

Today the Church, in godly wisdom, remembers and gives thanks for the great Apostles, St. Peter and St. Paul, on the same festival day, indeed, this is the oldest of feasts for the apostles, observed since the fourth century. That they are observed together illustrates something very important for us. They were both apostles. They are the most significant apostles; the two-fold focus of the history of the Church given in the New Testament is on these two men. The very origin of this feast is that they both died giving witness to Christ Jesus in Rome under Nero's persecution.

But the importance of this day is a much more significant unity of Peter and Paul. They were not competitors in a limited market, but both acted in accordance with the divine charge from the Lord who called and sent them out into all the world. That is, they had and pursued after the same goal and task. Not only this. True unity is not just in shared activity, but as we heard this past Wednesday with the commemoration of the Presentation of the Augsburg Confession, true unity in the Church is in shared teaching. Peter and Paul illustrate this truth for us. They demonstrate the unity of faith that truly makes the Church one.

In today's Gospel we see three ways that Peter and Paul both illustrate the shared teaching, not just what was true then, but what the Church, what you, ought know as well. First, how to rightly confess Christ. We say of Jesus not only what outward observation can discern. Many could see Jesus' great works, hear His stunning teaching, and marvel, see that there was something special about Him. And so many said that He was John the Baptizer back from the dead, or Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. But Peter and Paul, the holy Church throughout all the world, are not just students of some philosopher or teacher, nor the followers of a mere prophet, we are not dependent upon the rational conclusions of men as they observe and think about these things. Rather, as Peter not only boldly but rightly confessed, Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

And Jesus makes it abundantly clear that Peter and the 12, Paul and the whole Church, indeed, all humanity can know and confidently speak this of Jesus, is not attained by observation of the eyes, but can only be known by faith that is wrought by God Himself: **“flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.”** St. Paul will later affirm the same, **“no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit”** (1 Cor 12:3b). The true recognition of Jesus, the ability and courage to speak rightly of Him, is given by God. And it is given by God through His Word.

This is why Peter and Paul and their brother apostles are sent out to preach. They are to bear witness with Christ's own word, and that word bearing the promise of cutting to the heart, opening eyes, and giving faith and recognition of the Christ by the power of the Spirit of God working in and through that word. And so also it is why Jesus sends pastors to His Church today, so that we might obtain faith that recognizes and lays hold of Christ as the Son of God and our only Savior from sins, Jesus has instituted the ministry of the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. It is here that the Spirit works faith, when and where it pleases God, in those who hear the good news that God justifies those who believe in Christ.

There is no true knowledge of Christ, no right speaking about Him that is separate from His Word. So Peter, at the question of whether he and his brother disciples will leave Jesus over the difficulty of His words, answers, **“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life”** (Jn 6:68). And

Paul likewise asks, “**How shall they believe in One whom they have not heard, since faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, unless they are sent?**” (Rom 10:14–15).

So you cannot know, you cannot love Jesus if you do not long to hear what He says to you. You cannot believe in Him if you are not clinging for dear life to His Word of forgiveness, and if you are not seeking His help to live in the way that He has called and commanded you to live, being built up in the confidence of His promises? Just who is this “Jesus,” whom any would claim to love and trust, if they imagine that they have Him apart from His Word, apart from His flesh and blood? He is the foundation.

Here we come to the second point where Peter and Paul demonstrate unity in their proclamation of Christ alone as the foundation of the Church. This is because Jesus identifies Himself, His Word, as the foundation. After His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, He calls all who hear Him to be wise and build upon His Words, anything else is shifting sands. He identifies Himself as the Cornerstone.

Peter illustrates what happens when it is not Jesus alone whom we look to. When he asked the Lord to bid him to come to Him walking upon the waters, when his gaze went to wind and waves, Peter began to be lost, and cried out to the only One who could save him. Shortly after today’s Gospel, as Jesus speaks of what He as the Christ must do, what God the Father had sent Him into the world to accomplish, Peter recoils. He objects. He stumbles over the plan of salvation. And for this he is rebuked by Jesus, told that he is giving voice to Satan.

