

VIGIL OF SAINTS PETER AND PAUL
“FORTNIGHT FOR FREEDOM”

Cathedral of Saint Paul
Thursday, June 28, 2012 5:15 p.m.

BY THE MOST REVEREND JOHN C. NIENSTEDT

“Faith of our fathers, living still,
In spite of dungeon, fire and sword;
O how our hearts beat high with joy
Whenever we hear that glorious Word!

Refrain

*Faith of our fathers, holy faith!
We will be true to thee till death.”*

This evening marks the Vigil of one of the truly great Solemnities of our Church – the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul. This is also a day of special significance for our local Church, for this Solemnity is our patronal feast day. Truly, it is right and just to give thanks to God this evening, and to offer this thanks for the many graces he has lavished upon us and will continue to do so well into what I am convinced is a very bright future within our Archdiocese.

I cannot fail to mention that this Solemnity also has great meaning for me personally, for it was on this Feast Day five years ago that I was formally welcomed to this local Church as your new Coadjutor Archbishop. I remember well the warm welcome I received that day. What is more, two years to the day following my Welcome Mass, I had the tremendous grace of being able to ordain Bishop Lee Piché, as our auxiliary bishop. Bishop Piché, a most sincere word of congratulations to you on your anniversary. You remain an awesome gift to this local Church, and to me personally. Thank you for all you are and all you do.

The figures of this feast day, truly pivotal figures in the history of our Christian faith, give us an opportunity to reflect, however briefly, on the two aspects of our Christian way of life and of our religion as Catholics. They are aspects I have spoken about before – the call to communio and the call to missio.

In Peter, we see personified the prayer of Christ that “all might be one.” We are called as believers into communion to be one in heart, mind and prayer, gathered around the duly appointed shepherds of the Church. How discouraging it is to see so many in the Church, including priests and religious, openly reject this foundational tenant of our faith, choosing instead to fashion a religion in their own image by following the magisterium of their own

sentiments. My dear brothers and sisters, we must stand with Peter – in our commitment to define the dogmas and the doctrines of the Church, in our commitment to the sacramental life of the Church as given to us by tradition, in our commitment to the demands of the moral life and to a life of prayer, and in our commitment to an ever greater solidarity with the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, as governed by the bishops in union with the Holy Father, the successor of Peter in Rome.

Turning from Peter to Paul, we witness the radical call of the Church to go out to all the nations and proclaim the good news, the saving news that “Jesus Christ is Lord.” Paul recognized that the vocation to proclaim the Gospel was a profoundly universal call – Christ is the answer to every human heart’s desire for God. He is not simply the Jewish messiah. He is the savior of the world. Paul knew this in the very depths of his soul, and it drove him to his martyrdom, spending his very self in the proclamation of the Gospel. In Paul, the Christian is confronted with a challenge to accept the call to be a missionary, to reach out to those around us with the saving truth of Christ crucified. The words of the psalmist, “Their message goes out through the earth” expresses beautifully this universal nature of the missionary field for the Christian. Whatever our particular state of life may be, the call to be a missionary steadfastly remains. This fact is especially important to remember as we prepare to celebrate the Year of Faith, a year in which we are called upon as believers to accept once again our own essential need to evangelize.

Communion and mission – these are always the dual foci of the Catholic faithful, and the Feast of Peter and Paul allows us to re-commit ourselves to both.

But let us not forget that our celebration this day also falls within the “Fortnight for Freedom” called for by the United States of Conference Bishops. From June 21, the feast of Saint Thomas More, until July 4th, Independence Day, the Bishops of our country have asked us to bear witness in both public and private ways to our commitment to the preservation of Religious Liberty. The attacks leveled against conscience by the Federal Administration are increasingly bold and strident. And today’s ruling by the Supreme Court will, unfortunately, not discourage those attacks. Clearly, our struggle to ensure that Catholics and Christians are allowed to continue to follow the dictates of their conscience and their faith is not for us alone. It is for the generations to come. Let our children and our children’s children know that when challenges were leveled against the rights of all, we stood up and made our voices heard.

We did not choose this fight, but it has come, and we must be ready to fight with prayer, petition, protest and yes, legislative and legal initiatives. The words of Christ, spoken to Peter in today’s Holy Gospel, could be rightly used to describe the current struggle. “When you were younger, you used to dress yourself, and go where you wanted. But when you are older, someone else will dress you, and take you to a place you’d rather not go.” My brothers and sisters, we are indeed being taken where we do not want to go – no shepherd of the Church, of whom I am aware, relishes conflict. Few bishops want to make headlines for challenging political authorities. But our duty to feed and strengthen the sheep entrusted to us compels us to speak and to call forth from our people a willingness to take a principled stand against injustice and the threats of tyranny.

Whether one accepts the idea that a true religious persecution will some day come to this great country, the kind of which is even now being endured in the Middle East and parts of Asia, it remains irrefutable that religion is increasingly seen in our own day and in our own nation as an enemy to the rights claimed by the state. This is most unfortunate, as without religion the republic we all cherish is doomed. Contrary to the claims of so many, religion is not the enemy of dignity, rights, and right reason. Rather, it is from the well ordered life, indeed, the religious life, that these virtues flow. The founders of this country knew this, and it was for this reason that they enshrined the rights of religion into the Constitution, a constitution that remains the source of hope and inspiration for millions around the globe even now.

My brothers and sisters, on this feast of Peter and Paul, let us turn to our heavenly patrons for the graces we need to defend not only our rights, but the cherished heritage of this country, a country in which religion and statecraft are allies and partners in building up the common good, a civilization of liberty and justice for all.

Faith of our fathers, Mary's prayers
Shall win our country back to Thee;
And through the truth that comes from God,
We all shall then indeed be free.

*Faith of our fathers, holy faith!
We will be true to thee till death.*