

Fr. O'Connor's Homily
The Solemnity of the Apostles Saints Peter and Paul
29 June 2025

Acts 12: 1-11
2 Timothy 4: 6-8, 17-18
Matthew 16: 13-19

I wonder if you played church when you were little. Maybe some of our younger folks still do. We used to pin dishtowels together to make vestments. We would squish bread down as flat as we could to make hosts. Or, if we were really lucky, we had some Necco wafers on hand. We would use grape Kool-Aid. Then one of us – namely myself – would be the priest. And others would be servers and readers and ushers and choir.

Some children were doing this one day and then grew tired of it. And one of the children said, “Let’s not play church anymore. Let’s play Jesus.”

And so one of the boys took the part of Jesus and they began to act out some of the scenes from the Gospels.

At first, the boy playing the part of Jesus thought that it was great to be chosen. But then the other children started hitting him and calling him names. They tied him to a tree and pretended to crucify him. Then the boy playing Jesus had had enough. He said to the others, “Let’s stop playing Jesus. Let’s go back to playing church again.”

The shoe fits pretty tightly, doesn’t it? “Let’s stop playing Jesus. Let’s go back to playing church again.” The Church is the Body of Christ and His Holy Word and His Sacraments are Jesus acting in our world. Whenever members of the Church lose sight of who we really are, we make it hard for people to see Jesus among us.

We have two saints whose feast we keep today: Saint Peter and Saint Paul. They loved Jesus and loved His Church. And they help us to see how we, as members of the Church, are to proclaim Jesus and His Gospel to our world, right where we are.

Saint Peter and Saint Paul – their names roll off our tongues in a perfect pairing. Twin boys are often named Peter and Paul. We have two parishes in our diocese called Saints Peter and Paul, one in Doylestown and the other in Garfield Heights. These saints both died as martyrs in Rome – Saint Peter about the year 64 and Saint Paul about the year 67 – and so we wear red vestments today.

Saint Peter was crucified upside down because he did not think that he was worthy to die in the same way that Jesus died. Saint Paul was beheaded with a sword, rather than being crucified, because he was a Roman citizen. Peter and Paul both loved Jesus, and they both loved His Church – and they proclaimed Jesus and His Gospel to the Jews and to the Gentiles, in their living and in their dying.

Saint Peter was a fisherman by trade and not well-educated. Yet it was on Peter that Jesus founded His Church. Peter became the first pope – and today Pope Leo is his 266th successor.

Peter was one of those very human characters in the Gospels, one who was often shooting off his mouth and putting his foot in it. I like Saint Peter for that. I can find myself in him.

We also know that Peter really loved Jesus. At the Last Supper, Peter pledged his loyalty to Jesus by saying: “Even if I have to die with you, I will not deny you” [cfr. Mark 14: 29-31].

A few hours later, Peter denies knowing Jesus three times. “Then a second cock crow was heard and Peter recalled the prediction that Jesus had made to him (at the Last Supper), ‘Before the cock crows twice you will deny me three times.’ Peter broke down and began to cry” [cfr. Mark 14: 66-72].

After Jesus’ resurrection, Jesus asks Peter three times, “Do you love me?” Peter has the opportunity to amend his triple denial with his triple affirmation, “Lord, you know everything. You know well that I love you.” Then Jesus gives Peter a job to do: “Feed my lambs.” “Tend my sheep.” “Feed my sheep” [cfr. John 21: 15-17]. And Peter assumes his role as the first Pope, the Vicar of Christ on earth.

There is an old theological axiom that is attributed to Saint Anselm: “Ubi Petrus, ibi ecclesia. Ubi ecclesia, ibi Christus.” Which means, “Where Peter is, there is the Church. And where the Church is, there is Christ.”

This saying underscores our Catholic understanding of the Church as the Body of Christ, with the Pope as its visible head. And through the Church, with His Holy Word and with His Sacraments, individuals encounter Jesus Christ and His grace.

Saint Paul was a very well-educated Jewish man who was also very righteous or, maybe we should more accurately say, very self-righteous. He began persecuting the new Christians with a vengeance. Whatever Paul did, he did he did to the maximum. You remember that scene where he was on his way to arrest new Christians and he gets knocked to the ground and hears

a voice say, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” He answers, “Who are you, sir?” “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting” [cfr. Acts of the Apostles 9: 1-22 and 22: 3-16].

Now Saul – later Saint Paul – never met Jesus face to face. That voice could have asked, “Why are you persecuting my Church?” Or, “Why are you persecuting my people?” But the voice of Jesus asked instead, “Why do you persecute me?” That statement follows from the theological truth: “Where Peter is, there is the Church. And where the Church is, there is Christ.” In other words, “The Church is Christ and Christ is the Church.”

We are not simply a group of people who believe in Jesus. We are members of His Body, the Church. He lives in us and we live in Him.

To “play Church” and to “play Jesus” are not enough. We need to fully live our faith within the Church family and, in so doing, we are graced to live in Jesus Christ, and He in us. And to proclaim Jesus and His Gospel to the world.

“Ubi Petrus, ibi ecclesia. Ubi ecclesia, ibi Christus” – “Where Peter is, there is the Church. And where the Church is, there is Christ.”

And Jesus Christ is our pathway to heaven.