No, it is not Peter himself upon whom the Church is built. It is Peter’s God-given confession of the truth, the identification of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, that is the foundation, this is what the holy Church is built upon. And so Peter will address the Church later as the spiritual house of God that is built upon Christ (1 Pet 2). St. Paul will say to the Corinthians, “**No one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ**” (1 Cor 3:12), and to the Ephesians that they as the Church are “**built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone** (Eph 2:20).

So if it is Christ Himself and His teaching that is our foundation, then all others are excluded. It is not genealogy, fleshly descent, that unites the Church. It is not obedience to the Law, doing works, following the rules, that makes one a Christian. It is not being under Peter or his supposed successor in Rome that unites the Church. It is not having a pastor who was ordained by a bishop who was ordained by a bishop, and so on all the way back to one of the apostles. The Christian Church is wherever this foundation is clearly and unashamedly believed, taught, and confessed: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Where you hear that, you have Christians. Where you have that you have the true succession of the heart of apostolic doctrine.

Finally, with both Peter and Paul, we see that Christ Jesus has given the keys to the kingdom of heaven to the Church on earth. This is how the Church is built upon the foundation, upon Christ. Here in today’s Gospel, Jesus speaks of this as what He will do. He says to Peter “**I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.**” I quote the King James Version here because it makes clear who Jesus is speaking to. It uses “thee” and “thou.” As much as we might not care for that speech, it makes clear who is addressed. Jesus is speaking here to Peter. He is promising him that He will give to him, that is, to Peter, this authority. And our Lord does that, He

gives this authority to men, when, at the end of each of the Gospels, He sends them out to preach and baptize, to forgive and retain sins, and to administer the Lord's Supper. Not just Peter, but all of the apostles are given this authority.

There is an authority given to men to open and shut access to heaven. To be sure, this belongs to the whole Church. This is what the Church is to do. As those who have been joined to Christ, absolved of their sins, heaven opened to them, there is for every Christian, the ability and charge to speak as a Christian in their daily life, and if nothing else, or if we had to boil it all down, what a Christian spouse, parent, employer, worker, ruler, or citizen has to speak about as a Christian in those stations in life, it is to speak of the forgiveness of sins in Christ alone.

But just as true, indeed, to ensure that there are Christians, that is, people who know and believe this truth and thus can speak God's Word with confidence, our Lord has also set up an office with the specific, set duty to administer these keys, to use this authority in the Church for the good of all Christians. So Peter and Paul both, as we can see in the Book of Acts and in their epistles, administer this authority. They preach and teach. They warn and console. They baptize and administer the Lord's body and blood. Because that is what Jesus charged them to do. And so also, through the centuries, through the generations, our Lord has provided pastors to continue this task. To live in a specific time and place, to know the times and seasons, and also to know the Word of God, to be able to teach, and so faithfully use the keys, the authority entrusted to them, for the good of those in their care.

And because of Jesus' words here in Matthew 16 (among others), you can know then, that not just when Peter and Paul preached and taught and acted according to their charge back then, but also today, in this time and place, it is Christ's own authority that is used for your good on this earth. Peter and Paul have died and gone to their heavenly reward, as have all the apostles. But your Lord has not left you alone. He has provided for His Church the means by which the Church grows, and His Christians are comforted and preserved against all errors and perils, by His own activity.

When Christ's Word and His Sacraments are taught, proclaimed, given and received, it is by His own authority. You don't have to wonder if it's for real or just pretend, if what you hear in this place, if your baptism, if the bread and wine you receive, are all what we claim they are, are actually given by Almighty God in heaven here to you specifically. It does. Christ has given the keys of the kingdom of heaven here on earth, to be exercised here and now for your good, with the confidence and surety of His own Word, His own blood, and His own authority.