



The Holy See

SOLEMNITY OF THE APOSTLES PETER AND PAUL

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

29 June 1979

1. Today's liturgy takes us, as every year, to the region of Caesarea Philippi, where Simon, the son of Jona, heard the following words from Christ's mouth: "Blessed are you... For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (Mt 16:17).

Simon heard these words from Christ's mouth when he alone answered the question "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" (Mt 16:13) as follows: "You are the Messiah (Christos), the Son of the living God." (Mt 16:16).

The history of Simon, whom Christ began to call Peter, is centred on this reply.

The place in which it was spoken is a historical place. When [Pope Paul VI](#) visited the Holy Land as a pilgrim, he dedicated special attention to that place. Every successor of Peter must return to that place with his thought and his heart. There Peter's faith was reconfirmed: "Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." (Mt 16:17).

Christ hears Peter's confession, which has just been uttered. Christ looks into the soul of the Apostle, who confesses. He rightly speaks of the Father's work in this soul. The Father's work reaches the intellect, the will, and the heart, independently of "flesh" and "blood"; independently of nature and the senses. The Father's work, by means of the Holy Spirit, reaches the soul of the simple man, of the fisherman of Galilee. The interior light that comes from this work finds expression in the words: "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." (Mt 16:16).

The words are simple. But superhuman truth is expressed in them. Superhuman, divine truth is expressed with the help of simple, very simple, words. Such were Mary's words at the moment of

the Annunciation. Such were the words of John the Baptist at the Jordan. Such are the words of Simon in the neighbourhood of Caesarea Philippi: Simon, whom Christ called Peter.

Christ looks into Simon's soul. He seems to admire the work carried out in it by the Father through the Holy Spirit: for by confessing the revealed truth on the divine sonship of his Master, Simon becomes a participant in divine Insight, that inscrutable Knowledge that the Father has of the Son, as the Son has of the Father.

And Christ says: "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona (Mt 16:17).

2. *The history of Simon Peter is centred on these words.*

This blessing was never withdrawn. Just as that confession, which he made then, near Caesarea Philippi, was never dimmed in Peter's soul.

With it he spent the whole of his life up to his dying day. With it he spent that terrible night of Christ's capture in the garden of Gethsemane; the night of his own weakness, of his greatest weakness, which was shown in his denying the man... but which did not destroy his faith in the Son of God. The ordeal of the cross was compensated with the testimony of Resurrection. It brought a definitive proof to the confession made in the region of Caesarea Philippi.

Now, with this faith of his in the Son of God, Peter was going towards the mission which the Lord had assigned to him.

When, by order of Herod, he found himself in the prison of Jerusalem, chained and condemned to death, it seemed that this mission was to last but little.

But Peter was released by the same power by which he had been called. The way marked out for him was still a long one.

He is found *at the end of this way*—as a tradition indicates, confirmed, moreover, by very careful researches—only on 29 June of the year 68 of this era which is counted conventionally from the birth of Christ.

At the end of this way, the Apostle Peter, the former Simon son of Jona, was here in Rome, here, in this place in which we find ourselves now, under the altar where the Eucharist is being celebrated.

His "flesh and blood" were destroyed completely; they were subjected to death. But *what the Father had once revealed to him* (cf. Mt 16:17), *survived the death of the flesh*; it became the beginning of the eternal meeting with the Master to whom he bore witness up to the end. *The*

beginning of the blessed Vision of the Father's Son.

And it became also *the unshakeable foundation of the faith of the Church.* Her stone, the rock.

"Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona." (Mt 16:17).

3. In today's liturgy, which unites commemoration of the death and glory of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, we read the following words of the Letter to Timothy: "I am already on the point of being sacrificed; the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing." (2 Tim 4:6-8).

Certainly, of all those who loved the appearing of the Lord, Paul of Tarsus was the extraordinary lover, the fearless fighter, the inflexible witness.

"The Lord stood by me." Let us remember clearly how and where this took place; do we remember what happened near the walls of Damascus? "But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength to proclaim the word fully, that all the Gentiles might hear it." (2 Tim 4: 17).

Paul, in a few vivid and powerful strokes *sketches the work* of his whole life. He speaks of it from here, from Rome, to his beloved disciple, when the end of his life, entirely dedicated to the Gospel, is approaching.

There is—still at this stage—a penetrating awareness of sin and grace; of grace that overcomes sin and opens the way to glory: "The Lord will rescue me from every evil and save me for his heavenly kingdom." (2 Tim 4:18).

Today the Roman Church recalls to her memory particularly the last two glances in the same direction: in the direction of *the crucified and risen Christ.* The glance of Peter agonizing on the cross and of Paul dying under the sword.

These two glances of faith—that faith which filled their lives to the last and laid the foundations of the divine light in man's history on earth—remain in our memory.

And on this day we revive our faith in Christ with particular strength.

In this perspective I am happy to greet the delegation sent by my beloved brother, the ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I, to join in this celebration of the leaders of the Apostles, Saints Peter and Paul, bearing witness in this way to how the relations between our two Churches are being intensified more and more in a common effort towards full unity.

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