

SOLEMNITY OF ST PETER & ST PAUL, 2020

Today, on this great solemnity of the Apostles Peter and Paul - which has been transferred to the Sunday in the UK - we celebrate, amongst other things, two great dimensions or aspects of the Church which are represented by these Apostles: her teaching authority & her missionary nature.

Peter, as the one to who is given the keys of the kingdom of heaven and the rock of faith on which the Church would be built, represents the teaching authority of the Church: the power to bind and loose. The technical word we use for this is, of course, simply the 'Magisterium'. It is the belief that, when the Church teaches solemnly on a matter of faith or morals (on doctrine), she teaches with the authority of Christ and in his name. It's an astounding claim, if you think about it for a moment. I mean, imagine if I said to you, 'all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me by the Son of God, and so in his name I now say to you that you should all renew your membership for the 200 Club'. Now, I think I would be right in telling you that; and that's precisely what you should do or join for the first time! But if I were to say to you that this is the authoritative revelation and teaching from almighty God, you'd unfortunately be somewhat suspicious. Because I don't have that kind of authority - which is a real shame, as far as I am concerned!

And yet, when it comes to solemn teachings on faith and morals (obviously things far more important than a 200 Club), the Church does claim that she has such authority, as per this Gospel passage.

A large part of our difficulty in accepting this notion of final authority on faith and morals in the Church comes from the relativistic age in which we live - the philosophical idea that there is no such thing as objective truth; there is only your truth and my truth and they are equally valid. This, of course, always collapses in on itself in internal contradictions and destabilizes the foundations of rational dialogue. But we are, naturally, affected by this culture.

However, perhaps part of our difficulty with the idea of the Church having any divine authority also comes from our misperception of the claim. It is perhaps the case that we think the Church makes that claim as a self-made one; that she claims such authority of her own accord. Whereas, if one reads the Gospel carefully, one realizes that it is not a claim she is making for herself but one that the Lord has given her (*'flesh and blood has not revealed this to you... I say to you..'*). The Authority of the Church to teach in Christ's name is a *gift* given to her - something she receives; not something she claims for herself. Obviously, it then becomes incumbent upon Peter and the apostles and their successors (the present-day pope and bishops) to use that gift worthily and well. Any cursory reading of Church history will reveal to you that it has not always been used as well as it could have been! But the misuse of a gift does not render it non-existent; nor does it become any less precious. Gifts, when they are good ones, elicit in us a response of care and protection. We cherish them, because we cherish the one who gave us them.

St Paul, however, has always been considered a representative of the missionary nature of the Church - the need to go out to the whole world and proclaim the Good News. It's easy to see why this is identified with St Paul as he literally did just that. He spent his life tirelessly spreading the faith to all those with whom he came into contact. He truly did fight the good fight and ran the race to the finish and, like St Peter, gained a martyr's crown for his effort (St Peter by the cross; St Paul by the sword - a quick and 'merciful' death for being a Roman citizen).

But this Pauline, missionary dimension to the Church is also evident in Christ's words to St Peter upon its foundation. When Jesus says that, 'the gates of the underworld can never hold out against it', He is not talking about the gates of the Church - as if the Church were fortified and buttressed in, defending its keep. He is using a military analogy of the Church out on campaign and that the gates of

Hell will not prevail against the Church's attack! Passivity or subservience to 'that which belongs to Caesar', were never marks of the Early Church, least of all Sts Peter and Paul. 'Jesus Christ is Lord (Caesar)', they often repeated instead [cf. Bishop Barron, *Catholicism*].

In other words, as far as any military metaphors go, it is the Church that is out on campaign with her army of saints attacking the gates of hell; not vice versa. And they shall not prevail against the missionary attack of the Church. This is the divine promise of the Lord, and so it is in the very nature of the Church to be missionary, to be out on campaign with the weapons of beauty, goodness and truth.

So, this feast of St Peter and St Paul, let us renew our faith and confidence in the Lord's promises for his Church. Let us have the humility to be predisposed towards her solemn teaching, as given with the Lord's authority; and let us assist her in her missionary nature by being ambassadors for Christ by bringing His beauty, goodness and truth to others in what we say and do.