

Sts Peter and Paul

Year C, 2025

Acts 12:1-11 2 Tim 4:6-8, 17-18

Ps 34

Mt 16:13-19

Apostolic and ecclesial faith

Today we commemorate the apostles Peter and Paul, both of whom died as martyrs, witnesses to Jesus of Nazareth, risen from the dead, who is alone Lord and redeemer, savior of all the world. Peter and Paul were heralds of the salvation that began with and in Israel, but was meant for all the world and all its peoples. This day, as the liturgical texts of the Mass say, bring us joy, a “noble and holy joy,” as we remember and honor these two great apostles: Peter, the first among the apostles and the first bishop of Rome, and so the first pope; and Paul, the “outstanding preacher” of the faith, “master and teacher” of the nations called by God to be the new Israel, a holy and chosen people in his sight, gathered into one as the Church.

Faith in Christ is at one and the same time both apostolic and ecclesial. I will explain. The faith that we profess is an *apostolic* faith, a faith that we received from the apostles, who were witnesses to Jesus’s resurrection. We know about Jesus through the apostles and through their witness, for they accompanied the Lord Jesus while he walked on this earth, they saw him put to death by crucifixion, and they saw him alive again after his resurrection. They, the apostles, have handed down to us what they themselves received

from him, as St Paul so eloquently attests, even about the holy Eucharist (1 Cor 11:23-26):

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes.

Our faith, then, is *apostolic*. We believe on the witness and testimony of the apostles themselves. What they believed, we believe. Nothing more or less. What they preached and taught, we preach and teach. Nothing more or less. What they did in remembrance and after the example of their Lord and Master, so do we, even to this day. What they gave their lives for in witness to the truth as martyrs, for that, too, we also must be ready to lay down our lives.

By remaining steadfast in the faith of the apostles, we are certain to be true to what was revealed to the world in the Lord Jesus – "the beginnings of right religion" – to use the expression in the opening prayer, or collect, of today's Mass. Right religion. What we must believe and how we must behave in order to enter the kingdom of God. This the Lord Jesus taught the apostles, and this is what the apostles handed down to us.

To hand down or to hand over. The Latin word for that is *traditio*. From which we get the word tradition. That's all that tradition means, to hand down or to hand over. And it is that which the apostles so faithfully did, they handed down the words and the deeds of the Lord Jesus, so that all future generations could join in their witness to his lordship, that he truly died and was raised to life, that he is truly the messiah, the savior of the world, the son of the living God.

But our faith is, because it is apostolic, also *ecclesial*. To say that our faith is ecclesial means that our faith is that of the Church. The Greek/Latin word ἐκκλησία/*ecclesia* is translated in English as *church* and means basically an assembly or a gathering.

Of all his many disciples, Jesus called out twelve in particular to be apostles, the number twelve being, in the Hebrew scriptures, a symbolic and perfect number, representing fullness or completion, wholeness and unity, as in the twelve tribes of Israel. The apostolic twelve, then, witnessed to Christ in their profession of faith, not merely as individuals, but together as a body, a group, a church. For the twelve – as for Peter and Paul – it is not so much that they could say and teach, “I believe,” but “we, the apostles, we believe.”

Faith in Jesus and witness to Jesus is not solely a private matter, but it is eminently an ecclesial matter, the Jesus believed in and witnessed to by the apostles, who, with the first disciples were gathered together by the Lord Jesus and who became the Church

by the power of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. From the apostles, from the apostolic Church, I have received the faith that I profess, and so what I believe, I believe not just on my own or according to my own whim and fancy, but because the apostolic Church has handed on to me what she herself received from the apostles, who were witnesses of the Lord Jesus.

This ecclesial dimension of faith spares me the modern-day temptation to view Jesus as my personal lord and savior, my own personal Jesus, who, perhaps conveniently for me (but not for my eternal salvation), seems to ratify and justify my every opinion, preference, like, and dislike. This “personal Jesus” follows me more than I follow him. But such a Jesus does not really exist. He is a only deceptive reflection of sinful myself. He is no savior. To worship him is only to worship myself. I am deceived. I am not delivered from evil. I am doomed. This is the temptation of personalized belief.

And this is precisely why true faith is *both apostolic and ecclesial*. Alone, I am susceptible to self-deception. Alone, I am easy prey for the deceiver. But with and in the Church, founded on the faith of the apostles, I am part of the great cloud of witness, I am heir to the treasures of heaven, I am protected by the power of the Most High, I am anointed with the Spirit of truth, I have access to a wisdom beyond my own understanding, I receive what has been handed on to me, and I hold that gift, the faith, as something precious in the midst of my brothers and sisters, who demand of me integrity and

uprightness, who deserve from me fidelity and steadfastness. What has been handed on to me, I hold, not as an owner to do with as he pleases, but as a steward, who will, one day, have to make a return, who will have to give back, whole and entire, what he has received, along with the good fruits of his stewardship.

To be sure, Christian faith is personal, and intensely so, but for all that, it is neither my property nor my possession. It is the faith of the apostles and of the Church that has been handed down to me. What I call mine is also theirs. It is ours, this faith, theirs and mine, yours and mine. What I do with what I have received – what I believe and how I behave – will be a reflection of the genuineness of my faith and of my stewardship of the gift of faith. Which leads me to ask a couple of important questions: Is my faith built on a foundation of rock, in Christ and in his teachings, which are those of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church? Or is my faith built on the loose sand, in the trends and opinions of the world, which advertise themselves as deep and meaningful, but in reality are superficial, lifeless, and empty? Where do my loyalties lie? What is the quality of my stewardship of the faith that has been handed on to me? How have I handled it? Has it born fruit while entrusted to me?

In just a few moments, after a moment or two of silence, we will rise together and together profess the creed, our statement of belief. Together *we* will say *I believe*. Our faith, that of the Church, is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. In honor, then, of the great Apostles of

Rome, St Peter and St Paul, today we will recite the most ancient of our creeds, the Apostles' Creed, used since the beginning in the Church of Rome as its baptismal profession of faith. The text can be found on page thirteen in the paperback missalette.

The faith that Peter professed when he declared about Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16), the faith Paul gave witness to when he wrote, "yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20), this is the one faith, the holy faith, the catholic faith, the apostolic faith, the faith of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. It is our faith, and we are proud to profess it, in Christ Jesus the Lord. Amen.

St Peter and St Paul. Pray for us.