

Feast of St. Peter and St. Paul

June 29th, 2023 IHM Chapter

Today we **remember** and **celebrate the memory** of two great apostles. **Both of them gave themselves completely** to their Lord, Jesus, and **both of them faced** tremendous persecution, culminating in death in Rome.

At the heart of their story *is not* their own gifts and abilities; at the center is the encounter with Christ that changed their lives. They experienced a love that **healed them and set them free.** **They then became apostles and ministers of freedom for others.**

Peter, the fisherman from Galilee, **was set free**, above all, **from his sense of inadequacy and his bitter experience of failure**, *thanks to the unconditional love of Jesus.*

Although a skilled fisherman, many times, in the heat of the night, **he tasted the bitterness of frustration** at having caught nothing and, seeing his empty nets, was tempted to pull up his oars.

Though **strong and impetuous**, **Peter often yielded to fear.**

Even though he was a fervent disciple of the Lord, he continued **to think by worldly standards** and thus **failed to understand** and **accept the meaning** of Christ's cross.

Even after saying that he was ready to give his life for Jesus, the mere suspicion that he was one of Christ's disciples **led him in fright to deny the Master.**

Jesus nonetheless loved Peter and was willing to take a risk on him.

He encouraged Peter **not to give up**, to **lower his nets once more**, to **walk on water**, to **find the strength to accept his own frailty**, to **follow him on the way of the cross**, to **give his life** for his brothers and sisters, to **shepherd** his flock.

In this way, Jesus set Peter free from fear, from calculations based solely on worldly concerns.

The Apostle Paul also experienced the freedom brought by Christ. He was **set free from the most oppressive form of slavery**,

which is slavery to self.

From Saul, the name of the first king of Israel,
he became Paul, which means “small.”

He was **also set free** from the **religious fervor**
that had made him **a zealous defender** of his **ancestral traditions**
and a cruel persecutor of Christians.

Formal religious observance and the **intransigent defense of tradition**
rather than making him open to the love of God
and of his brothers and sisters, had hardened him:
he was a fundamentalist.

God set him free from this, yet he **did not spare him**
the frailties and hardships
that **rendered his mission of evangelization** more fruitful:
the strain of the apostolate, physical infirmity;
violence and persecution, shipwreck, hunger, thirst,
and, as he himself tells us, a painful thorn in the flesh.

Over time, Paul came to realize

that ***“God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong,”***
that ***we can do all things through him who strengthens us,***
and ***that nothing can ever separate us from love of God .***

For this reason, **at the end of his life** – as we heard in the second reading,

Paul was able to say: “the Lord stood by me”

and “he will rescue me from every evil attack” (2 Tim 4:17).

You could say Paul had a Passover experience: the Lord set him free.

The Church looks to these two giants of faith and sees **two Apostles**
who set free the power of the Gospel in our world,
only because first, they themselves had been set free
by their encounter with Christ.

Jesus did not judge them or humiliate them.

Instead, **he shared their life** with affection and closeness.

He **supported them** by his prayer and even, at times,
reproached them to make them change.

To Peter, Jesus gently says:

“I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail.”

And to Paul: ***“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”***

He does the same with us:

he assures us of his closeness **by praying**
and **interceding** for us before the Father,
and **gently reproaching** us whenever we go astray
so that we can find the strength to arise and resume the journey.

We, too, have been touched by the Lord; we, too, have been set free.

Yet we need to be set free time and time again,

for it is only when we are free that we become credible witnesses.

Like Peter, we are called **to be set free** from a **sense of failure**
before our occasionally disastrous fishing.

To be set free from **the fear** that **sometimes paralyzes us**,
that makes us **seek refuge** in **our own securities**,
and **robs us** of the **courage of prophecy**.

Like Paul, we are called to be set free from the **hypocritical outward show**,
free from the temptation to **present ourselves with power**
rather **than** with the **weakness** that makes space for God,
free from a religiosity that makes us rigid and inflexible;
free from dubious associations with power
and **from the fear** of being misunderstood and attacked.

Pope Francis says: *Peter and Paul bequeath to us
the image of a Church entrusted to our hands,
yet guided by the Lord with fidelity and tender love,
for it is he who guides the Church.*

*A Church that is weak yet finds strength in the presence of God.
The image of a Church set free and capable of offering the world
the freedom that the world by itself cannot give:
freedom from sin and death, from resignation,
and from the sense of injustice and the loss of hope
that dehumanizes the lives of the women and men of our time.*

We can help bring this freedom, but only if we first let ourselves
be set free by the newness of Jesus,
and walk in the freedom of the Holy Spirit.