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# His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros Homily for the Great Vespers for the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul

June 28, 2020

Saint Peter Greek Orthodox Church

Bronx, New York

My Beloved Christians,

This evening we have gathered to celebrate your Heavenly Patron, and his fellow Κορυφαῖος Ἀπόστολος, Saint Paul, on the day we commemorate their sacrifice and martyrdom for their love of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We know no other Disciple of the Lord more intimately than Saint Peter, the name which means the “Rock,’ for his given name was Simon. He is the one whose emotions we can read like an open book in the pages of the Gospels.

He is at once courageous and yet afraid. He walks on water, yet he denies the Lord.

He confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, but he knows not what to do on the Mount of Transfiguration, and he falls asleep with sorrow – even depression, in the Garden of Gethsemane. He speaks heroically, but then weeps bitterly.

He is the full expression of a human being – with all his weakness and all his strength. He reminds each and every one of us that although we are not perfect in any way, the Lord knows how to use us with all our faults for His glory.

The Lord, it is said, prayed specifically for Simon Peter, knowing that he would fail. He said:

*O Simon, Simon! Behold! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat! But I have prayed for you so that your faith might not abandon you, and when you have recovered, strengthen your brothers!**[*]***

Despite his failings, his love was so much greater. Remember how after the Resurrection, when the Disciples had been overwhelmed by this new reality, they lost heart and returned to their everyday lives. It was as if the peak experience of the Lord's Resurrection could not be maintained, and they reverted back to their sense of what they knew as normality. It says in the Gospel of John:

Simon Peter, Thomas (the one called the "Twin"), Nathaniel (who was from Cana of Galilee), the sons of Zebedee, and two other of his disciples were all together.

"I'm going fishing," Simon Peter said to them.

"And we're coming with you." they replied.

Then they went off and set sail in their boat, but for all their efforts through the night, they caught not a thing. As morning was breaking, Jesus was standing on the shoreline, but the disciples had no idea that it was Jesus.

"Little children!" Jesus called out to them, "have you caught anything to eat?"

"No!" they shouted back.

"Cast the net out over the right side of the boat." Jesus directed them. "There's your find!"

They cast the net out, but were unable to draw it up because of the size of the catch. "It's the Lord!" the disciple, the one whom Jesus dearly loved,[†] exclaimed to Peter. When Simon Peter heard "It's the Lord," he tied his robe around his waist (he was to that moment bare-chested) and threw himself headlong into the sea.[‡]

Here is Peter! Exhausted by the amazement and wonder of the Resurrection, he goes from the heights and wanders back to being a fisher of fish, no longer a fisher of men, even taking the other disciples with him. And yet, forgetting that he once walked on water, he leaps into the sea and swims to his Lord and Master. This is the life of Peter. This is the life of every disciple of the Lord. Like Peter, we go up and then down and up again.

There is an apocryphal story that when the persecution of Nero commenced – the very one that ultimately caused the deaths of Saints Peter and Paul – Saint Peter, who was by now an old man and the first Bishop of Rome, was leaving Rome to escape the coming fury. It is said that as he was leaving, he saw Christ Himself coming the opposite way and carrying a cross. Peter asked the Lord, "Where are you going?"[§]

The Lord replied, "To die again because you won't die for Me."[**] With that, Saint Peter turned around, returned to the city, and was later crucified upside down on the Vatican Hill, the very site today of the Basilica of Saint Peter's in Rome.

Peter's end, along with Paul who was beheaded, was not the end of the Church in Rome. Rather, it was the beginning of the conquest of Rome by the Church, culminating in the victory of the Cross that Saint Constantine saw in the Roman sky before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge nearly three hundred years later.

What was begun by their frail humanity – both Peter's and Paul's – was brought to perfection by God.

My beloved, the same is true for us today. God knows our every frailty, our every weakness and fault. And He loves us in spite of them all. And He is ready at every moment to transform them into the strength, courage, and moral stamina to live our lives for Him and for each other.

Through the intercessions of the Leaders of the Apostles, Saint Peter and Paul, may we always be deemed worthy to be transformed into the persons we are meant to be, to the glory of God and to the good we can accomplish in the world. Amen.

[*] Luke 22:31,32.

[†] John the Evangelist.

[‡] John 21:2-7.

[§] Latin, “Quo vadis?”

[**] Latin, *Rōmam eō iterum crucifīgī*, “I am going to Rome to be crucified again.”

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