

‘Their proclamation has gone out into all the earth...’ The Feast of the Glorious Leaders of the Apostles, Peter and Paul

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As the Church comes to the end of her long Apostles’ Fast, she approaches a most unique Feast in her liturgical life: the Feast of the All-Praised and All-Glorious Leaders of the Holy Apostles, Sts Peter and Paul. Amongst the great multitude of saints that sing from heaven to the glory of God, these two Apostles stand in a unique and incomparable place. This place is marked out by the splendour of the phrases used to cry out to them in the divine services:

‘With what wreaths of praise shall we crown Peter and Paul?’¹

‘...you were an invincible team for the Trinity.’²

‘Let us praise Peter and Paul, the two great stars of the Church; they shine brighter than the sun in the sky of faith.’³

The fast that has led us to this divine celebration is one of special intensity; and in a year such as the present, when the Apostles’ Fast is nearly the length of Great Lent itself, we are faced with the full emphasis the Holy Church puts upon this unique commemoration. The Church employs the fasts as periods and tools of preparation, calling us out of the sadly ‘normal’ state of our day-to-day lives, towards a life that is fully oriented around the celebration of, and participation in, true holiness. Our diets are restrained, our social activities curbed, our life of prayer and divine worship augmented, our attentiveness to almsgiving increased—all so that, through the grace of God who declared that ‘the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to those who take it by force’ (cf. Matthew 11.12), we may attain unto a real celebration of the sacred and life-giving Feasts of the Church.

The Feasts are life-giving, because they form the context, the ‘rhythm’, into which our participation in the divine Mysteries is set. There is no celebration of the Divine Liturgy which is not, in some sense, a clear participation in the Feast of Holy Pascha; for in each participation in the Mystery of Communion, we are united to the true Body and Blood of the risen Lord, who has defeated death and now gives us true and abiding life. There is no celebration of the Divine Liturgy which is not in some sense a participation in the Feast of the Nativity of Christ, for we receive bodily Him who took a body, the whole of human nature, for our sakes. There is no celebration of the Divine Liturgy that is not in some sense a participation in the feast of the Annunciation to the Theotokos, for that which was born of her is the same Christ in whom we commune at the Holy Chalice.

¹ From the first sticheron on ‘Lord, I have cried...’, Tone 2, by Andrew Pyrrhus.

² From the sticheron in Tone 3 at the Lity, by John the Monk.

³ From the third sticheron at the Aposticha of Vespers, Tone 1.

The Feasts orient our lives around the sacred Mysteries, for they provide the very context of life, of the history of salvation in which we are called through Holy Baptism to be participants, in which we are partakers of those sacred realities which give us life.

And so it is with our present Feast. Indeed, the centrality of this Feast of Sts Peter and Paul to our Orthodox lives is so significant, that it is one of only four in the year that is preceded not by a single day or short period of fasting, but by a whole season. Only the Feasts of Holy Pascha, of the Nativity According to the Flesh of Jesus Christ and of the Dormition of the Most-Holy Mother of God are similarly preceded.

The Christian believer then, like a child who turns to its mother, must turn to his mother, the Church, and ask the needful question: ‘Why?’ Why is it that this Feast, commemorating two notable and glorious apostolic ministers of the Lord, is given such significance and centrality to our lives as Christian people?

The answer is bound up in our witnessing the exemplary lives of these sacred and divine servants of God. As the first sticheron at the Great Vespers of their Feast hymns:

*With what wreaths of praise shall we crown Peter and Paul?
Separated in body, they were united by the Spirit;
They rank first among preachers:
One was the leader of the Apostles,
While the other laboured more than them all.
Truly, Christ our God, Who has great mercy,
Has adorned them with the crowns of immortal glory.⁴*

These ministers and leaders of the Church of Christ were joined in a common aim and work: the carrying forth of the Light of Truth to all the world. Between them were gifts of apostolic grace in its many forms: their preaching, which set forth the Word of God with clarity, precision, and pastoral power; their leadership, by which they organised and tended the flock and hierarchy of Christ’s Church; and their labours, by which they undertook the conversion of the human heart—the heart of each person they encountered—just as Christ had touched and converted their own hearts.

