

‘Unity with Rome’

Acts 12: Peter saved from prison by the Lord

2Tim 4: *the crown of righteousness ... to all those who have longed for me*

Mt 16: 13–19: *You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church*

This Sunday, one of Westminster’s former auxiliary bishops — Bishop John Sherrington, who until recently had oversight of Newman House, and would be here with us for Mass at least a couple of times a year — is in Rome, at the Pope’s Eucharistic celebration of SS Peter & Paul’s feast day. That’s because he’s recently been installed as the new Archbishop of Liverpool, and new metropolitan Archbishops always receive from the Pope on this feast day the ancient insignia: the white-wool *pallium*, which they wear over their vestments at Mass. Archbishop John is one of about 50 new metropolitan Archbishops who are receiving the *pallium* from Pope Leo this morning at St Peter’s basilica.

The *pallium* — a wide strip of woven white wool with 6 black crosses — has a very ancient history. Church mosaics going right back to the 5th and 6th c. show bishops wearing this liturgical article. They’re made of the wool

from two lambs blessed by the Pope on St Agnes’s day (21st Jan), then reared at *Tre Fontane* Trappist Abbey, whose wool is then spun by nuns from St Cecilia’s convent in Trastevere, Rome — it’s a labour of love that unites these different, prayerful strands of ancient Church life in Rome. From 24th June, feast of St John the Baptist, up to today, 29th, the woven *pallia* are placed to reside in the *confessio*, the niche below the altar of St Peter’s basilica, so that they are as close to the tomb of St Peter as possible.

The reason for all this — the new metropolitan archbishops travelling to Rome for this ‘pallium Mass’ and investiture, and for its always taking place on the feast of SS Peter & Paul — is that it *emphasizes the unity of the whole church*:

- Peter & Paul with each other, in this city where they met their ends as martyrs;
- the world’s Archbishops with the Pope, bishop of the unifying See of Peter;
- the world’s 1.3bn Catholics in unity via their bishops with the Holy Father.

As the Church, we look towards Rome not just nostalgically as a fine and historic city, but precisely because of its deep connections with the faith of the Apostles. We are, as we say every Sunday in the Creed, “*one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church.*” That means that what we live and profess is and must always be, that very same faith that SS Peter & Paul, along with the other apostles and collaborators, taught in the very beginning, as they had received it from Christ. It was no wonder that both Peter & Paul, independently, and after some 30yrs separately completing great journeys and carrying out huge amounts of missionary work across the near- and middle-east, Mediterranean lands, and the south-eastern parts of Europe, ended up in Rome. It was the centre of the greatest empire of its day, stretching from England to Israel, and God’s providence drew them both there towards the end of their ministries, in the 60s of the 1st c. AD. In due course, though in different years (64 & 67AD), under the erratic and cruel emperor Nero, they were each martyred for being the key Christian leaders: Peter

crucified, upside down, apparently, very near where the Vatican City is today; and Paul, beheaded, on the outskirts of modern-day Rome on the road to Ostia. They gave this supreme witness to the Lord Jesus, whose crucifixion and resurrection some 30yrs previously, had changed the world, and redefined human history. But it also made of Rome a city unique in Christian history, its greatest two teachers, Peter & Paul, united in shedding their blood there. This is why our Holy Father — successor of St Peter as Head of the Church on earth — resides there, as close to the site of Peter’s crucifixion and burial as possible. It’s why many Christians go on pilgrimage to Rome, especially in a Holy Year such as this one; and why our bishops are required to go there 5-yearly, to pray at the tombs of the apostles Peter & Paul. It’s why Archbishop John is there, today, receiving the sign of the *pallium* that marks in a physical symbol his communion of faith with Pope Leo.

St Peter and St Paul dominate so much of what we think of as we contemplate the Gospel message of Jesus that they greatly helped deliver to us:

— Peter, ever-present in the Gospels from the very beginning, at the washing of nets at their fishing vessels on Lake Galilee; Paul brought into the picture early after Pentecost and receiving that astonishing experience of the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus.

— Peter, always the spokesman for the Twelve, and appointed by the Lord Himself to be the anchor and rock that holds the Church in unity; Paul whose eloquence, in preaching and writing, won over so many new converts from Jewish & non-Jewish backgrounds, and who left us such a treasure of teaching in his letters (¼ of the pp. of the NT!)

— Peter, impetuous and knowing what it meant to fail and to betray the Lord, but knowing also his forgiveness; Paul, a highly trained Pharisee, but who also knew intimately what it meant to be very wrong, initially, about Jesus.

The Scripture offered us in this festal Mass gives us much ‘to feast on,’ so to speak, given the two saints’ presence in the pages of the NT. St Peter, in the 1st reading (Acts)

experiences that which most of us will never experience — being unjustly locked up and chained in prison. In that dire situation, but as if in possession physically of those “keys of the kingdom,” St Peter is miraculously able to unlock the prison gates, and be released out of the clutches of King Herod (Agrippa I) who had already put St James to death. (This was in about 44AD.) The Lord can do with us what He wants! St Peter went on to have 20 more years of ministry, crucial to the spread of the Gospel! So, we can trust that the Lord will bring about in our lives that which He wishes, for our good and the good of others. St Paul, in the 2nd Reading (2 Tim), is also reflecting on what the Lord has brought about through the difficulties of his life — now, towards the end of His ministry, and possibly also in prison, or at least under house arrest, in Rome: at the necessary moments, the Lord “*rescued [him] from the lion’s mouth [and] from every evil deed.*” He, too, has learnt this radical trust in Jesus that has brought him safe to the end of his days, to the end of what the Lord required of Him: “*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the*

race, I have kept the faith.” What more could any of us pray than this?

Honouring them jointly today reminds us that the Church is all about *unity*, bringing *together*. There can be much legitimate diversity in the Catholic faith, whilst still we profess one and the same Lord, in conformity with His firm teachings. Jesus came to unite the whole of mankind into one Kingdom, one Church, and to provide that unique path of salvation for us. Peter & Paul were so different in temperaments and backgrounds, but the Lord used each of them to start sowing His saving message in those early years. We look to them, in their single-minded determination to live out, daily, and despite the hardships, the mission given to them by the Son of God. As we honour them, we pray for unity and peace for the Church: just the other day Pope Leo confirmed that he will travel to Nicaea for the feast of St Andrew in November, in a joint visit with the (Orthodox) Patriarch of Constantinople ... this expresses also that ongoing desire and dialogue for Christian unity that is a key part of any Pope’s agenda, the

one who is charged to be visibly, for all the rest of us, “Peter, the Rock on which [Jesus] will build [His] Church.” We pray today, on the feast of these two great missionaries, also for the drive in every century including our own to preach the Gospel without fear, as they did, for the salvation of humanity; and we pray that SS Peter & Paul, co-martyrs at the outset of the Roman church, may remind us to value our faith above *all* things, to the very ending of our days.