

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, 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 Basilica. It is our oldest church. Despite many fires, earthquakes and wars, it has survived; thereby, becoming a symbol of the *endurability* of Christianity. The observance of this feast connects our local church with the Church of Rome, which is the center of our unity. The dedication of any church recalls the heavenly Jerusalem that all church buildings symbolize.

Four reasons why it is important for us to celebrate the Dedication of St. John Lateran.

In his book *Storytelling the Word*, Fr. Bill Bausch gives us four reasons for celebrating the Dedication of an ancient church.

- ***It is our Mother Church.*** *We celebrate this feast of St. John Lateran, because it is 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 and not directly from Jerusalem where the faith started. We have been evangelized from Rome, the mother church.*
- ***A sign of our union with Rome.*** *"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.*
- ***Buildings are expressions of what is important to us.*** *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. 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.*

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: Jesus Christ is Lord!

- ***St. John Lateran reminds us that we ourselves are unfinished.*** *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. Catholic Relief Services is the largest private relief service in the world. Think of all the Mother Teresa's 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.

Some reasons to be proud of our Catholic Church in the United States

A parishioner passed along to me some interesting and impressive statistics from an article written by Sam Miller, a prominent Cleveland Jewish businessman. Miller wonders why newspapers would carry a vendetta against the Catholic church one of the most important institutions in the United States. Then Miller gives some impressive statistics:

- The Catholic church educates 2.6 million students daily. This is a savings of about 18 billion dollars to the American taxpayer.*
- The Catholic church has 230 colleges and universities in the United States with an enrollment of about 700,000 students.*
- The Catholic church has a non-profit hospital system of 637 hospitals which account for hospital treatment of one out of every five people--not just Catholics--in the United States today.*

As stated earlier, Catholic Relief Services is the largest non-government relief service in the world. I wish I had more statistics on the work of CRS and Catholic Charities.