

Dedication of St. John Lateran

Today we celebrate a rather unusual feast day in the Church: the feast of the Dedication of the Basilica of St. John Lateran in Rome. To my knowledge, this is the only feast in the Church calendar for a building and not a saint or a doctrine of our faith or an event in the life of Christ. Why would we have a feast day for a building?

First, a little about the basilica of St. John Lateran. It is actually dedicated to two saints: St. John the Evangelist and St. John the Baptist. And it is located on the Lateran hill in Rome. So that is where its name comes from. Incidentally, St. John Lateran is actually the cathedral of the pope, the Bishop of Rome. Every diocese has a cathedral, which is the principal church of that diocese. It's where the cathedra – the Bishop's chair – is located. And the cathedra represents the office and the authority of the bishop, who is himself a successor to the apostles. One might think that the

pope, being the bishop of Rome and the successor to St. Peter, would have his cathedra or the chair which signifies his authority at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, but that is actually not the case. His cathedra is found a few miles away, at the Basilica of St. John Lateran. Since this is the pope's main church, so to speak, one could say that in a sense it is the most important church building in Catholicism.

So the basilica of St. John Lateran represents the authority of the pope, the bishop of Rome, the successor to St. Peter, who was appointed by Christ to lead his Church here on earth. And the Church uses this feast day about the dedication of a church building to teach us about the whole Church itself. So the word "church" of course can refer to a building, such as this one. But the word "church" also refers to the whole People of God, and the Body of Christ Himself.

Our first reading is from the prophet Ezekiel and refers to a vision he has of a temple. At the time of Ezekiel, he and the much of the Jewish people were living in exile in Babylon, far away from Jerusalem and their homeland. The Temple in Jerusalem lay in ruins. The Jews believed that the Temple in Jerusalem was the most sacred place on earth, and that the Spirit of the Lord Himself dwelt there. Much of Ezekiel's preaching to the exiled Jews was that their exile and the destruction of the temple was due to their sinfulness and failure to be faithful to their covenant with the Lord. But this reading today gives them a message of hope: that one day the Lord would restore them to their land, and that one day a new and glorious temple would be rebuilt.

As Catholics, we believe that now the Lord is present in the Blessed Sacrament in every tabernacle in every Catholic (and Orthodox) church – thousands and thousands of churches in almost every country throughout the world. So our churches are

very sacred places indeed. If Jesus Christ, God Himself, is present in the tabernacles of our churches, when we enter church we are in the most sacred place on earth – only every church is just as sacred because of His presence. So when we are in church, it is important that we act with reverence, because we are in the house of the Lord; we are in the Lord's presence. It's important that we maintain sacred silence, keeping conversations low and to a minimum, out of reverence to the Lord who is present here, but also out of respect for one another. Our churches are houses of prayer and worship, and it's important that we show respect to those who come here to pray. Our world is not particularly comfortable with silence, and churches are really the only public places where we can pray in peace and quiet, and so we ought to act differently in church than we do elsewhere.

So our churches are sacred because the Lord is truly present in them. But that is not the only place the Lord dwells, and the word

“church” is broader than just the buildings. We believe that the Lord also dwells within each baptized person: at baptism, we receive the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in us, not in a physical, but rather in a mystical way. St. Paul reminds us of this in our second reading today from his first letter to the Corinthians when he says, “Brothers and sisters, you are God’s building.” And then a little further he adds, “Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” St. Paul can say that we are the temple of God *because* the Holy Spirit has come to dwell in us at baptism. As such, we ought to treat ourselves with reverence, and we do this by striving to follow the Lord, trying to fulfill His will in our lives, striving to imitate the Lord Himself, and inviting Him into our hearts, again and again, every day. It’s important that we persevere in doing this, because it is possible for the life of the Spirit to diminish or decrease in us, and this is what happens when we sin. The more sin takes root within us and within our hearts, the more we stifle the life of the Spirit dwelling in us.

Thankfully the Lord has given us a remedy for this, and that is repentance. When we repent of our sins and ask the Lord for forgiveness, He will always forgive us and He will dwell within us anew. And the more we follow Him and conform ourselves to Him, the more His life within us will increase, the more He will transform us into His own likeness.

And because the Lord dwells in the baptized, we can say that together we are a part of the Body of Christ. And Jesus Christ is the head of this body. So at baptism, not only does the Holy Spirit take up residence within us – we become temples of the Holy Spirit – but we also become a part of the Mystical Body of Christ, that is, of the Church, whose head is Jesus Christ Himself. And in our Gospel reading today, Jesus identifies Himself as the new Temple. Ezekiel in our first reading had a vision of a new temple in Jerusalem from which life-giving water flowed. But this new temple was not to be a physical building, but rather Jesus Christ himself.

In this reading from John's Gospel, we hear how Jesus came to the Temple in Jerusalem and cleansed it by throwing out the money changers and the people who were selling doves and oxen and other animals. What exactly is going on here? What were these people doing here in the first place? All these transactions were taking place in the outer courtyard of the Temple. The Temple in Jerusalem consisted of three parts, with the sanctuary being the most sacred part: only one designated priest could enter it on a particular day of the year. This was where the Holy of Holies had been kept, and it was in the sanctuary itself that Jews believed the Spirit of God dwelt. The outer courtyard of the temple was a much busier area, and there were probably many people milling around inside it every day. The money changers and the sellers of animals and birds were there because people would purchase doves, oxen, and so on, for the priests to offer in sacrifice to the Lord. At festival time, it would be particularly busy, and there was a lot of animal sacrifice taking place, so much so that blood and the water used to wash away the

blood would literally flow out from different openings in the temple and down the walls. After Jesus died on the Cross, remember that a soldier pierced his side with a lance, and blood and water flowed out from it. Jesus had given his body as the ultimate sacrifice, replacing all the animal sacrifices that took place in the temple in Jerusalem for the atonement of sins. Since Jesus gave his own body, the ultimate and perfect sacrifice, there is no need for animal sacrifice anymore; it has become obsolete.

And in today's Gospel, when Jesus drives out the money changers, he is asked by the onlookers to give them a sign which would prove that he had the authority to do such a thing. What does Jesus say to them in reply: "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." Of course the Jews misunderstood him, thinking that he is speaking about the literal, physical temple. But John reminds us, "But he was speaking about the temple of his Body.

[And] when he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they came to believe....”

As important and sacred as our church buildings are, the Church is even greater – much greater – than the buildings themselves. The Holy Spirit dwells within each of the baptized. And at baptism, we become a part of the Body of Christ, the new Temple. And Jesus has given us the one, perfect sacrifice through his suffering and death on the Cross, so that we might have eternal life. And not only that, He also gives us Body and Blood as spiritual food and drink for our journey through this life. So let us go forward now to encounter and to receive the Lord in the Eucharist.

- **November 9, 2025 at St. Mary's, Spring Lake**