

Feast of Saints Peter and Paul, June 29th

Today's Feast of Saints Peter and Paul was celebrated on 29th June as early as the middle of the fourth century when Constantine was erecting a basilica on Vatican hill over the grave of Saint Peter. The martyrdom of Peter and Paul and the heroism of the Roman community during the first State organised persecution of Christians under Emperor Nero, plus the significance of the city in the Roman Empire, accounts for the special place of the Roman Church and its bishop for Christians down through the centuries. In spite of the painful divisions that have torn the Christian community over the centuries, today there are over a thousand million people who claim to belong to the Catholic Church that is in communion with the Roman church and its bishop, the Pope. Many Christians in other churches also recognise the important historical and symbolic place of the Roman church in the communion of Christians. The Preface of today's Mass speaks of: 'Peter, our leader in the faith, and Paul, its fearless preacher. Peter raised up the Church from the faithful flock of Israel. Paul brought God's call to the nations and became the teacher of the world. Each in his chosen way gathered into unity the one family of Christ. Both shared a martyr's death and are praised throughout the world'. Celebrating the life and death of the apostle to the Jews and the apostle to the nations provides a good occasion to reflect on the Catholic dimension of Christianity.

Jesus came to offer love to all and all are invited to belong to the family of his disciples. As Catholics we are committed to this understanding of Christianity. It is meant for all, it is offered to all and it welcomes all who want to belong. 'Catholic' was a name given to Christians very early when it became obvious to outsiders that Christians belonged to all walks of life and welcomed people from all racial and religious groups. The earliest extant example of the word Catholic being used of the Church is from the first years of the Second Century in a letter from Ignatius of Antioch to the community in Smyrna. He makes the simple statement: "Wherever Christ is, there is the Catholic Church"(Ignatius to the Smyrnaens 8).

Cyril, the Patriarch of Jerusalem in the middle of the Fourth Century, was present at the Council which added to the creed the words which have been prayed by the Christian assembly every Sunday since: 'We believe in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church'. In a catechetical instructions which he wrote in c.350AD, Cyril explains the significance of the word 'catholic': 'The Church catholic or universal gets her name from the fact that she is scattered through the whole world from one end of earth to the other, and also because she teaches universally and without omission all the doctrines which are to be made known to humankind ... Then again because she teaches one way of worship to all people, nobles or commoners, learned or simple; finally because she universally cures and heals every sort of sin which is committed by soul and body. Moreover there is in her every kind of virtue in words and deeds and spiritual gifts of every sort ... About the same holy catholic Church Paul writes to Timothy: "That you may know how one ought to live in the household of God which is the Church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth"'(*Catechetical Instructions* 18, 23-25).

It is because we believe this that we hold so tenaciously to the name 'Catholic'. The church invites every culture to bring all that is humanly noble in it to Christ. Consecrated in this way, we could together build a civilisation of love. In 1900, Father Jules Chevalier, the Founder of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, wrote: 'From the heart of Jesus pierced on Calvary, I see a new world coming forth: a great and life-giving world, inspired by love and mercy; a world which the Church must perpetuate on the whole earth' (Jules Chevalier, *The Sacred Heart*, 1900).

As Catholics it is to this dream that we are committed. In one sense the Church has never been catholic in fact, nor will it be till every person is part of the community of Jesus' disciples. Moreover, it is an obvious fact that the Church is broken, and every section of the broken body is

the poorer for the divisions that continue to wound us. But disciples of Jesus cannot allow themselves to forget his words: 'I pray that they may all be one' (John 17:20-21). We call ourselves catholic because we refuse to accept as normal that there are many Christian denominations not living in communion with each other. We are committed to the universal mission of Jesus and our heart will never be at peace while divisions continue.

When we accept to be called Roman Catholic this is not meant as a denominational limit to our catholicity. It is an acknowledgment of the historical fact celebrated in today's feast. Christian communities throughout that empire looked for guidance in their struggle to remain united (see John-Paul II, *That they may be One*, 1995, n.90). We continue this tradition. Pope Paul VI spoke of our catholicity in this way: 'When the name catholic becomes an interior reality, all egoism is overcome, all class struggle develops into full social solidarity, all nationalism is reconciled with the good of the world community, all racism is condemned, and all totalitarianism is unmasked in its inhumanity ... A catholic heart means a heart with universal dimensions: a heart that has overcome its basic narrowness that prevents us listening to our calling towards supreme love. It means a magnanimous heart, an ecumenical heart, a heart capable of embracing the whole world.'

If, then, we experience the privilege of communion with Jesus here in our community, our catholic heart will be compelled to reach out to others who experience the same longing, but who do not know where to search. Each of us has to ask how we are to carry out this universal mission given us by Jesus. We are also reminded to do what we can to create a welcoming community to provide a spiritual home for those searching to respond to God's love. Let us help each other be open to grace so that we become more loving, more forgiving, more gentle, more compassionate, more humble, more transparently pure and welcoming. Let us help each other so that our heart be transformed into the Heart of Jesus, and that the face of our parish community become more and more clearly the face of Jesus. Then those who are hungry and lost and bewildered and lonely will be attracted to the communion of love for which their heart longs.

The aim of all missionary outreach is to draw people to Jesus by welcoming them to the Eucharist where Jesus is truly present and offers himself as nourishment to us all on our journey to God. In our complex city living, it has been recognised that, along with the many other groupings that draw people into community, we need to have a local coming together, where everyone can have a place just because that is where they live. It cannot be too big or it becomes impersonal and people are too shy to enter, or else they feel overwhelmed and do not feel able to contribute.

You remember how Jesus went to Jacob's well and there met the Samaritan woman and offered her a spring of living water that would well up within her. He did not wait for her to come to him. He went to the well that she frequented. Jesus wants his disciples to do the same - to be in the midst of the world at the wells to which people go for nourishment. Where we find them in the many localities covered by our parish, it is there that Jesus wants us to be. The Archbishop wants us to invite people in the midst of ordinary life to form small communities of love which, when the members are ready will come together here to the Eucharist to share a common faith, a common meal and a common journey.

True Catholicism is faithful to the universal scope of God's love and of the Heart of Jesus reaching out, in Paul's words, to 'all that is true, all that is honourable, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is pleasing, all that is commendable, all that is excellent and worthy of praise' (Philippians 4:8) in all cultures and in the mind and heart of every woman and every man created by God. Let us thank God for the gift of our Catholic faith. Our Church, thank God, is committed to be Catholic. It will only really be Catholic when every woman, every man and every child will find a home here at the table of the Lord. Let us make that our prayer and, according to the measure of God's grace, let us do what we can to make that prayer a reality.