for his own sake? The account given by the evangelist Matthew tells us first of all that the acknowledgment of Jesus' identity made by Simon in the name of the Twelve did not come "through flesh and blood", that is, through his human capacities, but through a particular revelation from God the Father. By contrast, immediately afterwards, as Jesus foretells his passion, death and resurrection, Simon Peter reacts on the basis of "flesh and blood": he "began to rebuke him, saying, this shall never happen to you" (16:22). And Jesus in turn replied: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me ..." (16:23). The disciple who, through God's gift, was able to become a solid rock, here shows himself for what he is in his human weakness: a stone along the path, a stone on which men can stumble – in Greek, *skandalon*. Here we see the tension that exists between the gift that comes from the Lord and human capacities; and in this scene between Jesus and Simon Peter we see anticipated in some sense the drama of the history of the papacy itself, characterized by the joint presence of these two elements: on the one hand, because of the light and the strength that come from on high, the papacy constitutes the foundation of the Church during its pilgrimage through history; on the other hand, across the centuries, human weakness is also evident, which can only be transformed through openness to God's action.

And in today's Gospel there emerges powerfully the clear promise made by Jesus: "the gates of the underworld", that is, the forces of evil, will not prevail, "*non praevalent*". One is reminded of the account of the call of the prophet Jeremiah, to whom the Lord said, when entrusting him with his mission: "Behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land. They

will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you - *non praevalent* -, for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you!" (*Jer* 1:18-19). In truth, the promise that Jesus makes to Peter is even greater than those made to the prophets of old: they, indeed, were threatened only by human enemies, whereas Peter will have to be defended from the "gates of the underworld", from the destructive power of evil. Jeremiah receives a promise that affects him as a person and his prophetic ministry; Peter receives assurances concerning the future of the Church, the new community founded by Jesus Christ, which extends to all of history, far beyond the personal existence of Peter himself.

Let us move on now to the symbol of the keys, which we heard about in the Gospel. It echoes the oracle of the prophet Isaiah concerning the steward Eliakim, of whom it was said: "And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open" (*Is* 22:22). The key represents authority over the house of David. And in the Gospel there is another saying of Jesus addressed to the scribes and the Pharisees, whom the Lord reproaches for shutting off the kingdom of heaven from people (cf. *Mt* 23:13). This saying also helps us to understand the promise made to Peter: to him, inasmuch as he is the faithful steward of Christ's message, it belongs to open the gate of the Kingdom of Heaven, and to judge whether to admit or to refuse (cf. *Rev* 3:7). Hence the two images – that of the keys and that of binding and loosing – express similar meanings which reinforce one another. The expression "binding and loosing" forms part of rabbinical language and refers on the one hand to doctrinal decisions, and on the other hand to disciplinary power, that is, the faculty to impose and to lift excommunication. The parallelism "on earth ... in the heavens" guarantees that Peter's decisions in the exercise of this ecclesial function are valid in the eyes of God.

In Chapter 18 of Matthew's Gospel, dedicated to the life of the ecclesial community, we find another saying of Jesus addressed to the disciples: "Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (*Mt* 18:18). Saint John, in his account of the appearance of the risen Christ in the midst of the Apostles on Easter evening, recounts these words of the Lord: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven: if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (*Jn* 20:22-23). In the light of these parallels, it appears clearly that the authority of loosing and binding consists in the power to remit sins. And this grace, which defuses the powers of chaos and evil, is at the heart of the Church's mystery and ministry. The Church is not a community of the perfect, but a community of sinners, obliged to recognize their need for God's love, their need to be purified through the Cross of Jesus Christ. Jesus' sayings concerning the authority of Peter and the Apostles make it clear that God's power is love, the love that shines forth from Calvary. Hence we can also understand why, in the Gospel account, Peter's confession of faith is immediately followed by the first prediction of the Passion: through his death, Jesus conquered the powers of the underworld, with his blood he poured out over the world an immense flood of mercy, which cleanses the whole of humanity in its healing waters.

Dear brothers and sisters, as I mentioned at the beginning, the iconographic tradition represents Saint Paul with a sword, and we know that this was the instrument with which he was killed. Yet as we read the writings of the Apostle of the Gentiles, we discover that the image of the sword refers to his entire mission of evangelization. For example, when he felt death approaching, he wrote to Timothy: “I have fought the good fight” (2 *Tim* 4:7). This was certainly not the battle of a military commander but that of a herald of the Word of God, faithful to Christ and to his Church, to which he gave himself completely. And that is why the Lord gave him the crown of glory and placed him, together with Peter, as a pillar in the spiritual edifice of the Church.

Dear Metropolitan Archbishops, the Pallium that I have conferred on you will always remind you that you have been constituted *in* and *for* the great mystery of communion that is the Church, the spiritual edifice built upon Christ as the cornerstone, while in its earthly and historical dimension, it is built on the rock of Peter. Inspired by this conviction, we know that together we are all cooperators of the truth, which as we know is one and “symphonic”, and requires from each of us and from our communities a constant commitment to conversion to the one Lord in the grace of the one Spirit. May the Holy Mother of God guide and accompany us always along the path of faith and charity. Queen of Apostles, pray for us!

Amen.

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