

Solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul

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Acts of the Apostles 12:1-11
Psalms 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7, 8-9

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 17-18
Matthew 16:13-19

I have often wondered how differently we might understand the role of our Holy Father if our tradition had seen him as the successor of both Peter and Paul, not just Peter. I am not, however, suggesting a new radical way of approaching one of our most cherished institutions, but the reason this has often come to mind is that in many places, particularly in Rome itself, Paul gets equal billing with Peter. For example, in many artistic images of the Apostles, including one in the chapel of St. Patrick's Seminary, St. Paul stands with Peter in the center of the group. In St. Peter's Square in Rome, the Apostles and John the Baptist stand with Christ high above the front of St. Peter's Basilica, but down below in the square itself are the large statues of both Peter and Paul.

Even the Solemnity we celebrate in their honor is not the feast of one or the other; remarkable considering Peter was the first of the apostles and Paul was the great theologian of the New Testament. Indeed there is no single feast for Peter (except that of his *chair* – February

22) or Paul (except that of his *conversion* – January 25). Rather June 29 is celebrated as the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul, together. This year, on the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul, we take note that the successor of Peter has called on the Church to celebrate a year of St. Paul, the “thirteenth apostle” of our New Testament Tradition.

Unlike previous “years” declared by the Holy Father – Marian Year, Year of the Eucharist – a Year of St. Paul carries with it a particularly scriptural, evangelical and theological bend. It is scriptural in that most of what we know of Paul, and virtually all of Pauline teaching and tradition, comes from the New Testament writings. Paul is a main character in the Acts of the Apostles, while he wrote or is attributed to over half of the New Testament epis-



tles. Thirteen out of twenty-seven books of the New Testament have his name associated with them. It is evangelical in that most of Paul's activities as recounted in the Acts of the Apostles are missionary journeys to spread the Gospel to the Gentile

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communities of the Roman Empire and presumably (Acts 25:11-12) to the Emperor himself!

It is theological in that Paul is very much the theologian of the New Testament. Some scholars speak of the “Gospel According to Paul” referring to the epistles which, while not biographies of Jesus, nonetheless express “good news” of the mystery of our salvation in Christ. It is in the Epistles that Paul makes many of the connections between Jewish scripture and tradition, and their fulfillment in Jesus; between the mystery of Christ and our call as His followers, the Church. While Paul is not a character in any of the Gospels, some scholars suggest his influence in at least three of them – particularly

Mark, believed to have been a resource for Matthew and Luke. Indeed, a theology of the Eucharistic Sacrifice (1 Cor 11:17-34), including the very formula of the Last Supper used in the Mass (1 Cor 11:23-26), was put into writing by Paul before it was ever included in any of the Gospels.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly to us as a worshipping community, Paul is read during the vast majority of the Sundays and Solemnities when the Church gathers to celebrate the Eucharist. With few exceptions, the Second Reading is usually taken from one of the letters St. Paul wrote to the various communities of the early Church. As part of our scripture, Paul, in and through his theological writings, continues to evangelize to us who hear his writings read to us week after week.

Pope Benedict, the successor of St. Peter and, himself, an exceptional theologian, has given us a great gift in declaring this Year of St. Paul. There are few, if any, devotions centered on Paul. Yet there are also few, if any, schools of theology, or traditions of Church teaching that are not grounded in the writings of the Pauline tradition. Indeed any reflection on the life and legacy of St. Paul is invariably a reflection on the very foundations of our faith as expressed throughout the centuries by gifted and inspired theologians, beginning with St. Paul.

For us priests, it will be a particular challenge (but in my mind a welcome one) to dedicate our preaching throughout this year to the Second Readings read during the Mass

(rather than the First and the Gospel). In this way we can effectively make this Year of Paul a tangible part of the lives and worship of our parishioners. (I for one hope we are encouraged to do so by the parishioners themselves – so folks, feel free to get on our cases!)

So as we begin our Year of Paul on this Solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul, let us proceed through this year with particular attention to Paul, as he continues his missionary work among us today, proclaiming his gospel, explaining his theology and helping us grow in our understanding of faith in and through his writings in our Sacred Scripture.

Fr. William Nicholas
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