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Saint Peter and Saint Paul – Apostles and Martyrs in Europe¹

1. Saints Peter and Paul

Two different persons called by our Saviour Jesus Christ to preach the same Gospel of love and salvation. Saint Peter was called Simon before his meeting with Jesus, Who changed his name into Cephas (Peter). He was born in Betsaida of Galilee. His father was called Iona, and his brother Andrew, the first one called by Jesus to be Apostle. Andrew presented Simon to Jesus telling him: *“I have found Messiah”* (John 1, 41). Simon-Peter was married and was a fisherman. This profession taught him to fight the waves of the sea, to work, to enjoy the rich fishing and to assume the failure. He was a dynamic, spontaneous person and full of zeal. One day, he met Jesus of Nazareth, Who changed his life and made him from ordinary fisherman a “fisherman of men”, that is the Apostle, to gather people into the Kingdom of God preached by Saint John the Baptist and then by Jesus, when they said: *“Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand”* (Math. 3,2,4,17).

His Jewish faith was inherited in the family and cultivated into the Synagogue, in a Jewish context with some Hellenistic influence like the one in Galilee, with a mixture of ethnic groups. But Simon Peter was a simple man. He was not a speaker of Greek, that is why later he was helped in his mission by his disciple John Marc, who was his translator from Hebrew into Greek.

Saint Paul was called initially Saul. He was born in Tarsus of Cilicia (today in Turkey), in the Diaspora as a son of some Hebrews deported by Romans. He was a man with an extensive theological culture achieved in Tarsus and in Jerusalem. He was a Roman citizen, that means an international. He was a speaker of Greek and a disciple of the Rabbi Gamaliel, a theologian of the Law of Moses. He was a zealous person. Contemporary with Jesus of Nazareth, he never met Him during His life on earth. Out of a great zeal for the Jewish tradition, he persecuted the new community of the disciples of Jesus of Nazareth. But, while persecuting the Christians, in Syria, near Damascus, he met Jesus the Living One in the Heavens, in an accessible light. Jesus asked him: *“Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”* (Acts 9,4). Then he understood that Jesus of Nazareth is alive and He is the real Messiah. In the same time, he learnt that Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church is inseparable from the Church, His Body. Saul hits the Christians and Christ feels their pain, for their life was His life and His life was their life. Then Saul the Persecutor, converted and baptized becomes Paul the Apostle, the most zealous missionary of Christ and of His Church.

Different as a place of birth and culture or professional formation, Saint Peter and Saint Paul were called to be Apostles also in a different way and received from Christ and from the Church

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different missions: to Saint Peter the preaching of the Gospel among the Jewish people, to Saint Paul the mission among the Gentiles. Saint Peter appears the first in the lists of the Apostles. Saint Paul is the thirteenth among the Apostles! In this plan for the salvation of the world, Christ prefers every human being. Saint Andrew is the first called by Christ, Saint Peter is the first in the lists, Saint John is the beloved disciple. Saint Paul although the last one to be called, becomes the first in the missionary field. With every person and with every nation, Christ has in His love a preferential and unique relation because He gives Himself entirely to every person and every nation that believe and love Him.

2. What Saint Peter and Saint Paul have in common?

The essential and the plenitude. That means the fervent faith in Christ and in the living communion with Him. Saint Peter witnessed the divinity of Jesus Christ: *“You are the Son of the Living God”* (Math. 16,16). Saint Paul witnesses that in Christ *“dwells all the fullness of Godhead bodily”* (Col. 2,9) and the Mystery of the Christian faith is the Mystery of *“God who was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory”* (I Tim. 3,16).

Both of them have a powerful experience of repentance or conversion. Peter denied Christ three times. Then he wept bitterly and loved Christ until his death in martyrdom. Saint Paul persecuted the Church of Christ and then regretted that for all his life, he worked for the Church more than any other.

Saint Peter and Saint Paul have also in common their strong love for Christ and for His Church. The Church is founded on the Rock of the faith, witnessed by Peter, that is the whiteness of the divinity of Jesus Christ (cf. Mat. 16, 13-19). Therefore Peter confesses that not him but Christ is the “Cornerstone” that holds together and unites the Jews and the other nations of the world: *“Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious... Behold, I lay in Zion a chief cornerstone, elect, precious, and he who believes on Him will by no means be put to shame”* (I Peter 2,4). Therefore Saint Peter asks that the faith will be preserved in the unity of the Church against the false prophets (cf. II Peter 2, 1-22).

Saint Paul showing his love toward Christ speaks: *“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? ... For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (Rom. 8,35,38-39). And in another epistle he shows his care for the Churches in his missionary fight: *“Besides the other things, what come upon me daily: my deep concern for all the Churches”* (II Cor. 11, 28).

Saint Apostles Peter and Paul have also in common their martyrdom in Rome and the date was kept in the tradition of the Church to be in 29th of June, 67 A.D., during the persecutions of the Emperor Nero against the Christians. So, they could be called **Apostles for Europe and Martyrs in Europe**.

3. Which were the realities during their mission in Europe of their time?

First, a *pantheist and idolatrous religiosity that confuses the Creator with the creature* (cf. Rom. 2,25) that suppresses the freedom and diminish the dignity of the human person, increasing the forms of spiritual and social slavery.

Secondly, they confronted the *self-sufficiency and the arrogance of the Greek-Roman philosophy*, which could not accept the Cross and the Resurrection of Christ, that means the humble love of the Almighty and the Resurrection of the body from the death, because the fatalism of the death kept all the antique world in a slavery of the spirit: *“and to release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage”* (Heb. 2,15). Therefore the faith in God that is not confused with the changing world, the faith that conquered death brings freedom to the world.

Thirdly, they confronted the *self-sufficiency and the hostility of the political imperial power*. Saint Peter and Saint Paul ask in their epistles that the imperial political power and the administrative and military authorities be respected. More than that they call them servants of the social goodness and prosecutors of the criminals (I Pet. 2, 13-14 and Rom. 13, 1-13). But the Apostles never confused or replaced the spiritual power with the secular one and never confused the Kingdom of God with the Roman Empire, nor the temporary Emperor with the Lord Jesus Christ, the eternal and living One. That is why they witnessed Christ until their death.

Saints Apostles Peter and Paul are for us *teachers of the faith, model missionaries and intercessors for the life and unity of the Church*.

Through their life, deeds and writings, they urge us *to love Christ, His Gospel and His Church*, to work for the healing and salvation of all human persons and people, without difference of race and gender, nation or social status. They are for us *teachers of reconciliation, of forgiveness, of unity and of holiness*. They teach us to pray continuously, to work continuously good deeds, but never count on ourselves more than on the grace of the living God shown in Jesus Christ.

In the Orthodox iconography, Saints Peter and Paul, the first and the last among apostles represent the communion of Israël with all the nations on earth, as well as the link between unity and freedom.

The two “keys” of Saint Peter represent the repentance and forgiveness, the humbleness and love, through whom we enter into the Kingdom of God. And the “Sword” of Saint Apostle Paul represent the power of the spiritual Word that distinguish between the error and truth, through egoism and love, between death and life.

Let us pray to Saints Peter and Paul, these princes of the Apostles, to help us to be fervent missionaries in the Europe of today as they were in the Europe of their time, to be able to tell every Church and nation of Europe: *“Rejoice always in the Lord, and again I say Rejoice!”* (Phil. 4,4).