

Saints Peter and Paul

By Jeff Ziegler

ISSUE: How do we know that Saints Peter and Paul spent their final years in Rome and were martyred there? How were their ministries different? Why are they commemorated together on June 29?

RESPONSE: There is a wealth of evidence that Saints Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome. The two apostles exercised complementary ministries in which Saint Paul was subordinate to Saint Peter. They are commemorated together on June 29 because on that day in 258, the relics of the two saints were transferred to the catacombs.

DISCUSSION: There is much evidence in both Sacred Scripture and in the non-biblical historical record that Saints Peter and Paul lived and died in Rome.

At the end of his first letter, Saint Peter writes, “She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends greetings; and so does my son Mark” (1 Pet. 5:13). According to Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260-before 341), the father of Church history, the “Babylon” from which Saint Peter wrote was the city of Rome. Most Catholic biblical scholars have agreed with him, since the “Babylon” of Saint John’s Apocalypse (Rev. 17:5, 18:10) is most likely Rome. According to tradition, he was crucified upside down.

Saint Luke describes Saint Paul’s voyage from Caesarea to Rome (Acts 27-28) for his trial. Until his trial, Saint Paul “lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and unencumbered” (Acts 28:30-31). During his years in Rome, Saint Paul also wrote his captivity epistles, among which are usually numbered his Letters to the Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon. There is solid patristic evidence from the time of Pope Saint Clement (88-97) that Saint Paul was acquitted at his Roman trial, traveled to Spain, returned to the areas he evangelized in the East, and wrote his epistles to Saints Timothy and Titus before his martyrdom in Rome—according to tradition—by beheading.

There is also much historical evidence outside of Sacred Scripture that attests to the reliability of tradition that the two apostles lived and died in Rome. Witnesses to this tradition who lived before Eusebius include Pope Saint Clement, Saint Ignatius of Antioch (d. c.115), Saint Papias (d. early second century), Dionysius of Corinth (fl. late second century), Saint Irenaeus (d. c. 200), Caius (fl. early third century), Clement of Alexandria (d. 215), and Tertullian (d. middle third century).

Complementary Ministries

The apostles exercised complementary ministries before their martyrdoms, which took place between 63 and 68.

Saint Peter was Bishop of Rome and the head of the apostolic college. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (nos. 552-553) teaches:

Simon Peter holds the first place in the college of the Twelve; Jesus entrusted a unique mission to him. Through a revelation from the Father, Peter had confessed: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Our Lord then declared to him: “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” Christ, the “living Stone”, thus assures his Church, built on Peter, of victory over the powers of death. Because of the faith he confessed Peter will remain the unshakeable rock of the Church. His mission will be to keep this faith from every lapse and to strengthen his brothers in it.

Jesus entrusted a specific authority to Peter: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” The “power of the keys” designates authority to govern the

house of God, which is the Church. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, confirmed this mandate after his Resurrection: “Feed my sheep.” The power to “bind and loose” connotes the authority to absolve sins, to pronounce doctrinal judgements, and to make disciplinary decisions in the Church. Jesus entrusted this authority to the Church through the ministry of the apostles and in particular through the ministry of Peter, the only one to whom he specifically entrusted the keys of the kingdom.

Saint Paul exercised an apostolic ministry that was subordinate and complementary to Saint Peter’s. Immediately after his conversion, he traveled to Arabia and returned to Damascus.

Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas, and then remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord’s brother (Gal. 1:18-19).

Fourteen years later, Saint Paul returned to visit Saints Peter, James, and John, the pillars of the Church:

And from those who were reputed to be something (what they were makes no difference to me; but on the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter for the mission to the circumcised worked through me also for the Gentiles), and when they perceived the grace that was given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised; only they would have us remember the poor, which very thing I was eager to do (Gal. 2:6-10).

