

Homily

June 29, 2014

Feast of St. Peter and Paul

Good morning! We usually approach Community members to do homilies for “Community Feast Days.” I have known that the Feast of St. Peter & Paul, June 29th was the patronal feast day of the former St. Peter Province, which of course, was the name of the Pittsburgh Province of the Sisters of Divine Providence before we restructured the US Provinces and Regions into one Province now called the Marie de la Roche Province, after our Foundress. But I did not know why we had been called the St. Peter Province. In preparing this homily I looked into our history to establish a reason for the name. I was aware that the first six Sisters of Divine Providence came from Germany and arrived in New York on June 25, 1876, as Sister Mary Joan Coultas described earlier this week. I know that their arrival in the “new world” was challenging. They were not met in New York as Fr. Wattmann, who invited them, promised. They notified Fr. Wattmann that they would take a train to Cleveland. He again was not there, but met them at Hanover, the next station. He took them by coach to Dungannon, Ohio, but the house they were promised was being used by other people. Not until two weeks later could they occupy the house and then found it in deplorable condition. The early days of these six Sisters were difficult, not being able to occupy the house they were promised and then finding it in poor condition, and not having enough food to eat to sustain them as they prepared themselves to start a school. The final blow came when the Pastor told them that St. Philip Neri Church, to which they were invited, could not afford to pay them and further, that he, Fr. Wattmann, had neglected to procure approval from the Bishop for the for the Sisters to minister in the Diocese. Before they could develop Plan B, Providence intervened. There was a funeral at St. Philip Neri Church, which these Sisters attended. A gentleman from Pittsburgh, John Mayer, attended the funeral. Mr. Mayer went back to Pittsburgh to his parish church, St. Peter and Paul in East End, and told his pastor of the German Sisters who were prepared to teach the children of German immigrants. The invitation was made to the Sisters to come to Pittsburgh and they made their way to the East End section of Pittsburgh, to St. Peter and Paul Church. Eventually when the first U.S. Province was established, it was named St. Peter Province. The first Motherhouse was in East End, close to St. Peter and Paul Church where the Sisters began their mission to German immigrants. So I believe that is what we are celebrating today. The Province in America was named St. Peter Province because of its close proximity to St. Peter and Paul Church. There already was a St. Paul Province in Germany.

After I settled that wonderment, I went on to others. I have often wondered why these two saints, Peter and Paul, were celebrated together. Were not each deserving of a special day of celebration, each in their own right? As I prepared these remarks, I became much more aware of the significance of celebrating these two men together. The common feast day of the “twin” apostles, so to speak, brings a long biblical pattern to its final expression. Throughout the bible, one tradition seemed responsible for stability and continuity, the other for enrichment and expansion. The first secured survival, the second made the survival worthwhile. The first pointed out the way to the final destination; the second enriched the stages along the way. Of course, Peter symbolizes the first, Paul the second. In the Hebrew Scriptures, Jerusalem imaged the first, the prophetic tradition the second. A careful reading of

the New Testament recognizes Peter's presence at many crucial moments, not only confessing Jesus as Messiah and Son of God, as we heard in today's gospel, but also after the Ascension as told in the Acts of Apostles: in the election of a replacement for Judas Iscariot, in preaching the first public sermon at Pentecost, in receiving the first Gentile converts without requiring circumcision, in presiding at the Council of Jerusalem and in moving the center of church life to Antioch first and then to Rome, away from the origins and immediate family of Jesus. Paul, for his part was the line of enrichment. Paul developed a theology of world apostolate, as told in the letters to the Galatians and Romans. The same twin movement crisscrossed in the Old Testament. While Mosaic traditions first settled in the northern regions and were most carefully preserved in books like Deuteronomy, Hosea, Jeremiah and Second Isaiah, all northern books and traditions were eventually to be preserved and reach us in New Testament times through the southern Kingdom of Judah at Jerusalem. Despite its much destruction, Jerusalem was the center of survival. Yet, without the stern corrections and bold visions of the prophets, Jerusalem would not have been worthy of surviving.

The biblical readings for the day reflect the style and mood of the Old Testament traditions from the north and south. In the first reading from Acts, Peter's life is saved, even though the life of James, brother of John, is lost. Peter recognizes that he is rescued by the power of the Lord, whom he said sent an angel of mercy as recited in today's responsorial.