Their witness was borne of power, but that power was itself borne of love. In the case of St Peter, it was a love that had been tried, and in his weakness he had been found wanting; and yet Christ Himself, in His man-befriending love for His creature, had repaired and healed that which had been broken.

*Three times Christ asked Peter: ‘Dost thou love me?’
In this way He reversed the threefold denial of Himself.⁵
Henceforth Simon was to lead those who had witnessed God’s mysteries.
He cried out to the Lord:
‘Thou knowest all things; Thou knowest that I love Thee!’*

⁴ First sticheron on ‘Lord, I have cried...’, Tone 2.

⁵ Cf. Mark 14.66-72.

*Feed my sheep, tend my chosen ones!’ the Saviour said.
Feed my lambs, whose salvation I bought with My own blood!’
O blessed Apostle, pray that He may grant us great mercy!’*

It was because the Lord had called him back to the love of Himself, that Simon Peter was to become the one ‘to lead those who had witnessed God’s mysteries’. In the same way, when the holy Apostle Paul encountered the risen Lord in a vision on his way to Damascus, it was the overwhelming love of the Lord, pained at the warfare Saul then meted out against Him, that converted the aggressive heart of the persecutor into the loving heart of the Apostle.

Yet, the testimony of these saints was not made perfect solely in their receipt of God’s love, which He grants to the whole world, nor in their inward response alone. It was made perfect in the transformation this love brought about in their lives. Infused by the divine Grace of the Holy Spirit, the love they had received from the Lord was poured out, through them, upon the whole world; and they made of their lives offerings, that the whole of their being might be employed to ‘the furtherance in all good things’ of the children of God.

Through them, Christ Himself spoke, and led, and taught, and converted the hearts of the whole world. What the Church sees in her divine Fathers, Sts Peter and Paul, is the true conversion of the human person: men who from fishers and scholars became true evangelical preachers and missionaries. Men who had once caught fish and written scholarly tomes on the Law, who now were become fishers of men and true initiates of the divine Mysteries. So the Church cries out to them during the Lity as champions of the true Israel, the Church:

*Citizens of heavenly Jerusalem:
The rock of faith (St Peter) and the orator of the Church of Christ (St Paul):
You were an invincible team for the Trinity.
You have caught the whole world in your net;
You have endured the contest of suffering.
Today you depart this world for the throne of God:
As you stand before Him with boldness,
Intercede that our souls may be saved!’*

‘You have caught the whole world in your net.’ In such a way do the divine services connect the mission of Sts Peter and Paul to the receipt of the Holy Spirit, where this same image forms part of the Festal Troparion of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit gave these men power, and that power, as the Psalmist sang and as we now proclaim at the prokeimenon of the Divine Liturgy, ‘has gone out into all the earth, and their words to the ends of the universe’ (Psalm 18[19].4).⁸

The Feast of the Glorious Apostles, Peter and Paul, is central to the life of the Christian, because in it he sees a perfect icon of human life transformed by God, and through that

⁶ Doxasticon on ‘Lord, I have cried...’, Tone 4, by John the Monk.

⁷ Sticheron at the Lity, Tone 3, by John the Monk.

⁸ Taken as the prokeimenon for the Divine Liturgy of the Feast.

transformation, transfiguring all the universe. We are, in our sinful condition, marred by a sadly diminished vision of creation. We are taught by the world that our place is insignificant, our role minimal. We are but one organism in a sea of organisms, all essentially going about the same functions of a debased vision of 'life'. And yet the Church reveals the true dignity of the human creature: alone among all of creation, he stands as the image of God, called toward His likeness. Alone among all of creation, he is called to be priest to the cosmos, to sanctify and transfigure the world in which he resides. Alone among all of creation, He has dwelling within him the Most Holy Spirit, who illumines the universe. The Feast of Sts Peter and Paul is our constant reminder that this creature can be called out of its sin—would it only repent, only cling to the grace poured out by the Holy Trinity!—and become a beacon for all the world.

