

St Peter and St Paul
(Acts 12:1-11 / Matthew 16:13-19)
29.06.2025

Dear brothers and sisters,

Those of us who are familiar with the liturgical calendar know that the Church celebrates one apostle a month. But on the 29th of June we celebrate two apostles together: St Peter and St Paul.

First of all, it is interesting to note that St Paul, originally named Saul of Tarsus, was not one of the twelve apostles chosen by Jesus during his earthly ministry. Paul's conversion experience, in which he encountered Jesus after the resurrection on the road to Damascus, is a key factor in his claim to merit the title apostle. Paul's extensive missionary journeys, his founding of Churches and his letters to various Christian communities in the New Testament established him as a significant figure in early Christianity. Paul's apostleship was widely accepted within the early Christian community. Paul himself frequently refers to himself as an apostle in his letters and defends his authority as one who was commissioned by Jesus.

We can legitimately ask ourselves the reason for which the Church celebrates together the apostles Peter and Paul. These witnesses to Christ are called the two pillars of the Church.

When we look at their temperaments, or at their social, cultural and religious origins, Peter and Paul are quite different.

Jesus instituted Peter, a fisherman of the Sea of Galilee, as the shepherd of the whole flock. Peter raised up the Church from the faithful flock of Israel and governed it from Rome where 'his see' was established. There he had 'his chair'. St Peter is our leader in the faith. His mission was, to quote St Ignatius of Antioch, to "watch over in charity", and hold together in unity the multitude of God's children. Peter exercised his ministry for the benefit of the Church, the community founded on 'love for Christ'. He watched over the unity of the Church whose bond is charity.

Paul, Saul of Tarsus, was a Roman citizen, a much more cultivated man than Peter. He was educated at the feet of Gamaliel (Acts 22,3) a renowned and highly regarded spiritual master from whom he had acquired an advanced knowledge of Scripture. Once converted to Christ, he became a missionary, "the apostle of the nations" who went all over the world to found ecclesial communities everywhere and strengthen them. He did this in the course of his apostolic journeys, often visiting communities he had already established. Paul was the fearless preacher of the faith, the teacher of the world.

But if Peter and Paul were different, they also shared a number of similar characteristics:

Peter denied his Master three times during the Passion. Paul persecuted Jesus in the persons of his disciples.

Peter was a man of impetuous generosity, sometimes presumptuous, sometimes hesitant not to say coward, but someone of solid loyalty nonetheless.

Paul was proud of his Roman citizenship and did not hesitate to demand his title as an “apostle”, but he was conscious of being as fragile as a “clay jar”.

Peter was attached to the old reassuring institutions, but did not resist the Spirit who upset his convictions and led him where he did not want to go.

Paul resolutely turned to the Nations but was torn within by the resistance of his own people.

Won over by Christ to whom they gave their faith and their love, both these men rendered the supreme witness of martyrdom.

The common celebration of the feasts of Saints Peter and Paul, with the diversity of their complementary vocations and ministries, helps us to become more aware of the two fold dimension of the Church of Christ, its two notes or characteristics: its oneness and catholicity, its unity and its universality. These two inseparable apostles represent the richness of the Church, strongly anchored in its ancestral tradition but resolutely and boldly open to the universal and the new, under the guidance of the Spirit whose initiatives still often upset the Church’s traditions with a small ‘t’ and direct it into unexpected ways.

There is a dynamic to God’s dealing with his creation, with the world. God goes from the particular to the universal.

God made a covenant with a small nation, the people of Israel, holding in his heart the project to enlarge his covenant to the whole world through the mediation of Israel.

God sent his Son into the world to reveal his love to the whole world and redeem it. His Son pitched his tent in one small nation, Israel, and confided to this small nation the mission to share the good news with the whole world.

The same dynamic is found in the common celebration of the two pillars of the Church: Peter and Paul. Peter raised up the Church from the faithful flock of Israel. Paul preached the Good News to the whole world.

The same dynamic applies to each one of our lives. Each one of us is blessed by the Lord not to keep the blessings received for oneself but to share them all around us and beyond. We are blessed in order to bless. We receive God’s grace to share it generously with others.

With our baptism, we became members of the Church. We might ask ourselves today: Are we taking on board the double dimension of the Church in our lives, its unity and its universality? Or do we give preference to one of them over the other? May the Holy Spirit help us to widen and keep enlarged our minds and hearts!