In contrast, the second reading, from the letter to Timothy, Paul's career seems to be in meteoric splendor. The phrases come, one after another in excited grandeur: poured out like a libation, fought the good fight, finished the race, kept the faith, a merited crown for all who look for Jesus' appearance, strengthened by the Lord, preaching through all the nations, saved from the lion's jaws, safe to the heavenly Kingdom. The readings about Peter do not appear to possess this excited virtuosity, these leaps forward, this fearless and courageous race to the end.

Yes, Peter and Paul, two pillars of the Church, were different in personalities and had different vocations, yet they were united in one testimony: they gave their lives for the love of Jesus and the gospel. While Peter represents stability and continuity in the Christian community, Paul appears to represent the missionary outlook of the Church. The early Christian community needed both men and we do to, because each calls us differently. We live in a world that is in flux and that is rapidly changing around us. New technologies and new ideas call on us to express our faith in new and effective ways.

In the Gospel, the question Jesus posed to the disciples was "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" He listened to their responses: "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Then Jesus urges them to put external voices aside when He says, "But who do you say I am?" Peter answered without hesitation, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

For each of us, there is no mature and authentic faith unless we answer that question in a personal way. And we proclaim our answer of who Jesus is by the way we live, as our words actions and choices demonstrate who influences each of us.

As we celebrate the martyrdom of Saints Peter and Paul at Rome, we can wrestle with Church problems, or Community problems, family issues and perhaps, even global issues. As we reflect on human

problems or issues, we can find a model in these two figures for dealing with personal difficulties. The Church at large, human society and each individual are a mixture of these two lines: one that cautiously seeks survival, the other that acts excitedly across many barriers and/or boundaries; one that must ultimately take responsibility for all actions, the other that is always dreaming new visions; one that can be relied upon to absorb and integrate the new with the old, the other that has little time for the old as it seeks new lands where no apostle has yet labored.

Perhaps we have to recognize that there is a call to welcome the new day, the new idea, the new experiment, the new opportunity. Yet always we seek the unity of “all that is true, all that deserves respect, all that is honest, pure, admirable, decent, virtuous, or worthy of praise” as described in Philippians. This was true of Ketteler when he pursued his dream of founding a Community of Sisters to teach girls in Germany. He had to modify his dream when the Kulturkampf prevented the Sisters from teaching in Germany and so he sent them to America with his blessing. It was true of Marie de la Roche when she was removed from the office, for which she prepared, because of Fr. Autsch’s prejudice against her. Marie de la Roche willingly went to Herrnsstein and eventually to St. Mary’s Orphanage where she cared for children sick with typhoid and where she died. It was also true of the six Sisters who came to America expecting one set of circumstances, but found different ones, instead. They could readily move from Dungannon to Pittsburgh because they remembered Ketteler’s parting words, “Place your confidence, not in man, but in God alone. Even if man disappoints you, God will remain faithful.”

As I wrote this reflection, I was thinking about Fr. Richard Rohr’s book, the “Naked Now” which many of the Sisters read as we prepared for last year’s Assembly. His book encourages us to see as mystics see, to see with the third eye, the eye of the heart, to develop both/and thinking, rather than either/or thinking. The both/and approach is willing to wait for insight and integration. It keeps us inclusive and compassionate toward everything. It allows us to be distinct, yet united. Both Peter and Paul, both Moses and the Prophets, both Bishop Ketteler and Fr. Autsch, both Henry Mayer and Fr. Wattmann, and so on, will inform who we become as we integrate both experiences in our lives. This will lead us to inclusivity rather than exclusions. It will help us see that everything belongs and contribute to who we are now and who we will become.

Lastly, I am also reminded of Sr. Pat Farrell’s presidential address at LCWR in August 2012. She noted that the world is in flux with many institutions, traditions, and structures withering. The philosophical underpinnings of the way we have organized reality no longer holds, she observed. “The world is outgrowing dualistic constructs of superior/inferior, win/lose, good/bad, domination/submission”, she said. “Breaking through in their place are equality, communion, collaboration, synchronicity, expansiveness, abundance, wholeness, mutuality, intuitive knowing, and love.” Encouraging all not to be afraid of the movements of change, she conjectured that these times are “readying us for a fresh inbreaking of the Reign of God.

Yes, God calls us from the future. We must together ready ourselves for an ever changing future where God awaits us, ready to make all things new.

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