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Happy Festa!

Michael Sean Winters | Jun. 29, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

If Pentecost is known, properly, as the ?birthday? of the Christian Church, today is the Catholic Church?s ?name day.? Unity in faith is one of the gifts of the Spirit, so Pentecost bespeaks a decidedly ecumenical flavor and agenda, but the Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul is a distinctly Roman day. This is why the Ecumenical Patriarch comes to Rome, or sends a legate, on this day as the Pope sends a legate to Istanbul on the Feast of St. Andrew.

The fact that the feast day is shared by the two greatest apostles tells us something about the nature of the Church. Peter is the rock, the foundation on which the Church is built. Paul is the great missionary, called to bring the Good News to the gentiles. The Catholic Church must always embody both vocations. It must be solid, rock solid, able to withstand the fads and threats that beset every age. It must also constantly be looking beyond itself, bringing the Gospels to the gentiles of our day. And not only to the gentiles, but the Church must bring the Gospel to those parts of our hearts and minds that remain hidden from the light of Christ.

When you go to the Vatican, and walk into St. Peter?s basilica, the art and architecture can be overwhelming. You do not have to be a Catholic or a Christian to appreciate its beauty. Of course, the art and architecture serve a catechetical purpose, as the huge entablature around the nave and dome proclaims in letters several meters high, ?Tu es Petrus et Super Hanc Petram Aedificabo? - Thou art Peter and upon this rock I shall build my church. This basilica was designed to impress and to state a claim.

A Catholic can visit St. Peter?s as a tourist but not only as a tourist. For, this great edifice was built over what is believed to be the earthly remains of Jesus? best friend when he walked upon the earth. Peter was erratic, sometimes dull, failing to grasp the enormity of what was transpiring, as cowardly in his denials as he was impulsive in pulling his sword. But, he was Jesus? best friend. Historians can argue about whether or not Peter was really a ?bishop? or ?the first pope? but no one denies that he was Jesus? best friend and when we consider whether or not a subsequent pope was good or bad, the measuring stick is the same: did he show himself to be a friend of Jesus?

When you walk around the basilica, two things jump out at you that confirm the continuity of today?s Church with that of Peter. Peter came to Rome because it was the center of the empire and, for Catholics, the city still is the center of the world. You see lay people from Asia, seminarians from Africa, bishops from Latin America. Once, I was getting ready to grab my ride to the airport, but I ran into the basilica in the early hours to pay a last visit to the tomb of the apostle. And, down on his hands and knees with a small flashlight, examining the sculptures on the candlesticks in front of the statue of St. Peter was Cardinal Stafford. You never know who you will run into at the basilica! The other thing that jumps out at you is that bronze statue of St. Peter. The foot has been worn down by the kisses of pilgrims. What a beautiful thought, that kisses can, over time, wear down a very strong metal. Peter?s foot should be worn down by kisses, should it not? Perhaps the artist who sculpted that statue would object that his masterpiece has been deformed, but this is no deformity. Cardinal Newman once observed that the saying ?the water is purest closest to the spring? did not apply to Christian doctrine, that in fact, our doctrines become more pure as they are developed and embraced, as they move away from the spring. I think Peter?s statue is more beautiful, more accurate, with its foot worn down by kisses.

Of course, St. Peter?s is also a necropolis and we Catholics like our cemeteries and I do not believe there is anything morbid about it. We are tactile. We eat the Body and drink the Blood of Christ. We anoint with oil. We baptize in water. We like the smell of incense. Going to the tomb of St. Peter, we recognize the very human bond between us today and him of so long ago. We, too, shall be returned unto dust. Standing at the tomb of the apostle, like standing at my mother?s grave yesterday, we feel connected in our humanity with the person whose grave we are visiting.

The Basilica of St. Paul?s Outside the Walls has a different feel, not least because so much of it was destroyed by fire in the mid-19th century and rebuilt. It remains a very beautiful church and the mosaics are extraordinarily beautiful. I admit that the place does not warm my heart as St. Peter?s does, but that is a pretty high bar. Maybe it is that I feel closer to Peter, to his stumbles and foibles, than to the always confident Paul. Nonetheless, in their great dispute ? a dispute that was carried out with respect and charity ? Paul was right to insist that Peter and the other apostles expand their preaching beyond the people of Israel. There would be no Christian Church without Peter, but had there been no Paul, would be still be Celtic pagans?

I was only in Rome on this feast day once ? traveling to Rome in the summertime has never appealed to me as the city is hot and overcrowded with tourists. But, a friend was receiving his pallium and I went. The pallium represents a special bond between new metropolitan archbishops and the Holy Father. The thin vestments are kept in a golden box alongside the tomb of St. Peter until they are taken out and bestowed upon the new archbishops on this day. It is a beautiful, and fairly recent, ceremony: Up until the 20th century, a delegate would bring the pallium to a new archbishop and it would be imposed upon him by another metropolitan or the senior suffragan of the ecclesiastical province. I stick by my bias of avoiding Rome in summertime, but if you get a chance to be there for the imposition of the pallia, take it at least once.

So, Happy Feast to one and all.

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