

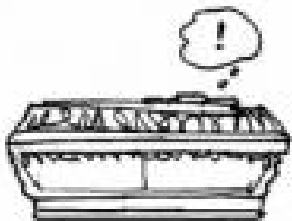
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Them bones ...

by Pat Marrin

NCR Today



"By sharing the cup of the Lord's suffering, they became the friends of God."

Entrance Antiphon, Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul, Apostles

A writing teacher once said that a piece of writing has to have good bones. How many speeches, editorials, even novels are rhetorically fulsome and flowing but lack an underlying structure that holds the whole work together. Sounds great but says little. Style without substance. It lacks bones.

A news story out of Rome today reports that archeologists probing the contents of the supposed tomb of St. Paul have concluded that the bone fragments it contains date from the first century and can be assumed to be those of the saint. The timing of the probe coincides with the Year of St. Paul, so there is perhaps some marketing going in here. Even with the witness of unbroken tradition supporting it, an ancient shrine probably can't yield this kind of certainty, but for anyone interested in this, another even more significant tradition is at stake -- the centrality of Rome as the focus of the apostolic foundation of the church. Peter and Paul, key apostles of the church as it emerged from Jewish Palestine in the Greco-Roman world, were together in Rome and, as history is now interpreted, this gave Rome its pre-eminence as the seat of Christendom.

It was not reported whether Pope Benedict XVI breathed a sigh of relief.

Whether this latest claim is true or relevant, the church has pretty good bones. Its scriptural and traditional narrative is as solid as any shrine, its authority has some historical precedence and its institutions are as good a starting point as we have for exploring the mystery of God active on earth in human community, culture and creed.

Because Christianity claims an historical validity, it is important to try and show that real people, real events and real places are involved, not just visions or revelations or concepts. Real people like you and me factor into the story, actual lives lived along the time-space continuum we share, events that changed the course of history to shape our present, framing for us the same questions that confronted first generation believers in Jesus. What impact did he have on them that was so profound that it changed everything, for them and for us?

The wonder of this history is matched only by its limits as any basis for our faith. While some converts may emerge from museums crying "Credo!", most of us need direct experience to be moved to commit ourselves to someone of something claiming to have absolute credibility. In most case, that involves relationships, other people who impress us, convince us by the way they live based on their beliefs. This kind of authority beats archeological evidence or formal pronouncements. It is because we believe that Peter and Paul laid down their lives for Jesus that we, 2,000 years later, honor them as cornerstones of our faith.

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