

## Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul

June 19, 2008

A trajectory is technically defined as a curve on a vertical plane traced by an object moving from one point to another.” If we throw a ball, or fire bullets or artillery, there is a path they follow until they reach the place where they will land. Analogously, our lives may also be said to be on a particular “trajectory.” Most people seem to heading in a particular direction in life, seem to be moving towards life’s targets down a particular path. From the time they are young, some people seem to be on the “college trajectory.” Some seem to be on the “military trajectory.” Some seem to be destined to become spouses, fathers, mothers; everything in their makeup, their likes and dislikes, their intellects, their abilities, their inclinations, seem to be carrying them on a definite path towards a particular target. But life is rarely predictable, and the surprises and detours are more than a few. Yes, many continue on their trajectories and indeed go the way everybody thought they would go; but in many lives the unexpected event, the unforeseen encounter, the unbelievably good offer surprisingly appears; and life’s trajectory is suddenly, radically, and profoundly changed.

Thousands of years ago, on the other side of the planet, was a fisherman who was known as Simon. His trajectory seemed pretty sown up: a simple man, who made his living catching fish. Wife at home, mother-in-law close by; who knows what other vestiges of normalcy defined his life. He wasn’t known as any sort of a great speaker; wasn’t known for his keen intellect, and such appeared to be the path his life would continue to take. Until one day, when he encountered this man known as Jesus; and what a different path his life suddenly took. We don’t know the exact time line, how long he kept his routine of fishing and providing while still listening to and absorbing this man Jesus’ intriguing message about this kingdom of his; but we know that one day, he was invited to not just listen, but to follow; leave behind his nets, his friends, his home; throw the dice, so to speak, on this new trajectory. Go from being a humble fisherman whom nobody outside of his circle of relatives and friends had ever heard of, to being one of the most famous figures who ever lived, and who would be given a name which would not only not be dropped from the lips of man but which would be invoked by others virtually every day from that moment on.

Living at the same time as Simon Peter was a man named Saul; and his life, too, seemed to be following a particular curve. He was deep into his faith as a Pharisaical Jew, and he

had no tolerance for his fellow “believers” who were being taken in first by this man Jesus Christ, and then by his followers after Jesus was crucified. Oh, they still made it to the synagogue on the Sabbath, still had a place for the Temple in their lives, but they also met on the first day of the week for their own services, and it was all about this Jesus Christ and his sacrifice, and they spoke of his kingdom still to come and a reign which had already begun. And Saul, learned and fiery and impassioned, was only too willing to join in the movement to squash this sect from taking hold, with their claim that Jesus is the Son of God. And he stood at the side and gathered cloaks even as the others stoned some of the believers; and with his impassioned beliefs and unparalleled talent for writing persuasive arguments, he was sure to be instrumental in putting this movement down. Until he, too, encountered Jesus; encountered Jesus after Jesus’ death: heard his voice, was blinded by his light. And Jesus asked him, gently and lovingly, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Saul didn’t think that he was persecuting Jesus, Jesus was dead; he would probably own up to a persecution of Jesus’ followers but in one literally blinding moment, he learned that it was not just any group of people he had been attacking, it was Jesus, in his followers; his Mystical Body. And Saul would become known as Paul, and would go forward from that point being the persecuted, rather than the persecutor; and he would take those talents of his and use them to spread this faith, rather than extinguish it.

And these two great saints are celebrated together on the Church calendar; not because they were inseparable friends, although their paths certainly did cross and they certainly did know each other. But they are celebrated together because of the inseparable paths which they took in the infant years of the Catholic Church. Peter: the apostle to the Jews, trying to convince his fellow believers that Jesus was the answer to every prophecy, to every promise made to them by God. Paul, apostle to the Gentiles, sent to preach to and gather in all those who thought that they were not welcomed into the life of faith. Peter, the head of the Apostles, the first Pope; Paul, the Prince of the Apostles, who received a special mandate from the Lord. Peter, the symbol of the Tradition of the Church, symbol of the Truths which would be safeguarded and handed on from generation to generation of the faithful; Paul, the preacher who explained these truths to people who were totally unfamiliar with many of their concepts. Peter, symbol of unity; Paul, symbol of evangelization. Celebrated together, because together especially they embody the mission of the Church: adherence to the truth Christ made known, and sharing that truth with the rest of the world.

In each of our lives, too, should be some moment when faith in Christ Jesus became our defining moment. For me, it was a simple advertisement for an inquiry class into the Catholic faith, before which I had never thought of becoming Catholic; after which, I would never be any thing but. We have moments of realization, that the faith we were taught as children is speaking the truth; moments when the beauty of the liturgy suddenly strikes us and we crave it, long for it; moments of decision, when we commit ourselves to some change in our lives because we know that we've gotten off the path; moments of appreciation, when we feel the joy of all we've been given. And we know that we're not on the path that the world considers normal, and Lord help us if we are; we are on an extraordinary path paved with charity, service, self-denial and self-sacrifice. Like Saints Peter and Paul, we know we're heading in the right direction when we forsake the way of materialism and self-indulgence, and see instead that we've embraced the way of the cross.

This is a particularly special Solemnity in the Church; each year, the Church asks for special prayers for the successor of Saint Peter, now Pope Benedict the 16<sup>th</sup>, and takes up the special Peter's Pence collection to assist him in the works of his office; and this year, when we've been blessed in our nation by Pope Benedict's apostolic visit, our opportunity to pray for him and to support him falls right on the Solemnity itself. And also this year, we begin a special jubilee year in honor of the 2,000 year anniversary of the birth of Saint Paul, and during the year the Church will offer us special graces and blessings in connection with observances honoring Saint Paul, and especially encourage us to follow his example of zeal and of evangelization. Saints Peter and Paul changed the paths which they were on, and converged on this one path which leads to the kingdom. There is no greater way to honor them, along with the prayers of this Mass, than to adhere to the teachings of the office of Saint Peter, and to zealously practice and promote the faith of Saint Paul. We may never achieve their fame, and probably won't; it's hard to envision having anywhere near the influence on as many people as did they; and we will likely not meet the martyrdom met by them. But their path can certainly be our path, their trajectory our trajectory; if like them, we set as our target in life and especially at life's end, the kingdom of heaven; access to which comes only through Christ, the Savior who calls us all to the kingdom, just as he very explicitly once called Saints Peter and Paul.