

Meditations: November 18, Dedication of the Basilicas of Saints Peter and Paul

Some reflections that can assist our prayer on the feast of the dedication of the basilicas of Saints Peter and Paul. The topics are: Peter and Paul, pillars of faith; they were different, but the Gospel united them; we are living stones of the temple of the Church.

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ST. PETER and St. Paul's lives were brought together by their love for Jesus Christ and a shared zeal for evangelization. They had different origins, temperaments, and upbringings, but from the moment they heard Jesus's call, they both gave their best to bear witness to the joy they had received. Each had his own mission and approach: Peter as the head of the Church, Paul as the apostle to the Gentiles.

They met in Jerusalem when Paul visited the apostles three years after his conversion (cf. *Gal* 1:15-18). They lived together for only a few days. They may have spent time together

in Rome later, when Paul was imprisoned in the capital of the Empire. We know that both gave the ultimate testimony of love for Christ through martyrdom in Rome. Peter was crucified, while Paul was beheaded. Their relics now rest in the Eternal City in the basilicas dedicated to them, as noted around the year 200 by the Roman priest Gaius: “I can show you the trophies of the apostles. For whether you go to the Vatican or to the Ostian Way, you will find the trophies of those who founded that Church.”^[1]

Today, we contemplate what God can do with those who generously open themselves to His action. “Courage! You... can!” St. Josemaria wrote. “Don't you see what God's grace did with sleepy-headed Peter, the coward who had denied him..., and with Paul, his fierce and relentless persecutor?”^[2] “Christian tradition has always considered Saint Peter

and Saint Paul to be inseparable: indeed, together, they represent the whole Gospel of Christ.”^[3] Together, they are the foundation of the Church, symbols of its unity and pillars of faith. For this reason, the Church celebrates the dedication of the Roman basilicas of St. Peter and St. Paul, built over their tombs, on the same day.

THERE ARE two statues in front of St. Peter's Basilica. The figures are easily recognizable by the objects they hold in their hands: the keys in Peter's hands, and the sword in Paul's.

The symbol of the keys, which Peter received from Christ, represents his authority. Jesus promised that Peter, a faithful steward of his message, would be the one to open the door to the kingdom of heaven (cf. *Rev* 3:7).

The sword that Paul carries in his hands is the instrument with which he was killed, and his letters show that the image of the sword is a symbol of his evangelizing mission. When he feels that his death is approaching, he writes to his disciple Timothy: *I have fought the good fight* (2 Tim 4:7). Paul is sometimes referred to as the thirteenth apostle because, though he was not part of the group of the twelve, he was called by the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus.

On the human level, they were not at all alike, and they probably suffered misunderstandings in their relationship. But their differences did not stop them from showing “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.”^[4] St. Josemaria wrote, “I would like — help me with your

prayer — all of us within Holy Church to feel that we are members of the same body, as the Apostle asks of us. I would like us to be vividly and profoundly aware, without any lack of interest, of the joys, the troubles, the progress of our Mother who is one, holy, catholic, apostolic, Roman. I would like us to live in unison with one another and all of us with Christ.”^[5] —

DEDICATING A temple to worship transforms that building from an ordinary place into a sacred space, meant to give glory to God. The central part of the rite of dedication is the consecration of the altar, which, being entirely bare, is anointed with chrism in the center and at its four corners. Then it is incensed and adorned with cloths, flowers, candles, and the cross. The

celebrant, with a lit candle in hand, invokes the “light of Christ,” similar to the liturgy of the Easter Vigil.

Like a temple, all Christians have been consecrated to God in our Baptism; we have been anointed on the chest with holy chrism oil. We were also given a lit candle, lit with the flame of the Easter candle, so that we may be sources of light in the world. We can enthusiastically collaborate in the building of the Church because we are *living stones* (1 Pet 2:5) of this supernatural edifice. These two witnesses of faith are admirable not so much for their special skills or strengths but because the center of their story is “the encounter with Christ that changed their lives. They experienced a love that healed them and set them free. They then became apostles and ministers of freedom for others.”^[6] —

“Peter knew Mary personally and conversed with her, especially in the days preceding Pentecost (cf. *Acts* 1:14), and he was able to deepen his understanding of the mystery of Christ. Paul, in proclaiming the fulfillment of the plan of salvation ‘in the fullness of time,’ did not neglect to remember the ‘woman’ from whom the Son of God was born in time (cf. *Gal* 4:4).”^[7] We ask her to help us follow St. Peter and Paul’s example and embrace the adventure of building the Church in our own lives.

^[1] Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, II, 25,7.

^[2] St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 483.

^[3] Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 29-VI-2012.

[4] Ibid.

[5] St. Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 630.

[6] Pope Francis, Homily, 29-VI-2021.

[7] Pope Francis, Angelus, 29-VI-2015.

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