

Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul, A – June 29, 2017 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of Saint Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – Missa Cantata, 6:30pm – 1,175 words

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

I am pleased to welcome you all here this evening to celebrate the Solemnity of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul. This feast is actually indicated in the Church's universal law as one of the Holy Days of Obligation of the liturgical year.¹ The law also gives conferences of bishops the possibility of suppressing certain holy days with the approval of the Apostolic See,² which is what has happened for quite some time now in the case of today's feast – sadly! I say “sadly” because it is such an important feast day: Saints Peter and Paul are the patron saints of the Church of Rome; what's more, this is really the pope's feast day, he being the successor of St. Peter and in a certain way also the successor of St. Paul. The Holy Father is the successor of St. Peter in office, but he succeeds St. Paul in the sense that Paul went to the end of the known world of his time, boldly preaching the gospel and ultimately giving his life for it; the pope is called to do the same. Both saints, in fact, gave their lives for Christ in the city of Rome, just a few years apart. On the tower of the North American College in Rome there is a beautiful inscription that recalls this fact, saying: “O Roma Felix” – “O happy Rome, which was consecrated by the glorious blood of the two princes!”

When I began as a priest nine years ago, martyrdom seemed like such a remote possibility: when I did have occasion to preach on it, I did so in mostly hypothetical terms. Well, in just a few short years, our world has greatly changed. Suddenly, because of the reality of ongoing Islamic terror, martyrdom is a possibility basically for us all. There are varying degrees of probability, I suppose, and we do generally feel very safe here. But think of all the Christians who have shed their blood for Christ in the Middle East over the last few years. Think of the elderly priest in France who was killed after saying Mass just under a year ago. There are so many other red martyrdoms we could list besides. Since the possibility is higher now, with a mature faith we must prepare ourselves to the greatest extent that we can for such an eventuality. We do so by living out our faith: remembering daily our baptism and confirmation, bearing witness to Christ in a hostile world, and striving always to remain in the state of grace. That is our ongoing martyrdom, which of course does involve a sort of death: death to self, death to sin, death to this world. If we live that way, then we can hope to be able to respond with fidelity and courage to the grace of red martyrdom, should it please God to call us to himself in that way.

The times in which we live are indeed challenging. The faith of many has been shaken, even, in recent years, as scandals have passed through different sectors of the Church and as great divisions and confusions have arisen. I do not intend to catalog these matters here or even to dwell on them; rather, when confronted by such things, we must look to the Lord and what he has promised us. In the gospel he said that “the gates of hell shall not prevail” against his Church. Pope Benedict XVI commented on this very theme back in 2012; he said:

...[I]n today's Gospel there emerges powerfully the clear promise made by Jesus: “the gates of [hell]” – that is, the forces of evil – will not prevail: “*non praevalent*”. One is reminded of the account of the call of the prophet Jeremiah, to whom the Lord said, when entrusting him with his mission: “Behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail

¹ Cf. CIC, canon 1246 § 1.

² Cf. CIC, canon 1246 § 2.

against you” – *non praevalent* – “for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you!”.³ In truth, the promise that Jesus makes to Peter is even greater than those made to the prophets of old: they, indeed, were threatened only by human enemies, whereas Peter will have to be defended from the “gates of [hell]”, from the destructive power of evil. Jeremiah receives a promise that affects him as a person and his prophetic ministry; Peter receives assurances concerning the future of the Church, the new community founded by Jesus Christ, which extends to all of history, far beyond the personal existence of Peter himself.⁴

These words not only properly explain Christ’s promise but bring us comfort. No matter how bad things may get in the Church with martyrdoms, persecutions, divisions, confusion, even scandal, *non praevalent*: “the gates of hell shall not prevail”. Indeed, throughout history the Lord has permitted all these sorts of things to happen in different measures and means, so as ultimately to show his power to save in a marvelous way. Our task, as I said, is to live out that daily white martyrdom, looking to the Lord always so that we may remain faithful and serve him as he deserves.

It seems fitting to recall the Marian Year which our Bishop has inaugurated in honor of Our Lady of Fatima. She is Queen of the Apostles and our Lord wishes for her to be Queen of our hearts also. Over and over, in those apparitions of hers that the Church has investigated and approved – especially at Fatima, 100 years ago – she has called us to a life of greater prayer and penance. This is precisely part of what living out a daily white martyrdom – a daily death to self, to sin, and to the world – entails. This evening, therefore, as we recall the example of holiness of the two great apostles, Saints Peter and Paul, let us commend ourselves to their prayers and anew to Our Lady’s care. It would be good for us on this feast to make some spiritual resolutions so that we may make progress on our journey. The Lord has never promised us comfort, but instead repeatedly told us of the cross. We know that we can always count on the cross in this world; we cannot always count on happiness or comfort, though the Lord, in his great goodness, also shares those things with us as well. May the great apostles Peter and Paul obtain for us strength in our resolve and a great determination to remain faithful to Christ each day to the very end. This is a great feast of our Catholic faith. “Thank you Lord, for giving me my Catholic faith, and keep me faithful in it to the end. Amen.”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

³ Jeremiah 1:18-19.

⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *Homily*, June 29, 2012. Accessed on June 29, 2017 via http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20120629_pallio.html.