

**HOMILY OF HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
HOLY MASS FOR THE SOLEMNITY OF SAINTS PETER AND PAUL
250TH ANNIVERSARY OF SAINTS PETER AND PAUL CATHEDRAL
ST. THOMAS, VIRGIN ISLANDS
JUNE 30, 2024**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Greetings and happy feast day to all! I am grateful to Bishop Feudjio for the invitation to join you for this great celebration of 250 years of this Cathedral. As representative of the Holy Father, I can assure you of his spiritual closeness, especially as we celebrate Saints Peter and Paul.

There is an antiphon for the Mass of Saints Peter and Paul which states: “These are the ones who, living in the flesh, planted the Church with their blood; they drank the chalice of the Lord and became the friends of God.”¹

What Peter and Paul did for the universal Church is repeated throughout history whenever the Church of Christ is planted in a new place in the world. This is part of the history of the Catholic Church here in the Virgin Islands. We remember the people who were the first to bring the Gospel here, including the French priest Fr. Jacques de la Valliere: the first Catholic priest to go to the island of St. Croix. It is always at the cost of their own comfort and convenience that missionaries spread the Gospel. This was true of Peter and Paul, as evidenced by today’s readings. And it was true of the missionaries who came to this land. Father de la Valliere lived only two months after his arrival because of the many diseases and harsh living conditions at the time. But his shortened life was not in vain. Centuries later, we still receive the gift that he left us.

At this Mass of Saints Peter and Paul, we ask God to grant that his Church may, in all things, follow the teaching of those Apostles who first passed on the Gospel of Christ.² That was the purpose of the missionaries to the Virgin Islands: to make it possible for people to follow the same teachings by which Saints Peter and

¹ Entrance Antiphon, Mass of the Solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul.

² See Collect for Mass of the Solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul.

Paul first spread the Gospel. Dedicating this cathedral to Peter and Paul was a way for this local Church to be forever reminded of the universal Church to which it belongs, and to give honor to these two great pioneers of the Christian proclamation.

In the first reading we find Peter imprisoned for the Gospel that he was preaching to his fellow Jewish people. And yet we also see, through the angel who frees Peter from prison, that God's power to bring freedom to his disciples is greater than anything which imprisons. A sad fact of the history in this part of the world is the enslavement of African peoples, an evil with which Christians themselves were complicit. And yet we see through history how "the word of God is living and effective".³ For a time, permitting enslaved people to worship together with those who enslaved them was thought to be an advancement. But thankfully, the Gospel continues to challenge our consciences over time. Eventually, the consciences of men who had been freed from slavery to sin by Christ, could no longer tolerate an institution which kept human beings in bondage on the basis of race. May the Gospel continue to shed light on our consciences today, and lead us to act against contemporary forms of injustice.

In the Eucharist, the living Gospel becomes our food. Because of this, we can live in the Church in such a way that, persevering in the breaking of the Bread and in the teaching of the Apostles, we may be one heart and one soul, made steadfast in God's love.⁴ This is what it means to encounter Christ and to celebrate his real presence among us. This is what this anniversary celebrates: that an encounter with Christ is being facilitated here in this Cathedral, day after day and year after year, for two-and-a-half centuries now, so that people may be brought into the kingdom of God and live according to one faith, in the midst of a world that suffers from confusion and division. The proclamation of the Gospel and the transmission of the faith promises hope and a new way of living, in contradiction to the evils of the world.

³ *Hebrews* 4:12.

⁴ See Prayer after Communion for Mass of the Solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul.

As disciples who carry on the faith of the Apostles, it is good to return regularly to that question that Jesus asked them in today's Gospel: "Who do you say that I am?"⁵ Peter shows us how to answer that question. It is not by relying on "flesh and blood".⁶ That is to say, we do not correctly interpret Christ's presence and his will by choosing one human agenda or another, a particular ideology, or a partisan idea. Rather, our discernment of Christ's will – for us as disciples, and for his Church – must rely upon what the Spirit of the Father reveals to us. The signal for Jesus to give Peter authority to govern in his Church was that Peter had been given a faith that came "from above". In our vocations, in the particular domains in which we exercise authority – in the family, in our communities, in the Church – we must be guided "from above". And for this, we have not only Scripture and the perennial teachings of the Church, but also the living presence of Peter among us: his successor the Pope. Just as Peter's faith was the guiding principle for unity of belief and mission for the first disciples, so the Holy Father remains today "the perpetual and visible principle and foundation of unity of both the bishops and of the faithful."⁷

Celebrating today the faith given by Christ to Peter and Paul, the same faith which was brought to this land centuries ago and which built this Cathedral in their honor, let us pray that, by the Eucharist we celebrate, we may continue to hold to this faith and to live it with love.

⁵ *Matthew* 16:15.

⁶ See *Matthew* 16:17.

⁷ Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 21 November 1964, 23.