

To those who are thinking about a trip to Rome in the next few months, I suggest taking note of some places that I will share with you, so that, after Mass, you can Google them and find some pictures. I am sure that you will be astonished by the beauty of the city of Rome. I would like, indeed, to tell you about Rome: the city that has Peter and Paul as patrons, but above all, that had them as citizens and then as holy martyrs. So I am about to take you on a spiritual pilgrimage to some places unknown to most people but very significant in the Eternal City.

At the time of Paul the Apostle, you could reach Rome from the south, using the street named *Via Appia*. This is still its name, and for a small stretch, the large stones on which Paul walked have been preserved and are still visible. Rome was the center of a great empire, and Paul knew that, from there, the Gospel could reach everyone, everywhere. Faith was born from the missionary desire of that man, perhaps small in stature (“paulus” literally means “short and small”) but with a true desire burning inside his heart. Faith is always in search of missionary disciples who feel indebted to others—especially to those who do not know Jesus Christ—for disciples who have met Christ and know His Gospel wish to share that Good News with others.

A little further on, as you are about to enter the city, you come to a small church at a crossroads: called the Church of the *Domine, quo vadis*, three words in Latin that mean “Lord, where are you going?” Legend tells us that Peter, who, having been warned of his impending death, was fleeing from Rome. Immediately outside the city, he met Jesus walking toward Rome and said to Him, “*Domine, quo vadis?*”—“Lord, where are you going?” And Jesus answered him: “*Eo Romam iterum crucifigi*”—“I am going to Rome to be crucified again.” Peter understood that he had to go back: he could not leave Jesus alone again, as he had done on the night of His

condemnation. At that moment, he had the opportunity to follow Jesus to the end. Half measures, compromises, and justifications are not useful for a true and beautiful Christian life. Be courageous in offering God the best of yourself; be courageous when you choose what to dedicate to Him. God does not deceive you—God always gives what He promises. And Peter returned to Rome and gave Jesus all of himself. Jesus disappeared from Peter's sight on that road, but the imprint of His feet is still visible on a rock inside the little church.

Next, I would like to take you to the Church of Saint Prisca, which is located on the Aventine, and to the Church of Saint Mary in Via Lata, which is also famous for the miracle of the well (when centuries later an image of the Virgin Mary appeared floating on the surface of the water). How did Peter and Paul spend their time when they lived in Rome? Teaching—but not as schoolteachers. Rather they shared what they had experienced with Jesus: in the dusty ways of Galilee for Peter, and, for Paul, his personal encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus and what followed in his life and ministry. While they lived in Rome, you could listen to Peter's own voice telling the story of his liberation from prison—the episode we heard from the Acts of the Apostles just now. Or, together with Saint Luke, you could listen to Paul's story—his conversion and his incredible journeys to proclaim the Gospel of Christ. Peter and Paul had not written books of theology. For them, the Gospel was their personal encounters with Jesus Christ, who had called them, forgiven them, loved them, and given them a mission. Perhaps you are tempted to ask how you could possibly witness the Gospel of Jesus to others; how could you possibly transmit His teaching? There is no need for us to have classes of Christian doctrine: we can tell of our encounters with Jesus as well, how He changed our lives, how believing in Jesus is a faith full of hope. Nothing else is necessary.

I would like to take you to another church, even though, I warn you, it is usually closed. It is called Saint Pudenziana because it is dedicated to the holy martyr, daughter of Pudenzio. Pudenzio lived right there, and Peter often used to meet a community of believers in his home. He spoke to them, he shared the Gospel of Jesus, but then he did not leave without having taken the bread and without having broken it. It was the Eucharist. Since that time, the Catholic Church has not been a club that discusses the Bible and its interpretation. The Eucharist is the sacramental way by which everything we learn about Jesus happens again for you and for me. The Eucharist is what we need to say: “Jesus is still living. Jesus is here. Jesus can save my life today.” The Eucharist creates communion between you and me: we cannot agree about many things, but we can come together at the one table Jesus prepared for us. For this reason, in the Church of Saint Pudenziana, you can find a precious relic: the table on which Peter broke the bread for his brothers in faith.

Not far from Saint Pudenziana, walking down Via Cavour and climbing the stairs to the Esquiline Hill, you get to the church called *Saint Peter in Vinculis*—St. Peter in Chains. The church contains a piece of the chain which held Peter during his Roman captivity, identical to what you find for Paul over his tomb in the wide Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls. These pieces of chain remind us that a faith for which one is able to suffer is a more credible faith. Christian faith is not a cheap faith; it doesn’t always make you popular with everyone. Peter and Paul paid with their lives for belonging to Christ. Theirs was not a failure, but the confirmation that God has a power greater than that of death. We believe that God is the giver of life—this life and the everlasting one.

Finally, I cannot avoid bringing you to Saint Peter’s Basilica—to that piazza which, with its colonnade, embraces the entire world.

Believe me: I work there. I pass through that piazza twice a day on my way to and from work, but I cannot get used to it—I cannot stop being amazed by that piazza and what it means to our faith. It is not because the top of the obelisk perhaps contains the ashes of Julius Caesar; it is not because Charlemagne was crowned on a red stone located at the beginning of the nave of the huge church; it is not because millions of people come there every year (and a lot of them from the United States). It is because you feel that all the world is connected to that place—everywhere there is someone belonging to the Roman Catholic Church. Saint Peter's Basilica is the burial place of the Apostle: the Vatican Hill was removed and replaced with the original Basilica dedicated to St. Peter; not many decades ago a rock was discovered at this same site with writing which read in Greek: "*Petrós enì*"—"Peter is here."

But most of all, in that place, Peter is still alive. Yes, it is what was said by the Dean of the College of Cardinals in his homily before the election of the new Pope: "Each Pope continues to embody Peter and his mission and thus represents Christ on earth; he is the rock on which the Church is built (cf. Mt 16:18). The election of the new Pope is not a simple succession of persons, but is always the Apostle Peter who returns." Today is a special day to pray for Pope Leo, to feel the beauty of the unity around him of all the Church, whose visible principle of unity he is. On the day he began his ministry as Successor of Peter, Pope Leo said: "I was chosen, without any merit of my own, and now, with fear and trembling, I come to you as a brother who desires to be the servant of your faith and your joy, walking with you on the path of God's love, for He wants us all to be united in one family. How can Peter carry out this task? The Gospel tells us that it is possible only because his own life was touched by the infinite and unconditional love of God, even in the hour of his failure and denial."

Let us pray: “Saints Peter and Paul, patrons of the Alma City of Rome, keep us in that unity of faith and charity. Inscribe our personal stories in the mystery of Christ’s love, as yours are inscribed there. Make us recognize the power of Christ, who with His love transforms our poverty and, with His sacraments, makes of us new men and new women. Saints Peter and Paul, pray for us.”