

CENTENARY OF THE FRANCISCAN MISSIONARIES OF MARY

In the late 1940s when engineers were working in St. Peter's Rome, they broke through the floor into a hitherto unknown lower level. A team of archaeologists investigated and to their great surprise, they uncovered, beneath the basilica, a complex of ancient mausolea that in 4C had been partially filled-in to form the foundations of the *first* St. Peter's. At the central point was a simple tomb with a casket inscribed *Petrou*. They then realised what they'd found. For that tomb was directly beneath the lower altar of the church Constantine built in 4C, and directly beneath the crypt altar of the church Charlemagne built in 8C, and directly beneath the great high altar of St. Peter's today. Amazed, Pope Paul VI gave permission for the casket to be opened. What they found inside makes you tingle with excitement: the bones of a 1C Palestinian man in his mid-60s who'd been crucified upside down.

I have fought the good fight to the end says St. Paul. *I have run the race to the finish*. We celebrate today the two princes of the apostles: Peter, the Rock on which the Church was founded, and Paul the great Missionary, very different characters yet each in their own way crucial for us. Peter was down to earth, a fisherman, yet appointed by Jesus to be the leader, the first among the Twelve. After the Resurrection, he is often mentioned in *Acts of the Apostles* as the Church's spokesman, with a unique prestige and authority. Paul, on the other hand, a devout middle-class Jew, persecuted the Church, but underwent a spectacular conversion on the Road to Damascus. The author of many letters, he spread the Gospel courageously across Asia Minor, Greece and Rome. Today, we praise and thank God for these two holy men, whose work founded the Church and enabled us to receive the salvation of Christ.

There's no better feastday than this to celebrate the centenary of the FMM on this site, at the invitation of Lady Alice Fitzwilliam. I follow in the footsteps of my predecessor Bishop Cotter and thank God for all He's given us here and for the Sisters' work over the years: a novitiate, an orphanage and school. In our day as the Church calls us to the work of new evangelisation, Cold Ash is a great grace for our Diocese as an oasis of prayer and spirituality where people in a secularised culture can come to meet the Lord. In this work, we can learn much from SS. Peter and Paul, men of deep faith yet brilliant communicators. Indeed, each one of us should copy their passionate love for Jesus – *Yes, Lord, you know I love you* – and their burning desire to spread the Faith.

You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church. The gates of the underworld can never hold out against it. Pilgrims have visited Rome since the 2C to pray to SS. Peter and Paul and to be close to the holy father. Pope Francis is the 265th successor of Peter, to whom Jesus said *I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven*. This power of the keys is the authority to bind and loose, to teach true doctrine, to make decisions *in persona Christi*. It's a power in certain cases graced with infallibility, freedom from error, that certitude which characterizes our Catholic faith. We thank God for the amazing gift of the Church and rejoice to belong to the one, holy, catholic and apostolic community Christ founded. So in this Mass, let us pray for the Church and the holy father. Let us pray too for FMM and for ourselves. Like Peter and Paul, we're ordinary folk, called to an extraordinary mission. Let's ask the Lord to grant us the faith of Peter and the energy of Paul. May we always be orthodox, yet creative and courageous missionaries.