

St. Paul tells a story in the letter to the Galatians about a meeting he had with Peter. It was not a pretty sight. While Paul was spreading the gospel at Antioch in Syria, he got into trouble. Some other missionaries appeared and Paul discovered they didn't agree with his interpretation of the gospel. Obviously, they didn't know you might as well argue with Rush Limbaugh as disagree with St. Paul. Basically, Paul's position: "If you want to be a Christian, come, be baptized." The others said, "No, no. If you're a Gentile, first become a Jew, then be baptized." This meant, among other things, obeying Jewish dietary laws and circumcision for the men. St. Luke says politely, "They had no small dissension and debate." Paul charged down to Jerusalem with his friend Barnabas in tow--(well, they were friends at the time; Paul eventually got into an argument with Barnabas too, but that's another story). They met with James, who was head of the church in Jerusalem; Peter, who would lead the church in Rome; and John, the third of those apostles who spent so much private time with Jesus in the gospels. They all decided to back off the Gentiles, and just asked them to refrain from pagan sacrifices and fornication. They did not impose the entire Jewish law. In fact, Peter and Paul began eating Gentile food. This mattered to Paul because he argued Christ freed us from strict observance of the old law, but gave us a new law, the law of love. All this made Christianity immensely appealing to the world.

Everything was hunky-dory until Peter visited Paul in Antioch. Paul noted that Peter no longer ate with Gentile Christians, but only with Jewish Christians. Even though they had agreed that Christians should eat whatever they want, Peter changed his mind. A few Jewish Christians convinced him he should not go with the new way; he should stick with the old. So Paul chewed him out for being inconsistent and too political. It was not a pretty sight. Although we only hear about this argument from Paul, he assures us that he won.

Today we celebrate the feast of Peter and Paul. We commemorate their martyrdom today as well as their mission. But it's worth remembering that the two of them didn't always get along. Peter vacillated; Paul bullied. Peter tried to make peace; Paul tried to make arguments. Yet the two of them brought the gospel to the world and suffered martyrdom for it together in Rome. Their faith outshined their fights.

In our church and in our homes we become disillusioned or frightened when bishops don't agree on inclusive language, when theologians challenge the pope on the ordination of women, when friends dispute, when parents argue, when some people prefer the old way, and some like it the new. I hope the next generation will remember us for our faith, not for our fights. Let us pray together, preach together, and die together. Christ is our mission, charity is our method, and God is in charge.