

SAINTS PETER AND PAUL  
SUNDAY JUNE 29, 2025 Greenwich

There's a certain irony, or perhaps it's God's sense of humor, in joining Peter and Paul together for this weekend's liturgy.

You remember that when they were in Antioch and Jerusalem, Peter and Paul lined up on opposite sides in the Christian community's first theological dispute. It was, in fact, a food fight. Did disciples of Jesus have to keep kosher like faithful Jews? Or could the Gentiles dispense with dietary rules and Circumcision? Paul said yes, in Christ, they were free to do so. Peter said, well, maybe, then changed his mind and went back to keeping kosher, and Paul confronted him, and then Peter had a revelation from the Lord who declared all foods, and peoples, clean.

Within thirty years or so of their deaths, the Church in Rome was claiming both of them as its own. Sort of like lumping together Samuel Alito and Stephen Colbert.

And within a century the church in Rome claimed Peter and Paul as the founders of the Christian community there.

That claim was more pious than factual, and it was also convenient. It bolstered Rome's assertion that it was the primatial episcopal See in the Church Catholic.

After all, it's hard to argue with the fact that Peter and Paul both were martyred in the city, and their bones were buried there.

More seriously, Rome's joining the memories of Peter and Paul is instructive for the Church of our own day, in our own theological debates and our own struggles to be faithful to the Lord Jesus.

First, despite their theological differences, leaders like Peter and Paul and James continued to dialogue with each other, and they kept communion, *koinonia*, even when they disagreed and disputed.

Paul even came to see the wisdom of Peter's position, and his letter to the Romans is much more moderate than his letter to the Galatians. Paul could actually change his mind, not an easy thing to do for someone who was trained as an academic!

Second, Paul raised charity above theological niceties.

In writing to the church at Corinth, Paul warned those in the community who were strong, not to offend the weak just to promote a theological point about their own spiritual freedom.

In other words, their unity in Christ was more foundational than the legitimacy of their diversity in spiritualities.

Finally, Peter became the key figure of this unity.

Both the more conservative backers of James on the one hand, and Paul on the other, acknowledged Peter, somewhat begrudgingly, perhaps, as the leading apostle.

The Church of the second century instinctively realized that extreme positions, claimed in the name of the freedom of pure Christianity of Paul or the rigorous Christianity of James, would yield numerous sects. The image of the Apostle Peter, especially with all his shortcomings, as a source of moderate unity, helped fashion the Catholic Church.

Sadly, in the Church's history, too many Christians have refused to imitate Peter and Paul. They have not kept *koinonia*, they have scorned charity, they have made purity of ideal higher than unity with Christ and Christ's Church.

What could they, and we, instead, have learned from Peter and Paul about apostolic authority and power, power which leaders abuse when they sever themselves, or drive others, from the Church.?

Paul always stressed that apostleship, his own, Peter's, was a spiritual gift, not one that belonged to the apostle, but one that was given to the community for building up that community.

Apostles help the community to be open to the charisms of the Holy Spirit.

Apostles call us to repent and to believe, so that the Spirit can fashion our personal talents into charisms of service.

Apostles discern these charisms, they call them forth, empower them, authorize and coordinate them.

But if apostles are to serve the community in this way, the members of the body of Christ have to place at God's disposal, their minds, wills and affectivity, talents and weaknesses, personal histories and abilities.

Look around. Do you see the Spirit at work in the lives of your sisters and brothers? And if so, do you let them know that?

Look within. Do you recognize the Spirit at work in your life? Will you say yes to those gifts?

Second, when Paul looked at members of the church, and recognized God's Spirit at work in them, he always gave thanks to God for them.

Do we do that?

Are we filled with gratitude that belonging to Christ joins us to each other?

Gratitude that God chooses to redeem and make covenant with people so different from ourselves?

E.W.T.N. and the National Catholic Reporter are both run by Catholics; so are the Voice of the Faithful and the Knights of Columbus. And I'm glad for that. I hope they all are! I hope we can rejoice that, as James Joyce said of the Church, "Here comes everybody."

When the pope or a bishop speak a word of correction or instruction on a disputed issue---take your pick, war, economic justice, sexual mores, capital punishment, political leaders--- would not that “hard word” change key, as it were, if love and gratitude and care for the people were the overture?

Pope Francis used to remind us that the Church is like an M.A.S.H. unit near a battlefield. As he put it, there is time later to worry about the patient's high blood pressure or cholesterol numbers.

Our first task is attending to those grievously wounded by injustice, violence, and whatever erodes human dignity.

And for our part, would not criticism of Church leadership—and I suspect most of us have succumbed to that at one or another time—would not that criticism threaten less if pastors and bishops first found out their people were grateful for their generous service and availability for the people of God?

At this Eucharist, we pray that the Lord purify our hearts, so that we might be bonded ever more closely to Christ and to His people.

We ask to be more open to the gifts of the Spirit in ourselves, more discerning of them and others, and more grateful to God for making covenant with all of us.

And we all pray to be more generous in seeking to build up the Church, until we join Peter and Paul and the entire white-robed army of martyrs in praise before the throne of the Lamb.

Thanks for listening. Stay wonderful.