Thus Saint Peter was head of the Bishop of Rome and head of the apostolic college, of which Saint Paul was a member. Although Saint Peter was the first to evangelize the Gentiles (Acts 10:1-11:18), Our Lord entrusted Saint Peter first as head of the apostolic college, and his preaching ministry was directed primarily to the Jews. As Acts 10:1-11:18 note, it was Saint Peter who first ordered the evangelization and baptism of the Gentiles. By his authority as head of the apostolic college, the other Apostles accepted his decision. Our Lord primarily entrusted Saint Paul with the mission of evangelizing the Gentiles.

The Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul

The Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul, celebrated by the Roman Catholic Church on June 29 since at least the fourth century, is the principal feast of the two apostles and martyrs. The Byzantine Catholic Churches also observe the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul on June 29.

Saints Peter and Paul have been commemorated together since the patristic era. In the fourth century, the Church in Syria observed the feast of the two saints on December 28. In the early Church, the Armenians celebrated their feast on December 27, and the Nestorians (whom the Council of Ephesus anathematized in 431) kept it on the second Friday after Epiphany.

The Roman observance has its origin in the translation of the relics of the two saints on June 29, 258 from their original graves to the safety of the catacombs. In 258, the emperor Valerian, who had initially been kindly disposed towards Christians, intensified his persecution of the Church and ordered the immediate execution of bishops, priests, and deacons. Pope Saint Sixtus II was martyred on August 6, the deacon Saint Lawrence on August 10, and Saint Cyprian of Carthage on September 14. The relics of Saints Peter and Paul were later restored to their original locations—Saint Peter at the Vatican, Saint Paul in the Via Ostiensis.

A solemnity is the highest type of feast day on the Roman calendar. Observance of the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul begins with Evening Prayer I on June 28 and concludes at midnight the following day. Readings for the Vigil Mass are Acts 3:1-10, Galatians 1:11-20, and John 21:15-19. Readings for Mass on June 29 are Acts 12:1-11, 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 17-18, and Matthew 16:13-19.

The Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul affords the faithful an opportunity to gain a plenary indulgence.

“The Christian faithful gain a partial indulgence in devoutly using religious articles (crucifixes, crosses, rosaries, scapulars, medals) properly blessed by any priest or deacon. But if these religious articles have been blessed by a pope or by any bishop, the faithful devoutly using them may also gain a plenary indulgence on the solemnity of the holy apostles, Peter and Paul, when they add to such use the profession of faith recited in any approved formulary” provided the usual conditions for gaining a plenary indulgence are met (*Norms for Indulgences*, third ed. 1986, 18).

The Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul is a holy day of obligation in the Roman Catholic Church. Catholics in the United States have been dispensed from this obligation since 1884 (unless June 29 falls on a Sunday, when the feast takes precedence over the normal Sunday celebration).

In his general audience of June 30, 1999, Pope John Paul II commented on the feast:

Yesterday we celebrated the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul. These two Apostles, whom the liturgy calls the “Princes of the Apostles,” were associated by the mysterious plan of divine Providence, despite their personal and cultural differences, in a single apostolic adventure, and the Church joins them in one commemoration. Yesterday’s solemnity is very ancient; we find it in the Roman sanctoral cycle even earlier than the feast of Christmas. In the fourth century it was customary on that day to celebrate three Holy Masses in Rome: one at St. Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican, another at the Basilica of St. Paul-Outside-the-Walls and the third in the Catacombs of St. Sebastian, where according to tradition the bodies of the two Apostles were hidden for a while at the time of the invasions.

St. Peter, a fisherman of Bethsaida, was chosen by Christ to be the foundation stone of his Church. St. Paul, struck down on the road to Damascus, went from being a persecutor of Christians to the Apostle of the Gentiles. They both ended their life with martyrdom in the city of Rome. Through them the Lord “gave the Church the firstfruits of the Christian faith” (cf. Collect of the Mass in their honor). The Popes invoke the authority of these two “pillars of the Church” when, in official acts, he relates tradition to its source, which is the Word of God preserved and handed down by the Apostles. By listening with docility to this Word, the ecclesial community is made perfect in love in union with the Pope, the Bishops and all the clergy (cf. Eucharistic Prayer II).

Saints Peter and Paul, pray for us!

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