

The Feast of the Holy Apostles Peter & Paul



"Today a joyous feast has beamed forth to all nations: the most precious memory of the most wise and major Apostles Peter and Paul. " (Stichera at the Aposticha of the Vespers service of the Feast)

We owe to the Holy Apostles the priceless treasure of the Christian faith. They handed Christ's teachings down to us. From them, we received the Holy Gospel and the letters of the Apostles. They laid a firm foundation for the Church of Christ.

The servant of God Metropolitan Andrew Sheptytsky speaks beautifully of the significance that the holy Apostles have for us; he says: "The Apostles in the full sense of the word are our parents in the holy faith. Through their hands, God gave to mankind and to every nation within Christ's Church all that belongs to the divine apostolic tradition. In our ascetical life and our sermons we must not forget, therefore, that we have received everything from their hands. All that we have, we owe to their apostolic labors and their prayers... St. Paul, the Apostle, claims first place, for in his letters he has given to the Church a rich revelation of God, and a wealth of divine teachings... The Liturgical Year gives the Apostle St. Peter first place, assigning to him two days in the year, namely, January 16th — the feast of St. Peter in Chains and June 29." (On the Veneration of Saints, 1941)

On the 29th of June our Eastern Church celebrates with great solemnity the feast, which in our liturgical books is called: "The Holy Illustrious and Ever-praised Major Apostles, Peter and Paul." Both Apostles are distinguished for their character, their zealous apostolic labors and their great cult in holy Church.

The Apostle St. Peter

Jesus Christ, having great plans for St. Peter at the beginning of his calling, changed the name Simon to the symbolic name of Peter-Cephas, which means rock, for he was to be the rock that will form the foundation of his Church. St. Peter was closely associated with Christ during his public life: He witnessed the glory of Christ on Mt. Tabor; in the name of all the Apostles, he professed the divinity of Christ; he was sent with St. John to prepare the Paschal Supper; He witnessed Christ's agony in the Garden of Olives; the temple tax was paid by Christ for Himself and for Peter.

After the Ascension of Christ, St. Peter became the head of the Apostles and the leader of the first Christian community in Jerusalem. Under his leadership, a new Apostle was elected to take the place of Judas. Peter convoked the first church Council in Jerusalem. St. John Chrysostom calls Peter "the firstborn lamb from the flock of the Good Shepherd."

The love of Christ was the chief motive of Peter's apostolic activity, labors and sacrifices. That love finally led him to suffer and die for the sake of his beloved Teacher. A pious tradition relates that he considered himself unworthy to die on the cross as Christ did, and therefore asked to be crucified upside down. This tradition is confirmed by Bishop Eusebius (f340) in his History of the Church and by St. John Chrysostom in a sermon on the Apostles SS. Peter and Paul, in which he says: "Rejoice, Peter, who died on the cross head downward." St. Peter died in Rome during the reign of Emperor Nero (54-68), between the years 64 and 67 A.D.; St. John Chrysostom following tradition gives June 29 as the day of his death.

St. Paul the Apostle

St. Paul did not belong to the original group of the twelve apostles, but through his apostolic labors, his dedication, his superhuman sacrifices, and his sufferings in the service of Christ, he received the title, along with Peter, of the First Apostle. He is the only one of the Apostles who was highly educated and was by birth a Roman citizen. While Paul was on his way to Damascus, Christ Himself converted him in a miraculous manner and called him to be an Apostle. After his conversion from being a persecutor of Christians, he became, in heart and soul, a zealous and courageous apostle of Christ. "Paul was a wolf," says St. Chrysostom, "But he became a lamb. He was a thorn, but he became a fruitful vine. From an enemy, he became a friend; from a weed, he became wholesome bread... The blasphemer became a theologian; the persecutor, a herald of good news; the tormentor — a leader; the traitor — a fellow-champion." (On the Holy Twelve Apostles)

In his apostolic work, St. Paul distinguished himself as a man of uncompromising character, remarkable strength of will and fervent spirit. For many years, he fearlessly preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ day and night. His unlimited love for Christ knew no obstacles, recognized no difficulties, and placed no limit to sacrifice. His love impelled him to undertake great missionary journeys and to establish new Churches; he was always ready to suffer and die for Christ.

The apostle of the Gentiles was not only an excellent preacher and a good organizer, but also an eminent theologian and writer. From him we have fourteen letters addressed to various Churches or persons in which he clearly expounds the teachings of Christ. St. Paul gave up his life for Christ. According to tradition, he died by the sword in Rome on June 29, 65 or 67 A.D.

The Cult of Saints Peter and Paul

Because of the great significance of these Apostles for holy Church, their cult began from the very moment of their death. Their tombs in Rome were well known and all Christians revered them. St. Jerome (f420) wrote: "When I was still a young man studying in Rome, I would go with my companions to the tombs of the Apostles and Martyrs." In the fourth century, their cult became universal in both the Eastern and the Western Churches. In Constantinople, Constantine the Great (f337) built a magnificent church in honor of the Twelve Apostles; he himself was later buried there.

