



# The Holy See

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SOLEMNITY OF THE HOLY APOSTLES PETER AND PAUL

**HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II**

*Sunday, 29 June 2003*

1. "*The Lord stood by me and gave me strength*" (II Tim 4: 17).

This is how St Paul describes to Timothy the experience he had during his Roman imprisonment. These words, however, can be applied to the entire missionary life of the Apostle of the Gentiles, as well as to the life of St Peter. This is testified to in today's liturgy, in the passage from the Acts of the Apostles, which describes Peter's miraculous release from Herod's prison and a probable death sentence.

The First and Second Readings, therefore, shed light on *God's providential design* for these two Apostles. The Lord himself will lead them to the fulfilment of their mission, a fulfilment that would take place precisely here, in Rome, where these his chosen ones gave their lives for his sake, making the Church fertile with their blood.

2. "*And they became the friends of God*" (*Entrance Antiphon*). Friends of God! The word "friends" is particularly eloquent when we think that it was spoken by Jesus at the Last Supper: "No longer do I call you servants...", he said, "but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you" (Jn 15: 15).

Peter and Paul were "friends of God" in a unique way, for they had drunk the cup of the Lord. *Jesus changed the names of both* when he called them to his service: to Simon he gave the name Cephas, that is, "rock", hence Peter; He gave Saul the name of "Paul", which means "little one".

Today's *Preface* compares them: "Peter, who first professed faith in Christ, Paul, who enlightened the depths of the mystery; the fisherman of Galilee who founded the first community with the

righteous of Israel, the teacher and doctor who proclaimed salvation to all the Gentiles".

3. "*Blessed is the Lord who sets his friends free*" (Responsorial Psalm). If we think of the personal vocation and history of the two Apostles Peter and Paul, we note that the apostolic and missionary zeal of each one was in proportion to the depth of his conversion. Tested by the bitter experience of human misery, the Lord delivered them.

Through the humiliation of his denial and the abundance of tears which purified him inwardly, Simon became Peter, that is, the "rock": strengthened by the power of the Spirit, three times he declared to Jesus that he loved him, and he received the mandate to tend his sheep (cf. Jn 21: 15-17).

Saul had a similar experience: the very Lord he was persecuting (cf. Acts 9: 5) "*called [him] through his grace*" (Gal 1: 15), blinding him with a dazzling light on the road to Damascus. In this way the Lord freed him from his prejudices and radically transformed him, making him "*a chosen instrument*" to carry Christ's name to all the Gentiles (cf. Acts 9: 15).

So it was that they both became "friends of the Lord".

4. Dear and venerable Brothers, *Metropolitan Archbishops who have come to receive the Pallium*, the personal lives of each one of you differ, but Christ has listed all of you among his "friends".

As I prepare to confer upon you this traditional liturgical emblem which you will wear at solemn celebrations as *a sign of communion with the Apostolic See*, I invite you to think of it always as a *reminder of the sublime friendship of Christ* which we have the honour and joy of sharing. In the name of the Lord, make yourselves, in turn, "friends" of those whom God has entrusted to you.

Your episcopal Sees are located in various parts of the World: imitating the Good Shepherd, be watchful and attentive to each of your communities. Take my cordial greeting back to them, with the assurance that the Pope is praying for them all, and especially for those who are subjected to harsh trials and are beset with the greatest of difficulties.

5. The joy of today's feast is enhanced by the presence of the *Delegation again sent this year by His Holiness Bartholomew I, Ecumenical Patriarch*. It is led by my venerable Brother, Archbishop Demetrios of America. Welcome, dear and venerable Brothers! I greet you in the name of the Lord and I ask you to convey my kiss of peace to my beloved Brother in Christ, Patriarch Bartholomew.

As time has passed, our reciprocal exchange of delegations for the feast of St Andrew in Constantinople and for that of Sts Peter and Paul in Rome has become an eloquent sign of our commitment to strive for full unity.

The Lord, who is familiar with our weaknesses and our waverings, promises us his help, so that we may overcome the obstacles that prevent us from concelebrating the one Eucharist. Therefore, venerable Brothers, welcoming you and having you beside me at this solemn liturgical encounter strengthens the hope and concretizes the longing which spurs us onwards toward full communion.

6. "With different gifts they have built the one Church" (*Preface*). This assertion, applied to the Apostles Peter and Paul, even seems to emphasize the commitment to spare no efforts in the search for unity, in response to the invitation which Jesus repeated several times in the Upper Room, "*ut unum sint!*".

As Bishop of Rome and Successor of Peter, I renew today, in the evocative context of this feast, my full willingness to put myself at the service of communion among all the disciples of Christ. Help me, dear Brothers and Sisters, with the constant support of your prayers. Invoke for me the heavenly intercession of Mary, Mother of the Church, and of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul.

May God grant us to fulfil the mission he has entrusted to us, faithful to the last day, to form one heart and one soul in the unity of his love (cf. Prayer after Communion). Amen!

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