

Dedication of the Lateran Basilica in Rome

By way of exception—but it is the second week in a row that this has happened—the Church’s liturgical calendar is interrupted again today. Last Sunday, which ordinarily would have been the 31st Sunday of the Year, we celebrated instead All Souls’ Day. Today, which should be the 32nd Sunday of the Year, we are celebrating a church in Rome, St. John Lateran Church or Basilica. Such interruptions tell us that those who composed the liturgical calendar gave great weight to these two events, great enough to supersede the normal Sunday sequence. I think we can understand the first interruption, for the commemoration of our dear departed is something of great weight. But to celebrate a church, albeit a church in Rome, does not immediately appear to us, I suspect, as being of such great importance or weight. So we will have to look again at what we can learn about this church in order to understand why it merits its own feast.

You know of course that for the first three hundred years of its existence Christianity was illegal, and membership in it could mean the loss of one’s property or even life. At times these first Christians suffered great and wide spread persecution such as those under the Emperor Decius around 250 AD and again around 300

under the emperor Diocletian. They were exposed to wild beasts in the Roman Colosseum. Nero was the first to kill Christians in the 60s. He blamed them for burning Rome down—he had probably done it himself to make room for his own building plans—and had them burned as torches to light the gardens of Rome. But all that changed with the first Christian emperor Constantine in the early 300s. He gave to the church part of the palace of a wealthy Roman family called the Laterani, and this became Christianity's first public church building. This church has served as the pope's church since then. Thus we are honoring the mother church of Christianity.

But is that so important, important enough to call for its own Sunday feast? Well, maybe it is if we realize that our religion is rooted in history and in events and in people who make up history and events. And when you talk about people you have to talk about times and places, yes, even buildings. And that is true not only of our religion but of its parent religion, Judaism, as well. Look how important the temple was for Jews. Solomon built the first temple in the 900s BC. The Babylonians destroyed it around 587, but the Persians allowed the Jews returning from exile in Babylonia to rebuild it in the 520s. The Jewish puppet king Herod enlarged and decorated this second temple in our Lord's time, but in 70 AD the

Romans destroyed it. It has never been rebuilt, but the only part of it remaining, its western wall, the wailing wall, is a place sacred to all Jews. They pray at it and place their prayers in its nooks and crannies. So did JP II. Yes, places become sacred and important to religious people. Think of the importance we attach to Bethlehem and to Rome.

But our readings don't stop there. Now they take this reality, a church, a building, and bring it to another level. Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth in the 50s: "You are God's building." And again: "Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" And in today's Gospel from John Jesus talks about his own body as a temple. So we have gone from a church, a physical reality, to people, who are also physical realities, but of a different sort, for they contain and are the expression of spirits, of souls, and we are now told that we are the temple or building of God because God's spirit dwells in us.

We have a beautiful church here at St. Charles. It is also the mother church of our city, its first Catholic church. Our parish had two smaller wooden churches for the first twenty-two years of its existence. Then it built this church in 1868. We reverence it, we love it; it is sacred to us. It is the place where many of you were

baptized and married and from which you will be buried. It serves families long moved away as the rock of their family's history, the place to which they return, often in death. But it is even more than that. It is the home of a community of believers, and every priest in every generation here at St. Charles could and no doubt did say to those sitting in these pews what Paul said in his letter to the Corinthians: You are God's building. The Spirit of God dwells in you.

Let us be what we are, the building of God, the community in which the Spirit of God dwells, indeed, the body of Christ. When we receive the Lord's body and blood here each week, we are transformed little by little into what we have received, the body of Christ. For we do not change the Lord into us; he changes us into himself. Let us live as the body of Christ, as the building of God, not only when we are here in church but in our everyday lives. For this building, although it houses the Blessed Sacrament, is closed most of the time. But we are out and active in the world each day. We must be the building and body of Christ, the dwelling place of the Spirit of God, in our world today.