The exultation poured out upon these two men, is a calling to each and every Orthodox Christian.

*With what spiritual songs shall we praise Peter and Paul?
They have silenced the sharp tongues of the godless.
They are awesome swords of the Spirit.
They are the adornment of Rome;
They have nourished the whole world with the Word of God.
They are the living tablets of the New Testament written by the hand of
God.
Christ, Who has great and rich mercy, has exalted them in Sion.⁹*

If today the Christian lives, not as a 'silencer of the sharp tongues of the godless', not as an 'awesome sword of the Spirit', not as an adornment of his city or the 'living tablet' of God's love, then the present Feast is a reminder and a charge: this life, lived in such a way, is not enough! God has not called His creature out of darkness into nothingness; He has called humanity into *life*, into the full Life He offers by His Body and Blood. The human heart can be transfigured, changed—made wholly radiant. And then, as we the faithful see in the image of St Peter and St Paul, it can change the world around it.

The Feast of Sts Peter and Paul is fundamentally a missionary Feast. In it we see the calling of the Christian, not towards 'missionary work' in the shallow sense of simply spreading messages and passing out literature, but in the deep, abiding sense of being transformed by the Holy Trinity, and in that transformation drawing up to Christ the whole of the fallen world.

We see today the power of that mission. These two men, sanctified by God's grace, continue to convert the nations, and our own hearts. That 'net' which they cast, has caught us as well. And the whole Church is the beacon of this same life-creating grace. Our Church has always been a 'missionary' Church in precisely this: she changes the human heart, and that heart changes creation—drawing it out of its sinful debasement, back into the glory of God. So has our own Russian Orthodox Church, from the time of the conversion of the heart of the Russian people in the days of St Vladimir, played her part in evangelising and transfiguring

⁹ Third sticheron on 'Lord, I have cried...', Tone 3.

the whole world. So does she, today, transfigure our hearts, drawing us into the divine Mysteries of our Lord, that we, too, may become a Christian people of mission and true life.

It is this, in the end, to which the Feast truly calls us. The long fast has brought us to participate in the memory of these two heavenly Apostles, and with them we participate in the Mystery of Holy Communion in our Lord and God and Saviour. The Lord shows His love to us, as He showed it to Peter, and as He showed it to Paul. He asks us, too, the question He posed to Simon: 'Dost thou love Me?', and we must respond to His divine love. We can do so by simply accepting it as a casual gift, then moving on and waiting for the next; we can do so by ignoring it altogether (though woe to us, then!). Or we can respond by taking the love we have received, and offering our lives back to Christ in gratitude, becoming wholly His. It is only self-sacrifice that responds to love truly, and creates of the human heart an icon of Christ that can speak to the world. Sacrifice is the avenue of real love. So we hymn the sacrifice of these great Apostles:

*Let us praise Peter and Paul, the two great stars of the Church.
They shine brighter than the sun in the sky of faith.
Let the nations follow the rays of their preaching,
And be led from ignorance to the knowledge of God!
One was nailed to the Cross
And received the keys of the Kingdom from Christ in heaven.
The other, beheaded by the sword, departed to the Saviour,
And is worthily counted blessed.
Together they proclaim to Israel:
'He Who was stretched out on the Cross is the Lord of all!'
By their prayers, O Christ our God,
Strengthen the Orthodox Faith and destroy our enemies,
As Thou art the Lover of mankind!¹⁰*

The present Feast calls us to *change*. To follow the example of our Glorious Fathers in the Faith, St Peter and St Paul, and offer the whole of our lives back to the Giver of Life. It was by such self-sacrifice and loving self-offering that they became 'brighter than the sun in the sky of faith'; and it is by such self-offering that we, too, by their holy prayers and intercessions, may find salvation in the eternal Kingdom of the Holy Trinity.

¹⁰ Third sticheron at the Aposticha of Vespers, Tone 1.