



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



SS. PETER & PAUL

By Timothy Horner, O.S.B.

One could make a good case that, after Jesus, Peter is the most likeable and Paul the most interesting man in the New Testament. Let us compare them:

PHYSIQUE: There is an early second century medal in the Vatican Museums showing **Peter** as sturdy, thickset, with a thick curly beard, and **Paul** as thin, bald, with a long head, deep set eyes and a rather straggly beard.

EDUCATION: As a fisherman from Bethsaida in Galilee—the boondocks— **Peter** would not have had much, the equivalent of a grade or two. He was a countryman, would speak Aramaic and, perhaps some Greek; he would have had a long apprenticeship as a fisherman. **Paul** was a city man, a Roman citizen, Jewish, well-trained in Jewish law and observance, who had sat at the feet of Gamaliel, one of the most distinguished Rabbis of his time. Schoolmasters sometimes imagine historical characters as schoolboys of today. I can see Peter as a tight end, apt to stray and become a loose end, getting into the open and calling for the game-winning pass, and perhaps then dropping it. It is hard to picture Paul playing football, but he might have been a manager. When they stoned Stephen, he took no part, but he did watch their clothes.

CHRISTIAN FORMATION: **Peter** had about a three year, group formation apprenticeship with Jesus, plus the very intense experience of Holy Week, the Passion, Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus and, very specially, Pentecost. **Paul**, on the road to Damascus, underwent his dramatic conversion from zealous persecutor, even to death, of Christians to zealous missionary of Christianity. This was followed by, apparently, three years of private tuition by God in Arabia. But theology was not handed to him on a platter. He had to digest, reflect on, pray about and develop it. That, incidentally, is why it is valuable to read his letters not in the order in which they are printed in the Bible, but in the order in which they were written. In addition, he had mystical experience of which we know only that he was ‘rapt unto the third heaven’ in the body or out of the body. The two had very different forms of training, to suit their very different characters and styles of learning

ACTIONS: Let us consider some of their actions that throw light on their characters. **Peter**’s most famous remark (Mt 16:17 ff) must be, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”. For this, because God has revealed it to him, Jesus praises him and makes him the rock on which the church will be built. A few verses later, Peter says the Passion must not happen, and Jesus calls him Satan, for thinking man’s thoughts, not God’s. It may not have taken place that soon, but Matthew is surely telling us something.



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In Mt 14:28, when Jesus walks on the lake toward their boat, impetuous Peter answers the Lord's call to come to him, but gets only part of the way and is rebuked for his lack of faith. In Jn 21:7, Jesus appears on the shore of the lake and tells them where the fish are. Perceptive John says, "It is the Lord", and you can almost hear Peter say, "Oh, is it?" He then jumps into the lake and splashes to the shore. Finally, in Jn 21:7, after Jesus asks him for the third time if he loved Him, Peter was upset: he did have deep feelings.

Paul we know as an indefatigable missionary. This brought him immense physical, mental and spiritual suffering. He made three major missionary journeys; he wrote thirteen letters (not counting Hebrews); he was flogged, beaten, stoned, shipwrecked; he was in danger of being drowned in rivers, murdered by bandits and even of being killed by some Christians. We read a little sadly of his confrontation with Peter over circumcision (Gal 2:11-14) even though by it we were liberated from Jewish observance, and of his confrontation with Barnabas (Acts 15:39) over John Mark. It does seem that, although Paul wanted to be all things to all people, there were limits to his tolerance of differences.

NATURAL CHARACTER: **Peter** was generous, impetuous (which at least entails impetus—no bad thing for a leader) practical, energetic, and transparent. After Pentecost, he was more of the rock, a name of much meaning for those familiar with the shifting sands of much of the Holy Land. He was tolerant, too, and, after his quarrel with Paul, still writes (2 Pet 3:15-16) of "Our brother Paul, who is so dear to us . . ." though there are "some points in his letters hard to understand". The new edition of Butler's *Lives of the Saints* calls him "impulsive, generous Peter" and we might add "without guile, deviousness or manoeuvring".

Paul, by contrast, was intellectual, a speculative theologian and also a mystic, with great concentration, persistence and apostolic zeal. He must have been formidable, though not so in personal appearance, but was also markedly humble. He had ample self-esteem—I doubt if Peter ever bothered his head about self-esteem—and recognized God's good gifts to him; he saw that they were good, but equally he reminded everyone that they were God's gifts. "I live now not I, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20) and "I will boast . . . not about anything of my own except my weaknesses" (2 Cor 12:5). To recognize God's good gifts both as good and as God's gifts is surely true humility.

CONCLUSION: If God can make great saints out of two so diverse men as these, by using and transforming their natural gifts, characteristics and weaknesses, then surely by using and transforming our natural gifts, characteristics and weaknesses he can make great saints of each of us.