

## **“Into the Darkness”: Feast of Saints Peter and Paul**

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[*Editor’s Note*: The following homily was delivered on June 29, 2002, at the opening assembly for the Society of Mary’s Province of the United States of America in St. Louis, MO. The readings for the day were Acts 12:1-11; 2 Tm 4:6-8, 16-18; and Mt 16:13-19. This article was first published in *Marianist Soundings*, vol. 7, no. 1.]

During one of our nation’s darkest hours, Abraham Lincoln buoyed up his aides’ spirits with this story from his youth:

When I was a small boy, I had a terrible fear of the dark. I always tried to get to sleep before nightfall. One night my father taught me this simple lesson. We were fixing harnesses in the barn, and my father asked me to go to the shed for more supplies. I stood at the barn door frozen in fear of the dark night. My father came up to me and said, “Pick up the lantern. What do you see?” “The oak tree,” I answered. “Is there anything between you and the oak tree?” “No,” I replied. “Then walk to the tree and lift the lantern again. What do you see?” “The mulberry bush.” “Walk to it and lift the lantern again.” By the time I’d gotten to the bush, I’d figured out the procedure. And so I made my way, step by step, from tree to bush to coop to shed and finally to the supplies. It was a simple lesson, but it can take you a mighty long way.

Some of our feelings this weekend, and certainly the experience of this feast and these readings, are about taking a series of steps into the darkness. However, we take those steps with a large measure of faith. Let me suggest some very concrete reminders of walking into the darkness that this feast and these readings bring forth.

### 1. Following Jesus is a high-risk venture.

The setting of the first two readings of today’s feast is a prison! In the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, Peter is being guarded by four squads of soldiers. In the Letter to Timothy, Paul is writing from prison, reflecting on the lack of support he received during his trial, but looking ahead nonetheless with hope.

Neither Peter nor Paul sought imprisonment and death any more than Jesus did. They accepted, however, what the Good News asked of them, eventually realizing how much of a high-risk venture the following of Jesus really was.

While we certainly hope none of our futures will entail a prison stay, they will most certainly entail taking risks and suffering for those risks. We do not know what the future holds as we begin this venture of a new Province; like Peter and Paul, like Abraham Lincoln, like William Joseph Chaminade, we have to sometimes take steps into the darkness. It is the only way to conquer our fear.

### 2. The strength to walk into the darkness comes from God.

Listen carefully to how the main characters in our readings today expressed their reliance on God.

In the Acts of the Apostles, Peter sums up his experience by saying, “Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me.”

In the Letter to Timothy, Paul confidently remembers, “The Lord stood by me and gave me strength.”

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus reminds Peter, “For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.”

As we embark on this journey as a new Province, we need to rely on God in the very same way and with the very same trust and confidence. It is only with such confidence that our hope is sustained. As Thomas Merton once said, “The real hope, then, is not in something we think we can do, but in God who is making something good out of it in a way we cannot see.”

3. Following Jesus means an ongoing discovery of who Jesus is in my life.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus asks the question, “Who do you say that I am?” The implied question is, “Do you get it yet?” For each of us, this must be a question we ask ourselves often. In all probability, our answers to the question will be different depending on where we are on the way. Nevertheless, the question needs to be constant.

By asking the question and by discovering, day in and day out, who Jesus is in my life, I draw ever closer to him. It is an essential means of becoming more intimate with him. And, after all, that intimacy is central to our lives as religious. Sandra Schneiders forthrightly asserts, “Intimacy with God is not one way to live religious life. It’s the only way.” Her assertion is similar to Father Chaminade’s constant exhortation to his followers, “The essential is the interior.”

### **A Final Word**

In celebrating Peter and Paul today with the entire Church, we commemorate two spiritual giants of our faith and of our Church. They gave Christianity its foundation and first directions. As we know, they were two very different personalities.

Peter: The fisherman, blustering, too quick to speak and act, the Rock, the Keeper of the Keys

Paul: Educated, adept at word and argument, slow to convince but then impossible to sway, the Runner, the preacher of the Word

They stand for us as saints, not because they were perfect, but because of their faith, their commitment, and their perseverance. This gathering and our long and wonderful Marianist history in the United States has grown in the same way . . . through

the faith, commitment, and perseverance of those Marianist giants who have gone before us.

As Peter and Paul stepped into the darkness and the uncertainty of following an itinerant preacher, as our Marianist forbearers in this country stepped into an unknown future, and as we step into this new and exciting phase of our history, let us keep in mind the sobering words of Archbishop Oscar Romero:

It helps now and then to step back and take the long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts; it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that should be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection; no pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the Church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is the difference between *master* builder and the worker.

We are the workers, not master builder, not ministers, not messiahs.

We are the prophets of a future that is not our own.

As we strive to build that future, sisters and brothers, let us place ourselves in Mary's hands so that she can draw us more closely to her son!