

**Mass celebrated with the Bishops of England and Wales
The Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul
29 June 2022
Westminster Cathedral**

Today, as we celebrate this great feast, we rejoice in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

It was this gift, given to the first apostles in the upper room, which transformed Peter from fear into great fortitude and directness, as did his release from prison as we heard in the first reading. 'Now I know it is all true' he proclaimed. Yes, earlier at Caesarea Philippi, standing in front of the marble temple erected to mark the claims of the Roman Emperor to be divine, he had spoken the truth of Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God. But now he is truly set free.

The Holy Spirit came to Paul on the road to Damascus and at the hand of Ananias, not forgetting the earlier witness of Stephen. Then he began preaching 'Jesus is the Son of God' (Acts 9).

At this time, as bishops, we are trying prayerfully to absorb and discern the presence of the Holy Spirit in all the voices we have been listening to on this Synodal Pathway to which Pope Francis has called us. We will shortly complete our

own reflections on all we have received. There are many different voices, and many different gifts of the Holy Spirit.

So too Peter and Paul are very different.

Peter, a steadfast fisherman, used to boats and market places, capable of obstinacy and hot-headedness. He followed the Lord in stolid faithfulness, never making a fuss about himself, yet open to challenge and change, and immensely brave.

Paul, a real high-flyer, academically talented, imaginative, full of ideas and re-interpretations and so able with those quick-silver responses to difficult situations. As we heard in the second reading, he was always ready to defend and justify himself and the mission he had been given.

These voices still find clear resonance in our Church today. The range is similar: quiet voices that have emerged only with much encouragement and prayerful listening, in contrast to voices that did not hesitate for a moment in making their views known. So it is good to remember that early teaching of Peter: 'Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to God' (Acts 10:34). And let's not forget that it is Peter, described as

‘uneducated and common’ (Acts 4:13), who is chosen to be the Rock of our faith.

As we bishops ponder all the responses we have received – over 700 pages – we are most open to the key characteristics of the work of the Holy Spirit. And there is no doubt that the first and essential gift of the Spirit is a closeness to Christ, a holiness of life. It is the Spirit who binds us to him, who alone is our way, truth and life. And the holy way of life is marked by a profound peace, by a willing repentance and by great fervour for the Lord. This comes across in really good measure in so many of the voices to which we are attending. There is here a fine measure of compassion and shared pain, especially for those who experience themselves, or are seen by others, to be ‘outside’ or excluded. In addition, there is the great concern for the urgent care of our created world.

These responses give rise to a most important challenge: that as a church we learn how to accompany each other, especially through those difficult times and places. As Pope Francis said at the beginning of his years of service as Pope:

‘The Church will have to initiate everyone – priests, religious, laity – into this “art of accompaniment”, which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (cf Exodus 3:5). The pace of this accompaniment

must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze, which also heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life' (Evangelii Gaudium 169).

Such accompaniment is a challenge for every parish. Who are those who feel that they do not belong, or fear they may not be made welcome? Can we reach out and say, 'No, we are close'?

It is a challenge for every organisation to look at itself and ask how easy is it for those who are different to join in our activities.

It is a question for each one of us: do we try to be close to those we meet regularly, with whom we might work or live, simply making it clear that no matter what happens we will not turn away, not in judgement, nor in disdain, nor in fear?

This requires a strength of purpose, certainly. But more than that it requires our closeness to our Blessed Lord, who not only invites us to live in this way, after his own example, but asks us to see himself in the other person, in every other person, polished or disfigured, erudite or confused, buoyant or depressed. Only in knowing his acceptance of each of us, with all our faults and failings, will

we understand that he accepts everyone else too and that we also must learn to do so.

Closeness to Christ is our first and last criterion. Without that we can look like no more than a debating society, interesting – perhaps – but closed-in. But our faith is so much more than ideas and processes. It is a living, life-changing relationship with and in the mystery of God. St John Henry Newman expresses this so eloquently in his confessional hymn which we will sing shortly. It begins: ‘Firmly I believe and truly, God is three and God is one, and I next acknowledge duly manhood taken by the Son.’ He then goes on to proclaim, most tellingly: ‘And I hold in veneration, for the love of him alone, Holy Church as his creation and her teachings as his own.’ That, too, is part of our love of the Lord. That too is the fruit of the Holy Spirit for which we search and for which we pray.

Today’s Feast, and this Synodal Pathway on which we have embarked, can renew our purpose and our life. Its keywords are ‘participation, communion and mission’, and Christ is at the centre of all three. We seek participation in the life of God in him, through the Holy Spirit; we find communion of life with him in the Church; and are called by him to a willing share in his mission in the world.

There is, then, a radical appeal to be heard at this moment. It is clear. Each of us can make this appeal, gently, respectfully, to those we know. It is simple:

Come, come to the Lord. In him, you will find your heart's desire, your refuge and your strength. Come with me, do not be afraid for he will tell you that your face is beautiful and your voice is sweet (cf Song of Songs 2:14).

And let us not forget that just as he rescued Peter while asleep, the Lord will pour gifts on all his beloved while they slumber (Psalm 127).

Indeed, as we strive to be 'the Church we wish to be', we remember the words of St Augustine: 'You will be taught much better by the one who speaks to you even when I am not here; the one about whom you think loving thoughts; the one whom you have taken into your hearts and whose temple you have become.'

Praised be Jesus Christ. Amen.

H.E. Cardinal Vincent Nichols
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