

WHY OUR CHURCH CELEBRATES THE DEDICATION OF AN ANCIENT CHURCH IN ROME.

Each year our church celebrates the Dedication of St. John Lateran Basilica in Rome on November 9th. When the feast falls on a Sunday, it displaces the Sunday in Ordinary time that we would normally celebrate on this date.

Each diocese has a cathedral. The cathedral church in Rome is St. John Lateran and not the more famous church, St. Peter's. When the Emperor Constantine officially recognized Christianity, he made generous gifts to the church, one of which was a palace and grounds formerly belonging to the Laterani family. In 324, he added a large church on the grounds. Later a baptistery was added and dedicated to St. John the Baptist. In subsequent years the entire edifice became known as St. John of the Lateran. It is our oldest church. Despite many fires, earthquakes and wars, it has survived; thereby, becoming a symbol of the survival of Christianity itself. The observance of this feast connects our local church with the Church of Rome, which is the center of unity. The dedication of any church recalls the heavenly Jerusalem that all church buildings symbolize. The November liturgical readings lead us in that direction.

Fr. Bill Bausch, in his book *Storytelling the Word*, offers the following reflection on the importance of this feast.

We celebrate this feast of St. John Lateran, because it is the Christian church, the mother church. But that is only the surface reason. We celebrate this feast because it reminds us of our origins. Rome was evangelized by Peter and Paul and countless missionaries. In turn, Rome, being the world center at the time, the heart of the Roman Empire, sent missionaries out to the west. Most of us are European in origin, although that is fading, and so the faith comes to us by way of Rome. Not directly from Jerusalem where the faith started, nor from Antioch in Syria which sent missionaries to the east, to the Balkans, and to Turkey, but from Rome and we celebrate that fact. We have been evangelized from Rome, the mother church.

"To be in union with Rome," means to be in union with our origins, with that faith proclaimed by Rome's imports from the mid-east, Peter and Paul. Rome is where Peter eventually lived and died and passed on the faith. The Lateran Palace or St. John Lateran's is the place where Peter's successors have lived and died and passed on the faith. It's our Christian equivalent of the Governor's Palace in Williamsburg or Independence Hall in Philadelphia. It's an historical sign and symbol of our deep rootedness, our connection with the past, our touchstone of faith and with the long line of popes who have presided there.

St. John Lateran basilica, therefore, reminds us of our catholicity, our relationship with the center and from the center of the rest of Christianity. It reminds us here in our little parish in Colts Neck, New Jersey, that through our connection with that mother church, we belong to a vast brotherhood and sisterhood both vertically to the past and horizontally to the present. And in these days of almost pathological individualism, of atomistic existence, this is no small thing indeed. We're part of a wide community. We are catholic with both a small and big "C." St. John Lateran tells us that.

There's another reason why the Catholic world celebrates a church building in another part of the world. We are reminded that the building of temples and churches is a natural, poetic instinct we humans have. We need symbols and rituals in order to live and would sooner do without food and water. The poor of France know the Eiffel Tower could be melted down and the money given to them, but they would resist, knowing they do not live by bread alone. The Dome of the Rock for the Arabs, the Wailing Wall for the Jews, Westminster Abbey for the Anglicans, Sancta Sophia for the Turks, are all more than buildings. They enshrine national history and aspirations and house celebrations and rituals. They give identity and cohesion. Which is why tyrants' and invaders' first act is to destroy a people's shrines and literature. Without them, the people are nothing.

At time, people have lost their moorings and declared that all buildings are human vanity. The Puritans wrought terrible havoc by destroying many masterpieces, smashing stained-glass windows, and burning priceless works of art. They forgot that churches and cathedrals were not the products of human vanity,

although at times they were, but truly the expression of human faith. Men, women, boys and girls, people from all walks of life, the whole town, for example, helped build Chartres Cathedral, stone by stone, love by love. This feast reminds us that our church, however grand or humble, is a sign of transcendence, a gathering for us to worship and say out loud what we are pressured to deny openly: Jesus Christ is Lord!

A final reason we celebrate this feast of our mother church, St. John Lateran, is that it reminds us that we ourselves are unfinished temples. We indeed have a great history of grandeur. Over the centuries the church has been responsible for more good and decency and help than will ever be realized. The constant media focus on our failings should not blind us to the enormous good we have done throughout the ages, and still do. Realize that Catholic Relief Services is the largest private relief service in the world. Think of all the Mother Teresas there are, the countless Catholic hospitals, schools and clinics, leprosaria. Perhaps the biggest assistance to AIDS patients is the Catholic church, although you would never know it. We have taught people to read and write and sing. We have healed, consoled, buried, and converted. We're in every part of the globe ministering to others, day and night, endlessly. We have done Christ's work.

But, of course, we are, as I said, unfinished. Just as St. John Lateran had to be restored many times throughout the centuries because of the ravages of time and vandals, so has the whole church. We have sinned and we have constant reforms and renewals to call us back to our origins. This is the reason we celebrate this feast. It recalls struggles, countless martyrs, sacrifice, Peter and Paul, missionaries, and it challenges us to see how far we have strayed from the message they left us at so great a price. To that extent, this feast beckons us to reform.

St. John Lateran. It's a shame many people, many Catholics do not know it and are perplexed as to why it's a weekend feast day and why we take the time to celebrate it. But now you know and in the knowing you should have pride and resolve" pride in our ancient heritage that keeps us grounded to the truth and resolve that our spiritual ancestors will not, as one of our Presidents said, have died in vain.