



In Joy and Hope

by

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A celebration in Rome

I suspect each of us has favorite feasts in the course of the liturgical year. One of mine has been and is the Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul on June 29th. This feast provides me with a sense of rootedness for who we are as a church and holds up for us those incredible figures of Peter and Paul, who were the leaders in the early Christian community. I am sure there were countless other heroic men and women who took the message of Jesus seriously and dared to be his disciples. But Peter and Paul stand out as unique individuals. There is a wonderful humanity to Peter with whom so many of us can identify. God's grace would transform Paul from being a persecutor of Christians to become the apostle to the Gentiles. The Acts of the Apostles tell the amazing tale of these two men who would confront each other, but who would each give his life for the Gospel.

Little did I know that the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul would find me this year in Rome. I was invited to be present for the reception of the pallium by Pope John Paul II. The pallium is a sign of the office of those who serve as archbishops in the church. The pallium is a band of white cloth woven from lamb's wool which is placed on the shoulders of the archbishop. The pallium symbolizes the humility of Jesus and serves as the image of the flock which the archbishop as shepherd is to watch over, guide and nourish.

A powerful celebration

The reception of the pallium took place at a celebration of the Eucharist in St. Peter's Basilica. Thirty other archbishops from throughout the world and I concelebrated the liturgy with the Holy Father. Memories of that celebration will remain with me a long time - memories of the nine languages used in the liturgy itself, the Sistine choir, the thousands of people who were present, being called by name to come forward and receive the pallium from our Holy Father.

I have to admit that I wondered how in God's providence I found myself to be in this position. I admit as well that I wished my parents were present, and yet, somehow I knew they were. I appreciated the presence of my sister and brother and their spouses, one of my nephews and some friends, but I felt a bit awkward when so much attention was given to me when they and countless others deserve the same attention and more.

"The Lord stood by my side"

Pope John Paul II preached a powerful homily that morning. He chose the text from the Liturgy of the Word where Paul wrote to Timothy, "But the Lord stood by my side and gave me strength." (2 Tim 4:17) The Holy Father pointed to the many instances in the lives of Peter and Paul where the Lord was present to them and offered them courage and faith, and the strength to endure martyrdom.

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A celebration in Rome

The Pope went on to say, "The ancient rite of the conferral of the pallium near the tomb of the Prince of the Apostles highlights, in addition to jurisdiction, the bond of close communion which unites each of you to the Successor of Peter, the principle and visible foundation of the unity of the whole Church. Dear brothers in the episcopate, my wish is that this expressive sign of unity and love will strengthen in each of you your adherence to Christ who calls his disciples to proclaim the Gospel to all nations. May the love of God nourish your apostolic dedication, sustaining your daily activity in the service of the flock entrusted to you."

What does all this say to me?

I caught portions of the Holy Father's homily in Italian that morning of June 29th, but I have reflected often ever since on the English text and what the Pope's homily asks of me. It gave me a more profound insight into the challenge of what it means to be a bishop in the church today and my need for the Lord to stand at my side and give me strength to proclaim the Gospel.

To proclaim the Gospel today is not easy. To teach in unity with the church may not be popular. Individual theologians and leaders in the church may well point to the surveys or opinions of people in our country today, but the Bishop is asked to be the teacher who is faithful to the Gospel, to our tradition and the magisterium. Far too often today we are tempted to begin with our experience as the norm of faith, instead of acknowledging the challenge of the Gospel and our tradition. This applies not only to issues of ordination, or the role of women, or the gift of sexuality, but also to our commitment to have a preferential option for the poor, to be people who hunger and thirst for justice, who value life from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death.

A bishop is a member of a college of bishops in union with the Holy Father as Bishop of Rome, and I realize more than ever how important that unity is in fulfilling the ministry asked of me as bishop of this local church.

A visit with the pope and Mass at the tomb of St. Peter

On June 30th, Pope John Paul II met privately in different rooms with each archbishop along with the group who accompanied him to Rome. He took time to greet each person individually and stayed for a few minutes to talk with us. He asked about Archbishop Hunthausen and extended his greetings to him. They were powerful moments as this outstanding individual shared his pastoral care and concern with us.

The last full day in Rome found us celebrating Mass at the tomb of St. Peter in the crypt of the basilica. Again, it was a moment when time, tradition and faith all seemed to converge and we celebrated what disciples of Jesus have done for almost 2,000 years.

There's no doubt about it! It was an incredible week in Rome. And as I try to fulfill what is asked of me in my ministry with and to the church here in Western Washington, I pray that Paul's words to Timothy may come alive within me as well, "But the Lord stood by my side and gave me strength." Thank you for the strength you offer me as well by your prayers, encouragement and support. May God's grace and peace be yours.