

HONORING OUR PARISH NAMESAKES

JUNE 26, THE FEAST OF SAINTS JOHN AND PAUL

“Apart from their names and the fact that they are Christian martyrs there is little that is certain about these two saints.” [Butler’s Lives of the Saints. New Edition, 1997. June volume]

Not much to go on for our parish name, is it? And yet, note the key words that they were ‘Christian martyrs’. They were honored as martyrs, shortly after their deaths (late 4th c.), and the one who is said to have deposited their relics in the current Church of SS. John and Paul in Rome and established a Church over a home there was Pammachius, a well-known friend of St. Jerome and a Roman senator, who lived during the time indicated and certainly could have known of these two brothers. However, there is not enough independent historical testimony from the period to sort out the legends from the facts connected to these two saints, other than that they were martyrs honored for their faithful witness during a time of persecution. The recorded acts of John and Paul are quite ancient but are of limited historical value, since they contain many noticeable chronological errors. But it will be these stories which pass into the “Golden Legends” of the Middle Ages and become the basis for the account that is usually given of their lives.

The whole story is as follows. John and Paul were brothers and army officers whom the emperor Constantine held in high esteem and so were assigned to the household of his daughter Constantia. In some versions of the story they were heirs to Constantia and court dignitaries. But when Julian the Apostate became emperor (called such in

Christian history because of his return to ancient Roman pagan worship), they refused to go to the court to take the oath to serve the Roman gods and offer sacrifice, even though many others were doing so. One historian of the time said that Julian persuaded many Christians, including even some priests, to make such sacrifices, using his flattery or bribing them. John and Paul proved immune to both flattery and gifts and then to threats. Julian gave them ten days to reconsider, after which he had them placed under house arrest and killed by a captain of the guard, Terentianus, and buried on the spot. During those ten days the brothers met with their friends and celebrated Mass with a priest of the Roman community. They made plans to have all they possessed distributed to the poor and thus were ready to face their fate fully. Their execution was kept from the public as much as possible, including where they were buried, because Julian did not want to stir up a cult of martyrs. One year after their death, however, Julian died in battle and was succeeded by Jovianus who embraced the Catholic faith. He allowed a basilica to be built over the place where their presumed graves were and that place of martyrdom soon became a pilgrimage site. The date of their martyrdom is not actually known but 362 A.D. is the usual year given. Their feast day is June 26th.

The devotion to SS. John and Paul grew and remained strong due to two primary reasons. First, because their names were eventually inserted into the Roman canon (what we today call Eucharistic Prayer I). Secondly, The Church of SS. John and Paul in Rome became one of the ‘stational churches.’ These are churches assigned to a priest of Rome but are used by the bishop of Rome (the pope) during the Lenten season

(Friday after Ash Wednesday for the Church of SS. John and Paul) and so receive significant attention each year. In times past the Church's Liturgy of the Hours used an image from the Book of Revelation, comparing the martyred brothers to the two olive trees and the two candlesticks or lampstands, which are said to "*stand in the presence of the Lord*" (Revelations 11:4). And the Magnificat antiphon for evening prayer on their feast day added "*these just men have stood before the Lord and have not been separated from one another,*" referring to how they were brothers in life but became even deeper brothers by sharing the same faith and same martyrdom.

THE REDWOOD ICON OF SS. JOHN & PAUL

In the fall of 1999 the Parish of SS. John and Paul commissioned Anthony J. Bellomo, a nationally known liturgical artist, to create a rendering of the brothers, John and Paul, for the church. He met with a committee from the parish and read everything that was available about the brother saints. He decided upon a large redwood carving that could



be hung upon a wall of the church. As he was playing with different designs he prayed with some of the statements from the Liturgy of the Feast of SS. John & Paul mentioned above.

The icon depicts the two brothers, arm in arm, almost dancing to the Resurrection. If either brother had any doubts about facing martyrdom, they gave each other the *courage to hope*. They knew in the deepest recesses of their hearts that the Resurrected Christ awaited them with open arms and a welcoming smile of victory. The two olive trees of Faith are strong and erupt in massive flames of Light leading all to the joy of Resurrection.

The SS. John & Paul Icon encourages us to live as the Light of Christ, to devote ourselves to serving the needs of the poor, the sick and the broken. It reminds us that we can always live our Christian faith better in community than alone. In serving and loving others we are assured of the promise and glory of the Resurrection. With the witness and help of these two brothers in faith, we also have the courage to hope.