

Commissioned to be champions of Christ in the world

Homily by Bishop John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo

Saturday, June 29, 2013 – Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul

Given at the Cathedral of St. Mary, Fargo, ND

“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). In every age, God has raised up witnesses who have made this proclamation – men and women who have been his messengers, his heralds, his ambassadors. He has raised up saints through the ages to be his co-workers in the building up of his kingdom and he chooses particular individuals at particular times to serve him in ways that are needed in those times, to be his instruments, instruments of his grace and his love and his truth.

Peter and Paul are two such men, extraordinary instruments in God’s hands and, in some ways, unlikely partners in the plan of the Lord. This is not just any ordinary Saturday evening Mass. Today, the 29th of June, is the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul, one of the high feast days, one of the great solemnity celebrations in the church year because of the key role that Peter and Paul played in the life of the church.

Peter, of course, was first known as Simon. He was chosen as one of those first 12 apostles. He was the leader and the spokesman of the group. We know him well from the gospels. We know, too, from the gospel that we just heard that Peter was called to be the “rock” – *petra* – the Greek word that means “rock”, the rock on which Jesus would build his church, the first bishop of Rome, the first Pope. We know that Peter was a fisherman, a simple man, probably uneducated. He was probably devout in his Jewish faith and practice. To be a fisherman, he had to be a rugged man, a man who was used to hard work, probably used to the occasional failure of a poor catch. We also know that he was determined to put out to sea again and again so that he might bring in a decent catch. He was persistent, dogged.

Then there was Paul who was first known as Saul. Paul was a Pharisee, he was a learned man, who at first opposed Christianity. He was chosen by Jesus to be a great missionary of the Christian faith, preaching not only to his fellow Jews, but also going out to the Gentiles, to the nations. Where Peter was simple and unsophisticated, Paul was a scholar of the law and the prophets, probably a rising star among the leadership of the Jewish people.

Each of these two men, surprisingly, was called by Jesus to carry out the work of building his kingdom here on earth, going even as far as Rome, the capital of the world, where they would put the church of our Lord “on the map”, you might say.

Peter and Paul not only inspire us by their greatness and their heroism, they also encourage us, because, like all the saints, they were so human, they were so much like us. They attained greatness and, indeed, great holiness despite their human frailties.

Peter, the leader of the twelve, was bold. He was even impetuous. He was forever speaking up and speaking out and sometimes even putting his foot in his mouth. He professed his loyalty and

his willingness to die for Jesus. Then we all know, in the moment of testing, he failed Jesus. On the night of our Lord's arrest, when he was challenged, Peter denied that he even knew Jesus. He ran away and hid.

Then there was Paul, the Pharisee, who was a fierce opponent of Christ's Church. With great enthusiasm, he accepted the task of stamping out this new faith. He persecuted the Church. He hunted down those who followed Christ and, in doing so, he persecuted Christ himself.

Each one of these men was passionate and energetic, but, like us, each of them was flawed and seemed for a time to be quite distant from the way of Christ. A reasonable person would not expect Jesus to choose such men for such an important mission and yet he did, he did choose them. By God's grace, each of them was forgiven for his failures, his sins. Each of them received the mercy of God. Each of them was transformed and received a commission to be a champion of Christ in the world and to witness to Christ wherever he sent them.

Peter and Paul became heroic in their fidelity and in their witness to Christ. Each of them was faithful even to the point of martyrdom. In fact the very word "martyr" means "witness." They witnessed to Jesus by willingly shedding their blood, accepting death for him who had died for their sins and for ours.

Peter famously was crucified in Rome on a spot adjacent to the place where St. Peter's Basilica now stands. He thought himself unworthy to die as his Lord had died and so he was crucified upside down.

And Paul, after being taken to Rome under arrest, spent the next two years teaching, preaching to the people, sharing the gospel, planting seeds of faith among the people of Rome. Eventually he, too, paid the ultimate price for his faith. He was beheaded, also giving witness to the redeeming death and resurrection of Christ.

These two men, by the shedding of their blood for love of the Savior, gave inspiration to all Christians and they planted seeds of faith and hope among their fellow believers.

So, despite their frailty, their weaknesses, even their sinfulness, they became great heroes, great examples of fidelity and holiness, and we celebrate them today – saints, princes of the apostles, holy men of God.

My friends, we're all called to be saints, each in his or her own state in life. Just as Jesus called Peter and Paul, he calls you and me to serve him in whatever way we can, to be close to him and to share the gift of faith that we ourselves have received. This is the challenge of our times, to go out into the world like Peter and Paul did, into a world that is, at one in the same time, both hostile and open to the message of Christ, and to welcome others into the embrace of the Lord.

This solemnity of these great apostles also reminds us of our unity with the Church of Rome and especially with our Holy Father, Pope Francis, the Bishop of Rome. As pope, he is our spiritual father and the sign of the unity of all Catholics. He is that visible head of the church who shepherds the flock of Christ and keeps us well grounded in the truth of our Lord's gospel. And

he personifies the apostolic nature of the church and continues to witness to Jesus Christ today just as Peter and Paul did in their day. Today we should remember Pope Francis in prayer with gratitude for his election to the Chair of Peter and with hope that Christ will continue to work through him as he worked so remarkably through Peter and Paul.

Today I'm also very happy to welcome an important group of people to our Cathedral who in their own way are witnesses and apostolic co-workers of the Lord. I am referring to the Knights of Columbus. The Knights of Columbus of North Dakota are present with us at this Mass and after communion it will be our privilege to initiate their new state officers.

The Knights of Columbus, as perhaps you know, were founded here in the United States. They have an exceptional history of fidelity, charity and service in the church. In many ways they exemplify the apostolic character of the church: their faithfulness to the successor of Peter; their willingness to give of their time, their talent and their treasure; their defense of the most needy, especially the unborn and the elderly; their defense of our rights to freedom of religion. These are just a few of their notable attributes and I, myself, am very proud to be a Knight and am very happy to welcome them to the Cathedral for this important occasion.

Friends, on this solemn day, this solemn feast of Saints Peter and Paul, let us all remember our debt to these great saints who have gone before us, who have handed on to us the treasure of our faith. It's not enough to simply remember and be filled with admiration for what they have done. Now we must step forward and take our place in the ranks of the saints who have gone before us. It's now our turn, our hour, to give witness to Christ in the world. May Saints Peter and Paul continue to intercede for us and for the church. Let us all together profess to everyone who will listen, that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God".