

4th Sunday of Easter
May 3, 2009
Fr. Tom Elliott

The Relics of Saint Peter

Acts 4:8-12
Psalm 118
1 John 3:1-2
John 10:11-18

I have been waiting for months to share with you one of the highlights of the pilgrimage to Italy last year. The reason it has taken so long is that I've had to wait until I could arrange for the proper technology to illustrate the story, since it is best understood through pictures. The story has to do with the extraordinary man in our first reading today—Saint Peter. God worked mighty deeds through this man, including the one we heard referenced today when a crippled man was healed through Peter's words—

Peter said, "I have neither silver nor gold, but what I do have I give you: in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean, (rise and) walk." Then Peter took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles grew strong. He leaped up, stood, and walked around, and went into the temple with them, walking and jumping and praising God.

-Acts 3:6-8

It is also the story of the importance of relics. Many of you may not be familiar with relics. A relic is an object associate with either Christ or one of the saints. In the Acts of the Apostles, we read about how relics of St. Paul were venerated as avenues of healing and exorcism. Luke writes, "So extraordinary were the mighty deeds God accomplished at the hands of Paul that when face cloths or aprons that touched his skin were applied to the sick, their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them" (Acts 19:11-12). These cloths and aprons that had been touched to the skin of St. Paul would be considered, by the Church's definition, "third class" relics.

There are three classes, or categories, of relics. A "first class" relic would be an object intimately connected to the life of Christ, such as His manger or cross, or the physical remains of a saint, such as a bone, hair, tooth, etc. A "second class" relic is an item worn by a saint, such as a religious habit or vestment, or an object frequently used by a saint, such as a Bible or rosary. A "third class" relic is essentially anything touched to a first class relic. According to these categories, the prayer cloths touched to St. Paul are third class relics. They were cherished as physical signs of Paul's intercession.

On the very first day of our pilgrimage to Italy last fall, a couple of us had the amazing opportunity to see the relics of Saint Peter. Here is the story (as best as I can remember it) of how the bones of Saint Peter were found—

As many of you already know, Saint Peter was martyred upside down on a cross in Rome. He would have been around 65 or 70 years old at the time of his death. Crucifixions in Rome were frequently done in the center of a circus where chariot races took place. The bodies of non-Roman citizens who were crucified were either put on stakes and lit as torches, or

devoured by wild animals or thrown into the river. Since the early Christians did not want Peter's body desecrated in any of these manners, they used the cover of night or bribery to steal Peter's body from the cross and bury him nearby.

It was common for Roman guards to simply chop the hands off of the crucified bodies in order to get them down from the cross quicker. Peter, however, was crucified upside down. It is believed that the early Christians who came for his body had to cut his feet off in order to expedite retrieving his body for burial. Then, they needed to find a quick place to bury him. They found that place in the pagan cemetery near the circus. They dug a quick grave with no special marker, in order to keep secrecy. That grave served as Peter's burial place for many years.

During those years the Christian community in Rome grew richer and was able to build a more elaborate monument over his grave but the monument never had any specific Christian markings since Christians were persecuted up to the year 313 when the emperor Constantine allowed Christianity to be practiced. St. Peter's monument blended in with all the pagan monuments surrounding it. During the reign of Emperor Constantine in the fourth century, Christianity became widely accepted. Constantine decided that it was not right that the great saint, Peter, was buried in a pagan cemetery and he wanted to honor St. Peter, the prince of the apostles, by building a basilica over his tomb but there was a problem...Roman law prohibited the disturbance of graves. So, Constantine rescinded the law about disturbing graves and allowed, for one year, pagan families to move their deceased out of the cemetery. Constantine also allowed Christians to move their deceased into the cemetery to be near the tomb of St. Peter.

After the year was over, the Emperor leveled the hill and buried all of the cemetery plots. He then built the first Basilica of St. Peter on the site, encasing the monument that is over St. Peter's tomb with marble and porphyry, a purple stone signifying royalty. That Basilica stood until the 16th century. At that time, the church was in such poor condition that a new Basilica was built. The altar of the new Basilica sits right above the altar of the original Basilica, which is above the remains of St. Peter.

In 1939, Pope Pius XI asked to be buried in the crypt. As people dug the hole for the burial, they discovered the ancient pagan cemetery in which St. Peter's grave was situated. It was decided that an excavation would be done. At first the idea was to only investigate the pagan cemetery but later the excavation broadened with the hope of discovering the tomb of St. Peter. And, eventually, the tomb was found!

When Peter's tomb was excavated, the archeologists found many human bones. The bones were removed and analyzed by scientists and it was discovered that Saint Peter had three right legs... Much to the dismay of the archeologists and scientists, the bones that were found in Saint Peter's tomb did not belong to Saint Peter. There were bones from three different people mixed together in the bottom of the burial hole—the bones came from a woman and two young men.

As analysis progressed on the archeology site they discovered a wall full of practically undecipherable writing scratched all over it. This wall, which they named the "graffiti wall" since it had writing all over it, was important since it was part of St. Peter's burial monument. As they analyzed the graffiti, they discovered a hollow chamber hidden within it and lined with marble. When they opened the chamber, they found a set of bones, stained purple from linen which must have wrapped them at some point. There was an inscription inside the chamber reading, "Peter is within." The scientists analyzed the bones and found that they belonged to only one person, a robust man who would have been about 65 to 70 years old. The bones had dirt matching the dirt in the grave. Bones were found from nearly every part of the body, but there were some bones missing... yes, the feet!

It is calculated that the early Christians suffered various persecutions for about 129 years and then enjoyed a certain degree of toleration for about 120 years, up to the point of the Emperor Constantine in 313 A.D. It is believed that the early Christians feared that pagans would come and desecrate or steal Peter's bones, so they put "decoy" bones into his grave and hid the real bones in the graffiti wall which made up part of the monument above St. Peter's grave. Since the Christians knew where his real bones were, they inscribed their prayers and intentions onto the graffiti wall.

During the special tour, called the scavi tour, we were led underneath the original Basilica of St. Peter to the graffiti wall and got to peer into the chamber where Peter's bones still reside. While the placement of these relics means that very few people will get to see them, the Church feels that it is important to leave the bones where they are since there is a beautiful and important symbolism in the fact that the relics are beneath the altar of the Basilica and have been for centuries. This symbolism reminds us that the Church is built upon the many holy men and women who have gone before us, willing to give their lives for the sake of their faith in Jesus Christ.

The relics of the Saints continue to be sources of encouragement for us as we are called to live our faith in Christ Jesus in a radical way, as well. These relics carry the power of Christ, as He continues to work through the men and women who were closest to Him through faith, hope, and love!