

Homily of His Beatitude Patriarch Bechara Peter Cardinal Rai at Our Lady of Lebanon Cathedral
Brooklyn, N.Y., on June 25, 2016: Feast of Saints Peter and Paul

Bishop Gregory, Archbishop Paul,
Archbishop Ochagan,
Bishop Tenielian,
Bishop Dionisius,
Chorbishop Michael,
Monsignor James, Rector of the Cathedral ,
Archpriest Thomas Zain,
Monsignors Kozar, Kerrigan, and Asmar,
Father Luke, Beloved Priests, Deacons and Subdeacons,
Honorable Carla Jazzar,
Ambassador Nawwaf Salam,
Ms Carolyn Ziade,
Honorable Majdi Ramadan,
Mr Michel Aflak,
Mr. Nadim Gemayel,
Sheikh Sami Merhi,
Parishioners and Friends of the Cathedral of Our Lady of Lebanon

"You are Peter the Rock, and on this Rock I will build my Church" (Mt. 16, 18).

"Saul, Paul is my chosen vessel to bear my name before the Gentiles, Kings and people" (Acts 9,13).

It gives me special pleasure, with my delegation from Lebanon, to celebrate with you this Divine Liturgy, here in Brooklyn, New York, on the fourth day of our pastoral visit to some of the Parishes of the Eparchy. We have visited three already; Buffalo, Lawrence and Waterville. I would like to thank my Brother Bishop Gregory for his kind invitation to me to make this pastoral visit. I thank also Mgr. Michael Thomas, his Vicar General, for his role in the planning and organization of the visit with Bishop Gregory. Came with me from Lebanon my Vicar General, Archbishop Paul Sayah, Attorney Walid Ghayad, Head of the Media Office of the Patriarchate, and Deacon Simon Abi Nader. We bring you warm greetings from our people, along with their hopes and concerns, while our country and the whole of the Middle East are passing through a difficult, critical and even decisive period in their history. We ask for your prayers and support for them in every possible way.

Today we are celebrating the great Feast of Saints Peter and Paul, two very different men who had one thing in common, a deep personal desire to witness, to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to teach about his sacrificial death and his life giving resurrection. But each of them distinguished himself with a quality for which God chose him as His disciple: Peter's quality was his deep faith in Jesus, which he confessed in Cesarea Philippi: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Mt. 16,16). Because of this profession of faith Jesus changed his name from Simon to Peter, the Rock, Kif in Aramaic, meaning the Rock, and Petros Petra in Greek, and on the faith of Peter Jesus built His Church, but He himself is the corner stone. "To you Simon Peter I say you are the Rock and on this Rock I will build my Church and the powers of hell will not prevail against it."(Mt. 16, 17-18).

Paul's, Chaoul's distinct quality for which Jesus chose him is his great zeal and his knowledge. Jesus transformed him from a persecutor of the Church and of his followers to an apostle and a servant, chosen to carry the Gospel before the Gentiles, Kings and peoples", as Jesus revealed to Hanania when he informed him of his call to Paul (See Acts 9, 11-16).

Peter knew Jesus, fished with him, ate with him, denied him, and died for him. Paul at first hated him, persecuted him, and then eventually encountered him on the road to Damascus, and by means of an extraordinary grace, he was converted from the way of hatred to the way of love.

Paul was a tent-maker and a zealous Pharisee, while Peter was an ordinary fisherman prone to emotional outbursts that caused him to say and do things he regretted. After their encounters with Jesus, both men spent the rest of their lives in his service. He called them to be his messengers despite their human weaknesses. They seemed to be two men who were the most unlikely to succeed in their mission. But in the eyes of God, these two would become the two great pillars on which a Church would be built, a Church that Jesus promised he would stay until the end of time.

Peter and Paul had another feature in common, their martyrdom for Jesus in Rome, the year 63 at the hands of Nero; Peter crucified on the Vatican hill and Paul decapitated outside the city walls. But because of this dual martyrdom Rome, the capital of the heathen Roman Empire was changed into the capital of Catholicism, in which the successor of Peter, the Pope of the Catholic and Apostolic Church, established his See, the See of faith and teaching, the beating heart and center of the Church.

We too were called by Christ at our Baptism, like Peter and Paul, to change our lives, and he depends on us to be pillars in his Church in this day and age. Like Peter and Paul, our human weaknesses leave much to be desired, yet Christ still calls us for his greater glory. Like Peter and Paul, we too have some work to do for the good of his holy Church. May we take our responsibility as good Christians seriously and with a "Shepherd's care" as Peter said. And may we, through lives be true examples, reflecting the teachings of Jesus and not the wisdom of this world. On this Feast Day of Saints Peter and Paul, we renew, with the Church in Lebanon and the Middle East, where it is suffering aggression persecution and all sorts of difficulties, we renew our faith in Christ, like the faith of Peter, and our zeal for the Gospel like the zeal of Paul. The Middle Eastern region needs today, more than ever before, this Gospel in order to be saved from the calamities of war death and destruction. We pray that the blood of martyrs may wash away the people's sins and crimes, and turn into the seeds of a new world in the Middle East, in accordance with the words of Origen: "the blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians."

Saints Peter and Paul, pray for us!