

Mass at the Tomb of Saint Peter, Apostle

I. Introduction

Yesterday we celebrated, here in the Basilica of Saint Peter, the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul, principal patrons of the City of Rome. Today the Church celebrates the feast of the First Holy Martyrs of the Holy Roman Church. And what a privilege it is for us to return here to the Basilica of Saint Peter for this great feast.

II. Saint Peter

The great dome of Saint Peter's Basilica was designed by Michelangelo, and it rises above the tomb of Saint Peter, the fisherman from Bethsaida in Galilee, who was called by Christ to leave everything and follow him. As we heard in yesterday's Gospel, Peter became, by divine mandate, the Rock on which Christ built his church.

After a time in Jerusalem, Peter came here to Rome, he was the first Bishop of this City, and less than a football field away from here, he was crucified, upside down, in the Circus of the Emperor Nero. Incidentally, the obelisk which stands in the center of St Peter's Square was the centerpiece of the racetrack-like Circus of Nero, and it could well have been the last thing St. Peter saw before he closed his eyes to this world and opened them to the glory of Heaven.

In those days, the Vatican Hill was a necropolis, or a kind of large cemetery. So Peter was buried here, and from the earliest days of the Church's existence, his tomb became a place of pilgrimage and prayer. After Christianity was legalized in the Roman Empire, the Emperor Constantine built a great basilica over his tomb. That church stood for over 14 centuries. The present Basilica that stands today was completed in the 16th century; the wording across Carlo Maderno's façade explains the rationale behind the whole building: In Honorem Principis Apostolorum: In honor of the Prince of the Apostles.

III. The Tomb of Saint Peter

As you might imagine, with all that construction over all the centuries, a lot of layers accumulated above the tomb of St Peter, such that after a while, no one was sure of

the precise location of the tomb of the first Pope. If you look to your left, and my right, you'll see the tomb of Pope Pius XI. He was Pope from 1922 to 1939, and he ordered excavations which, to make a very long story short, located with precision the tomb of St. Peter.

Through this window behind the altar, you can see to the area just above the tomb of St Peter. That silver box you see is called the Niche of the Pallia. On the night before the Pope gives the Pallium to the new Archbishops, the pallia are kept there, above the tomb of Saint Peter, as the Church asks the intercession of St Peter, so that the Archbishops who wear the Pallia will be filled with apostolic courage and with the love of the Good Shepherd.

IV. First Martyrs of the Holy Roman Church

So today, after celebrating Saints Peter and Paul, we commemorate all the men and women who, during the three centuries that the Catholic Faith was illegal in the Roman Empire, shed their blood rather than forsake the Lord Jesus Christ and his holy Church.

In the early Church they were subjected to almost unimaginable cruelty. Particularly ferocious was the persecution of the Emperor Diocletian; Christians were crucified, fed to wild beasts, and even turned into human torches at the Emperor's garden parties. Yet they remained steadfast because they had discovered the pearl of great price, they had become friends with Jesus Christ, and they had discovered the truth of the Gospel, which leads to eternal life.

They are our older brothers and sisters in Christ. They have fought the good fight, they have finished the race, they have kept the Faith.

V. Conclusion

Standing so close to the tomb of Saint Peter reminds us that all of this is real. Here are the bones of a real person who actually encountered Jesus Christ. His life was changed forever by Christ - and so were the lives of the first Martyrs of the Church of Rome - and so is your life, and mine.

Today let us ask their prayers that our faith will be deepened by the experience of these days, so that we too might be found faithful to the very end.