The oldest church calendars already had the feast of these Apostles. Originally, not all the Churches observed their memory at the same time. The Calendar of Furius Philocalus, from the middle of the fourth century, has the commemoration of Peter and Paul on the 29th of June. The Syriac Calendar of the year 411, on the day of the 28th of December notes: "Peter and Paul, the Major Apostles." The Georgian Menology also places their feast on the 28th of December. The Calendar of Polemius Silvius (f455), Bishop of the city of Sitten in northern Italy, gives February 22, as the day of the death of Peter and Paul. The Antiochian menology of the fourth century places the feast of St. Peter on June 28 and that of St. Paul on June 29. The Nestorians celebrate the memory of both Apostles on the second Friday after the feast of the Theophany. We learn from a sermon of St. Sophronius of Jerusalem on SS. Peter and Paul that the fourth day after the Nativity of Christ in Jerusalem was dedicated to the two Apostles. Their feast in Rome in the fifth century, according to the testimony of Pope Leo I (f461), even had an eighth day post-feast.

Such distinguished Fathers of the Church as St. John Chrysostom, St. Augustine, St. Ambrose and others left us many beautiful sermons in honor of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul. St. John Chrysostom composed the largest number of sermons given in their honor. It may be appropriate to give a few excerpts here. "Rome has two illustrious eyes," he says, "they are the bodies of these Apostles (Peter and Paul). The brightness of the sky is due not so much to the

sun diffusing its rays, as to these two lights of the city of Rome that illumine the ends of the universe with their radiance." (Works, Vol. 9, p. 856) "O blessed duo," he says in another sermon, "who have faithfully caught souls all over the world! Peter — the beginning of the true faith, the greatest high priest of the Church, the head of Christians, a treasure of heavenly powers, the apostle upon whom Christ Himself bestowed honor. Paul — the great Preacher of truth, the glory of the universe, a heavenly man and an earthly angel, splendor of the Church; great eagle that soared to heaven, lyre of the Holy Spirit... Paul and Peter — lights of the Church, who daily illumine the faithful; treasuries of the Holy Spirit; enlighteners of the universe; vessels of grace; interpreters of the Holy Trinity; expounders of the divine word... pillars of the Church, great lamps of the universe." (Works, Vol. 8, pp. 615-616)

On the feast of St. Peter and St. Paul, St. Ambrose taught: "This day, brothers, is well known to us and to the whole world, for today is the commemoration of St. Peter and St. Paul. Their feast cannot be confined to one part of the world." St. Augustine, in one of his sermons in their honor, says: "Although we know from tradition that they did not die at the same time, nevertheless, we honor the memory of both on the same day, since St. Paul died a year later on the same day on which Peter was freed from the bonds of the body and was transferred to the world of the angels."

Saints Andrew of Crete, John Damascene, Cosmas of Maiuma and others composed the service for this feast on the basis of the sermons of St. John Chrysostom. The chief theme of the services for the feast of Peter and Paul consists of their significance for the Church of Christ, their zeal, their dedication, and sacrifice. In the aposticha of Small Vespers we read: "O Peter, foundation of the Apostles, rock of Christian faith, head of the Christians... O Paul, preacher of the gentiles, protector of Christians, lamp of the universe, great voice of Christ, the living God... O Peter, supreme disciple; Paul, the ideal of the Apostles." The stichera of the Great Vespers service extols them with these praises: "Terrible swords of the spirit, splendid ornaments of Rome, nourishers of the whole universe; spiritual tablets of the New Testament written by God... founders of the Church, true pillars, foundation and trumpets of the divine teachings of Christ, sharer in his sufferings... O Peter, rock and foundation of faith, and Paul, chosen vessel..."

At the sticheras of the Praises in the Matins service, holy Church calls upon all the faithful to glorify the Major Apostles and to take joyful part in their feast: "The solemn feast of the two Apostles has arrived, bringing salvation to all. Therefore, let us spiritually clap our hands and say to them: "Rejoice, O lights to those who are in darkness, O bright rays of the spiritual Sun. Rejoice, Peter and Paul, immovable foundation of divine teachings, friends of Christ, most precious vessels, come invisibly among us and impart supernatural gifts to those who celebrate your feast." On June 30th, the day following the feast of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, the Eastern Church celebrates the memory of all the Apostles of Christ. In a sermon for this day, St. John Chrysostom praises the holy Apostles in these words: "You — are the unshakeable pillars of the true faith, the glory of the Church, the scepters of the kingdom... Here Peter teaches Rome; there, Paul preaches to the world; Andrew instructs the wise men of Hellas; Simon leads the barbarians to God; Thomas makes the Ethiopians white through baptism; Judea venerates the altar of James; Alexandria falls to the throne of Mark; Luke and Matthew write the Gospels; John, the Revealer of mysteries, in death as in life, has Ephesus under his protection; Bartholomew teaches the Lycaonians moderation. Philip, by a miracle saves Hierapolis. All unceasingly manifest everywhere good things for all. Their very dust, even in their graves, is immortal. Now they are servants, but later they shall sit as judges of the world." (Work, Vol. 8, p. 619)

A Byzantine Rite Liturgical Year 1992, Toronto, Julian J. Katrij, OSBM,
translated by Fr. Demetrius E. Wysochansky, OSBM