Today we celebrate the solemn feast of Sts. Peter and Paul. Last month, some members of our Sunday Community traveled to Rome. They visited the four basilicas of Rome, two of which are the Basilica of St. Peter at the Vatican, and the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls. Peter and Paul are metaphorically and literally pillars of the Church. The liturgical calendar of the Catholic Church includes 17 Solemn Feasts. Of these, nine pertain to Jesus; four, to Mary; and four to saints: All Saints Day; St. Joseph, the spouse of Mary; birth of John the Baptist, and today’s feast. The Church ranks Sts. Peter and Paul among its most important saints. Also, only three saints among the Church’s 13,000 saints have two feast days: John the Baptist, Peter, and Paul.

The basilicas of St. Peter and St. Paul, Emperor Constantine constructed about 330AD. The locations where Constantine chose to build the basilicas had been long revered by the earliest Christians. Both Peter and Paul had suffered martyrdom under Emperor Nero about 67AD. St. Peter requested that he be crucified upside down since he felt unworthy to die in the same manner of Christ. St. Paul was beheaded. Early Christians marked Peter’s burial place with a red rock signifying the martyred Peter whose name means “rock.” These earliest Christians created a memorial at the site of St. Paul’s burial. Throughout the Church’s first three centuries, i.e., up to the time of Constantine, many early Christians were buried on these same sites, especially with Peter, either by martyrdom or by choice. Archeological excavations made throughout the decade of the 1940s verified these burial sites as those of Peter and Paul, and on top of St. Peter’s tomb most of the Church’s 265 popes have been buried.

I would like to mention a few details about Peter and Paul, whom St. Irenaeus describes as, “the most glorious apostles.”

Both were chosen by God, and both had their names changed. In today’s gospel Jesus asks his apostles, “Who do people say that I am?” Simon responds, “You are the Christ, the son of the Living God.” To which Jesus replies, “You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it.” St. Paul was approaching Damascus to arrest Christians and bring them to Jerusalem for trial as apostates from Judaism when he was literally knocked off his high horse. In the midst of a blindingly bright light, Jesus asks Paul, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” After this moment of dramatic conversion, Saul ceased his persecution of Christians, entered a quiet phase for ten years, and subsequently became known as Paul, which is the Romanized form of the Jewish name Saul. And Paul evangelized for Christ and became the Apostle of the Gentiles.

Both played very important roles. In the four lists of the apostles in the New Testament, Peter is always named first. When Jesus went away from the crowds during which he experienced the Transfiguration
and the Agony in the Garden, he took with him the same three members of his inner-circle of apostles: Peter, James and John.

St. Paul humbly admitted that he did not deserve to be called an apostle because previously he had persecuted Christians. He adds, however, that the resurrected Jesus himself had called Paul, that he became an apostle, that he had worked harder than all the other apostles, and that “I consider myself inferior to the “super-apostles” in nothing.”

The achievements of these two men are extraordinary. Rather than focus on their achievements, I prefer to focus on their imperfections/limitations/failings and despite these the marvelous deeds which God achieved through them.

In the Garden of Gethsemane when the Jewish leaders and Roman soldiers came to arrest Jesus, Peter drew his sword and cut off the ear of Malchus, the servant of the Jewish high priest, which Jesus immediately healed. Jesus told Peter to put away his sword. That same evening, Peter denied Christ three times. Peter did not grasp the fullness of Jesus’ message until Pentecost.

St. Paul had persecuted Christians. He stood by and held the garments of fellow Jews as they stoned to death St. Stephen, the Church’s first martyr. Paul went out of his way to persecute Christians and to bring them back to Jerusalem. He was strong-willed: arguing with Barnabas against John Mark who had abandoned Paul on his first missionary journey, and arguing with Peter that Gentile Christians ought to be required neither to undergo circumcision nor to keep Jewish dietary laws. Paul gives hope to all Christians, when he writes, “I do the things that I don’t want to do, and I don’t do the things that I do want to do.” We all can identify with that experience.

We take hope in the lives of Peter and Paul. They were imperfect, yet God achieved great things through them. You and I are quite imperfect. Like Peter and Paul, we are at our best when we allow the grace of God to work through ourselves. Peter evangelized at Jerusalem and Rome. Paul evangelized from Antioch in Syria throughout Asia Minor, Greece, Rome and possibly Spain.

You and I are quite imperfect, yet we are also called by God. In our daily lives, where and how might we evangelize? ... How could you be more Christ-like at home? ... At home, who needs a helping hand, a kind word, or a word of tough love? ... At work or school, who does not believe in God to whom you might demonstrate your faith in words or deeds or by wearing a Christian symbol?

In all humility, we admit our weaknesses. St. Paul writes, “I willingly boast of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may abide with me. ... For when I am powerless, it is then that I am strong. We confess our sins, we ask for and receive God’s forgiving and healing graces. In letting go, we let God lead us, ... just as did Peter and Paul.