

An embrace in martyrdom and the primacy of charity

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29 June

by ENZO BIANCHI

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The solemnity of the holy apostles Peter and Paul unites in a single celebration Peter, the first disciple called in the synoptic accounts, the first of the twelve apostles, and Paul, who was not a disciple of Jesus and did not belong to the group of the Twelve, but whom the Church calls “Apostle”, preeminently the one sent, although this title, which he presumes to apply to himself, is never attributed to him in the Acts of the Apostles. This feast is already attested in the oldest liturgical calendar that has come down to us, the *Depositio martyrum* of the third century, which places together two of Jesus’ apostles who died in Rome at different times, but both of them martyrs, victims of the persecutions of Christians: two lives offered in libation for the cause of Jesus and of the Gospel.

The two apostles are thus united in the liturgical celebration, after their earthly lives saw them even opposing one another: a communion lived in evangelical *parresia* and for that very reason not always easy, in fact, often difficult. The limestone bas relief preserved in Aquileia, like the traditional iconography that depicts their embrace, intends to express this very communion at high cost that guaranteed the labors of each of the two as the foundation of the Church of Rome, the place where their race had its end, the place that saw both of them martyrs in Nero’s time, put to death for the same reason.

Peter is among the first of those called by Jesus: a fisher of Bethsaida on the lake of Tiberias, a man who certainly gave little time to intellectual formation and who lived his faith especially thanks to the Saturday synagogue worship and then, after Jesus’ call, through the teaching of that teacher who spoke as no one else before him. Generous and impulsive, Peter responded at once to Jesus’ call to follow him, but remained inconstant, an easy victim of fear, capable even of cowardice, to the point of denying him whom he was following as disciple. Always close to Jesus, he sometimes appears as a spokesman of the other disciples, among which he occupied a preeminent position: it would not be able to speak of Jesus’ life without mentioning Peter, who was the first to dare confess boldly faith in Jesus as Messiah. The disciples, like many in the crowd, wondered whether Jesus was a prophet or even “the” prophet of the last times, whether he was the Messiah, the Lord’s Anointed: it was Peter who, on Jesus’ solicitation, made a profession of faith in words that vary in the four Gospels, but which all attest that he was the first to recognize the true identity of Jesus. Peter made this profession not as “spokesman” of the Twelve; rather, he was moved by an interior force, by a revelation that could come to him only from God. To believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, was not possible by only analyzing or interpreting what could be a fulfillment of the Scriptures: it was God himself, the Father who is in heaven, who revealed to Peter Jesus’ identity (cf. Mt 16,17). Jesus, thus, recognized his disciple Simon as a “rock”, *Kefa*, a stone on whose faith the community, the Church, could find a foundation.

Peter, called “blessed” by Jesus, declared to be a solid rock, capable of confirming the disciples’ faith, will not be exempt from errors, falls, infidelity towards his Lord. Immediately after his profession of faith he will show his all too worldly way of thinking as regards Jesus’ passion, to the point that Jesus will call him “Satan”, and at the end of Jesus’ earthly life Peter three separate times will declare that he never knew him: fear and the desire to save himself will lead him to declare forcefully that he “did not know” that Jesus’ knowledge about whom he had received directly from God!

Jesus, who had assured him of his prayers so that his faith would not fail, after the resurrection will reconfirm him in his post, asking him three times to attest his love: “Simon son of John, do you love me?” (Jn 21, 15.16.17). Touched to the quick by this question from Jesus, Peter will become Jesus’ apostle, the pastor of his sheep, first in Jerusalem, then in the Jewish communities of Palestine, then in Antioch, and finally in Rome, where in his turn he will lay down his life after the example of his Lord and Teacher. In Rome Peter will also again meet Paul: we do not know whether in the daily life of Christian witness, but certainly in the great sign of martyrdom.

Paul, the “other”, a different apostle, placed next to Peter in all his difference, almost as if to guarantee from the very beginning that the Christian Church would always be plural and nourished by diversity. A Jew of the diaspora, born in Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia, he went up to Jerusalem to become a scribe and rabbi in the following of Gamaliel, one of the most famous teachers of the rabbinic tradition; Paul was a Pharisee, expert and zealous in the law of Moses, who had known neither Jesus nor his first disciples, but who distinguished himself by his opposition and persecution of the infant Christian movement. Paul could call himself a “miscarriage” (cf. 1Cor 15,8) in comparison to the other apostles who had seen the risen Lord Jesus, but asked to be considered as one sent, a servant, an apostle of Jesus Christ just like them, because he had placed his life at the service of the Gospel, he had made himself an imitator of Christ even in sufferings, he had done his utmost in apostolic journeys in the entire eastern Mediterranean, he was driven by concern for all the churches of God. His passion, his intelligence, his dedication to announcing the Lord Jesus shine through all his letters, and the Acts of the Apostles too give sincere testimony of this. By his own definition, he is “the apostle of the gentiles”, while Peter is “the apostle of the circumcised” (Gal 2,8).

Peter and Paul, both of them disciples and apostles of Christ, are nevertheless so very different: Peter a poor fisherman, Paul a rigorous intellectual; Peter a Palestinian Jew from an obscure village, Paul a Jew of the diaspora and Roman citizen; Peter slow to understand and to act, Paul consumed by eschatological urgency. They were apostles with two different styles, they served the Lord in very different ways, they lived the Church in a manner that was sometimes dialectic if not in opposition, but sought to follow the Lord and his will and *together*, thanks to their very diversity, they were able to give a face to the Christian mission and a foundation to the church of Rome that presides in charity. It is hence just to celebrate their memory together, a memory of unity in diversity, of life given over for the love of the Lord, of charity lived in expectation of Christ’s return.

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