

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

One Named Peter, One Named Paul

I wish we shared the feasts of saints, You find them celebrated properly in some monasteries, and in a big way in some continental countries. I wish it would become fashionable in England – I'm sure it once was. Perhaps we treat them too formally, instead of seeing them as real members of our family.

Canonisation

I'm quite sure Peter and Paul were never subjected to the undignified process of canonisation, by which selected persons are nominated to a long process of committees within the Vatican and elsewhere. Forensic teams are set on you, to scabble around for your relics (not just your bony bits, but things like the letters you wrote on bad days, your bank-account, even, I suppose, your Backs of Bulletins) and to find out the long-lost facts of your life (an invitation, surely, for people to make up a lot of stories about you). Then they ask some negative old dogsbody to dig up the dirt, and to do his damndest to discover you were an ordinary rotter after all. Then, if they draw a blank there, they invite the faithful to pray to you, so that a miracle (in Mother Teresa's case) or two (for the rest of us) may be identified as having been worked by your intercession. Finally, they hold a big inquest to decide whether you are a good example to the faithful *at this precise moment* – whether your elevation to the altars is *opportune*. If you pass all these rigorous tests, the Church on Earth will declare that you are with God, and that you are a jolly good model for other people to imitate.

How God Does It

There seems to be a quite different process afoot in the case of Peter and Paul, who never had the benefit of the attentions of any Vatican committee. They were vetted and nominated by the Son of God in person – one before, and one after the Resurrection. The strange thing is that, had their lives been subjected to the scrutiny of the Sacred Congregation for the Saints, I could well imagine that they would have had a very sticky passage, or might even have been turned down outright. After all, one was a total loser on the very night of the arrest of

Jesus, and denied three times (with oaths) that he knew his Master, who once called him "Satan". An "opportune" candidate for canonisation? The other spent a good deal of energy, by his own admission, doing everything he could to extinguish the Church in its infancy, and acted as cloakroom attendant at the first martyrdom, "entirely approving" of the killing. A good example to the faithful?

Their Real Worlds

I think of the real Peter as ponging of fish a lot of the time, and, I guess, being a fairly usefully-built person with a powerful suntan. He seems to have struggled to understand things, and to have had a big hand in emotion. Paul, whilst probably not especially fishy, by his account in 2 Cor 11 was battered, scarred, and possibly crippled too. He seems to have had an embarrassing weakness, some say epilepsy. My way of thinking of these figures is to see all the human flaws and wounds from which each of them so clearly suffered as being taken up and glorified in their God-given sanctity. It is precisely because they were weak and ordinary and human that they were precious to God. Now that we have seen how Jesus chose them and gave them a part in his saving of the world, we can treasure them in just the same way. Saints don't have a supernatural quality as they walk the earth. They are the hairy, crumpled characters that inhabit the human menagerie today. But when they are taken up into the mystery of Christ, however halting and unwilling at first, they become wonderfully illuminated, the humble Princes of the Church we celebrate today. May they pray for us!

Fr Philip