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Meditations: June 29, Saints Peter and Paul

Some reflections that can assist our prayer on the solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul, the two "pillars" of the Church.

06/29/2024

- A Church freed by the encounter with Christ
- Peter: weakness alongside God's strength
- Paul: a heart without barriers

“These are the ones who, living in the flesh, planted the Church with their blood; they drank the chalice of the Lord and became the friends of God.”^[1] The apostles Peter and Paul are considered the “first pillars” of Christianity. Saint Peter is the rock on which Jesus built his Church; and Saint Paul, with his travels and writings, is the apostle of the universal Church. The two confirmed the unity and universality of the new people of God with the testimony of their martyrdom.

The lives of both were marked not mainly by their own qualities, but by their personal encounter with Jesus. It was He who healed them and made them apostles. “Peter, the fisherman from Galilee, was set free above all from his sense of inadequacy and his bitter experience of failure, thanks to the unconditional love of Jesus. Although a skilled fisherman, often in the

heart of the night he tasted the bitterness of frustration at having caught nothing (cf. *Lk* 5:5; *Jn* 21:5) and, seeing his empty nets, was tempted to pull up his oars. Though strong and impetuous, Peter often yielded to fear (cf. *Mt* 14:30). Albeit a fervent disciple of the Lord, he continued to think by worldly standards, and thus failed to understand and accept the meaning of Christ's cross (cf. *Mt* 16:22). Jesus nonetheless loved Peter and was willing to take a risk on him. He encouraged Peter not to give up, to lower his nets once more, to walk on water, to find the strength to accept his own frailty, to follow him on the way of the cross, to give his life for his brothers and sisters, to shepherd his flock."^[2] —

Paul, in turn, was freed “from the religious fervor that had made him a zealous defender of his ancestral traditions (cf. *Gal* 1:14) and a cruel

persecutor of Christians.”^[3] — His rigid observance of the law and opposition to Christ had closed his heart to divine love. But after his conversion on the road to Damascus he set forth with the eagerness of one who “has intensely savored the joy of being close to God.”^[4] — His life, which perhaps had been centered on fulfilling precepts, is now based on that personal encounter with Christ. Peter and Paul give us “the image of a Church entrusted to our hands, yet guided by the Lord with fidelity and tender love. For it is he who guides the Church. A Church that is weak, yet finds strength in the presence of God. The image of a Church set free and capable of offering the world the freedom that the world by itself cannot give.”^[5] —

JESUS one day asked his disciples a question: *Who do men say that the Son of Man is?* (Mt 16:13). And they began to give some of the names they had heard in the city: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, one of the prophets... Then Jesus asked for a more personal response: *But who do you say that I am?* (Mt 16:15). This time no one dared to say anything. Except Simon Peter, who replied: *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God* (Mt 16:16).

And hearing these words, Jesus tells Peter that he will be the rock on which he will build his Church. But He also makes clear that Peter's strength will not depend on his own qualities: *flesh and blood has not revealed this to you* (Mt 16:17).

Rather it will be based on the power of God the Father. Soon after Peter has been called the rock, we see him being reprimanded by our Lord after He had announced his Passion: *You*

are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men (Mt 16:23). This contrast between God's gift and our own human qualities marks the life of Saint Peter, and also of the Church and of each one of us. It is a tension between the light and strength that comes from God and our human weakness, which only God's action can transform when He finds a humble heart.

“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 Christ.”^[6] Peter did not change suddenly from one day to the next. He would continue to experience in his life both God's abundant gifts and his own weakness. Such was the rock Christ built his Church on. Peter came up against his own defects constantly, but he anchored his life in Christ's love.

SAINT PAUL is called the apostle to the Gentiles; that is, to all those who did not belong to the Jewish people. The one who had worked so hard to persecute Christians because they were not observing the Jewish law, later announced God's salvation to all the nations. *I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some (1 Cor 9:22)*, he wrote to the Corinthians. God's plans are always much bigger than our human vision.

Nothing can separate a Christian from his fellow men and women. Everything that distanced Saint Paul from others disappeared when he met our Lord. "That event widened his heart, opening it to everyone. He became capable of engaging in a broad dialogue with everyone."^[7] As Saint Josemaría said: "The human heart is endowed with an enormous

coefficient of expansion. When it loves, it opens out in a crescendo of affection that overcomes all barriers. If you love our Lord, there will not be a single creature that does not find a place in your heart.”^[8] This is what happened to Saint Paul when he personally met Christ.

Mary, Mother of the Church, wants to see all her children united. “It is difficult to have devotion to our Lady and not feel closer to the other members of the Mystical Body and more united to its visible head, the Pope.”^[9] Like Peter, Mary will help us not to lose hope in the face of our shortcomings and to live anchored to the rock that is God. And, like Paul, she will expand our hearts so that we discover the fraternity that unites us with all of mankind.

^[1] Roman Missal, Entrance Antiphon, Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul.

^[2] Francis, Homily, 29 June 2021.

[3] Francis, Homily, 29 June 2021.

[4] Saint Josemaría, Notes from a family gathering, 25 August 1968.

[5] Francis, Homily, 29 June 2021.

[6] Benedict XVI, Homily, 29 June 2012.

[7] Benedict XVI, Audience, 9 March 2008.

[8] Saint Josemaría, *The Way of the Cross*, Eighth Station, no. 5.

[9] Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 139.