

January 20, 2019

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Eight summers past I was in Rome with my family and a dozen youth from the parish church I was serving at the time. It was a pilgrimage experience – we spent a lot of time with the very religious/spiritual things that are Rome. One of the things about Rome is that St Peter's presence looms large over the city. Yes, there is the Basilica, that massive Church and all that it represents – both spiritually and historically. But there are also the bones of St Peter, deep under the magnificent church named for him, down in the dark, buried depths, below the dome and under the high altar. And there is the golden box over the altar at St John Lateran where, by legend, the skulls of both Sts Peter and Paul are kept. And there is San Pietro in Vincoli, where you can see the chains that held Peter in prison.

But down just a few steps off the Appian Way, not far from the Catacombs of St Sebastian and St Callixtus, is a tiny church, the Church of St Mary in Palmis. And here, in this place, you can see down to the ancient catacombs, there where a few bishops of Rome were martyred and early Christians buried. And you can stand there on the ancient Roman Road, the Appian Way, that grand road traveled by Caesars and the Roman army. And it is the same road, by legend, that Peter, at the end of his life, was running down, running to save himself, running from certain death in the persecutions of Nero.

And there, on the side of that ancient road is this little church, St Mary in Palmis, better known as Domine Quo Vadis. And by the legend, as St Peter is running for his life, he runs into a man going the opposite direction, going back toward Rome. And Peter says, "Domine quo vadis?" "Lord where are you going?" And it is Jesus. And he says, "I am going to Rome to be crucified again." And Peter turns around and returns to Rome and meets his fate. Inside the little church there is a marble slab [actually, a copy of a marble slab] with two large footprints. By legend, they are the footprints of Jesus, left by the Lord as he is speaking with Peter.

One of the boys in our group, Ian, got separated from us while we were in the area, and I eventually found him in the little church. As we were walking back to our group, I said to Ian that those probably were not really the footprints of Jesus. And Ian said, "I know. But the story is so beautiful and powerful. It's a reminder that being a Christian is something you do, not just something you think."

For me, it is important to remember that Christianity is something you do, not just something you think. Today, we listen to Peter blurt out what he believes in his head and his heart, who he believes Jesus to be, the Messiah, the anointed one [anointed in the same way as the ancient kings like David], the savior, the liberator of the people. But it is important to understand that these are all very real, very physical, very bodily things. To be Messiah is not a head thing, it's a body thing. Peter would have known that Jesus has to *do* things to be the Messiah. A messiah has to *act*. And to believe in Messiah would undoubtedly demand that he, Peter would have to act as well. Believing in Messiah would call upon Peter to act in the world. So, you see, confessing Jesus as Messiah is more than something that rolls around in your head. Sooner or later, it has to get out of your head and into the rest of your body – your hands and feet and eyes and ears, into your heart. Peter's words [and some of Peter's actions] indicate that he knows this, that he knows that confessing – believing – that Jesus is Messiah will include your body, your life, everything that you are.

That little church on the Appian Way is a poignant reminder of this. To confess Jesus is going to, someday, move out of our head and into the rest of us. It's going to ask us not to only think, but to act, act in the world where Jesus is. It will call us into the world – where Jesus is – and it may even call us back to our own Rome, the very places and people from whom we run away.

To confess Jesus' true identity calls us more deeply into the world. But if you think of it, it makes all the sense in the world. Jesus came to be *in* this world, to change *this* world, to save *this* world. And that is work that takes all of our selves.

Who do we say that he is?

And are we ready to follow him back to Rome?

Amen.

Pastor Erdos

The Confession of St Peter

St Matthew 16:13-19