



The Dedication of the Church of St. John Lateran—2008

November 9, 2008 Fr. Joe Sobierajski, S.J.

Ezekiel 47:1-2, 8-9, 121 Corinthians 3:9c-11, 16-17

John 2:13-22

With the edict of Milan in 313, Constantine recognized Christianity as a legitimate religion of the Roman Empire. Soon after, he gave the Lateran palace to the Bishop of Rome and began to build the first “Basilica” meant to be used as a church for this newly acceptable religion that was soon to become the official religion of the Roman Empire. The church that we call St. John’s Lateran was originally dedicated as the Church of the Savior in 324 and became the Seat, the Cathedral, of the Bishop of Rome which still remains today. It has in the course of nearly two thousand years been destroyed once by an earthquake, and twice by fires. The present building is a remodel, practically a total rebuild, by the 17th century architect Borromini. Carved in stone above its main portal in Latin is, “Mother and Head of all churches in the city and in the world” which gives us some reason why historically we celebrate this *Feast of the Dedication of the Church of St. John Lateran* rather than the 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time.

I must say that its celebration caught me quite off guard. I had already finished a Homily for the 32nd Sunday when Bill Rainey asked me something about our Psalm for the Feast, and I discovered my mistake. Sunday readings are only replaced for the celebration of major solemnities or feasts and so it is not just the age of St. John’s, its 1,684th anniversary that we celebrate but something more.

Today we celebrate what a “Church” is. By that I don’t simply mean the building of St. John’s in Rome, or St. Peter’s here in Charlotte, but all churches everywhere and more importantly we celebrate who “we” are as church. Who you and I are as a living, breathing community of believers here and throughout the world with all the faithful who have come before us and who will come after us. More than that we also celebrate what is expected of us as a community and as individuals as we worship in our churches of stone, wood, brick, mud, straw, or tin throughout the world and as we leave those churches to live in our communities wherever they may be.

Compared to St. John Lateran, our St. Peter’s is both young and humble in its materials and decoration, and yet both these building share the essence of what it means to

be a church. A church, although we may initially think of it as such is not simply a public building for worship. It is a dwelling, a home for the Lord. No matter what material it may be made of, nor what architectural style it might embody, a church is above all a building that reminds us that God dwells among us.

In today's Reading from the *Book of the Prophet Ezekiel* the prophet speaks during the time of the Babylonian captivity, when the Jews were taken into exile, and the temple of Solomon was destroyed. For the Jew, Solomon's Temple had an importance that no one church not even John Lateran or St. Peter's Rome has for us. The Temple, and there was only one Temple, was the focus for the encounter between man and God. Ezekiel's words look forward to the time when those captive in Babylon would return to the Promised Land and rebuild the Temple. The new Temple would then become a source of blessings which Ezekiel symbolizes for us by the flowing waters that give life to all the lands they touch because God again lives among His people. Even while they are still in the exile of Babylon the very promise of the Temple is reason for them to rejoice and to hope.

That kind of joy and hope should be ours too, because God in His incarnate, real Presence has chosen to live within the walls of this Church. Whenever we come together here to celebrate the Eucharist, we give thanks for the extraordinary way in which God has chosen to dwell among us and for the way in which He continues to act in our lives through His Son's Life, Death and Resurrection. The Eucharist, Christ's Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity, is broken and poured out for us should make us keenly aware that Church is not simply a building.

Paul tells us in our reading from Corinthians that we are God's building which rises on the foundation of Christ Himself. Paul uses this image time and time again not only in his letters to the Corinthians, but also in his Epistle to the Ephesians. While Paul takes some credit for helping to establish the foundation of Christ among them, he also makes it clear that they and we with them are not only a building, and living stones, we are also co-builders in the process of building up the living Church. Paul employing the image of the Church, by pleading with them to not let whatever differences and disputes they may have weaken or destroy God's Temple because it and they are holy and sacred in God's eyes.

We know full well here at St. Peter's just how fragile church buildings can be, but we also know how working together we can build up and strengthen those same buildings making them examples of human handiwork that can bring praise to God. More than that,

however, our own experiences have taught us that as Church, as a community of faith, we are much more than brick and mortar, wood and plaster. I believe that experience allows us to more fully understand and agree with Paul's words because we know that we are the living Church. Certainly, the beauty of our stained glass windows, our triptych, our sculptures, our beautiful pine and slate floors, our copper holy water fonts, as well as the simple elegance of this structure give us comfort and help to sustain our faith, but we know that we are much more than the all these things. It is the people who make up our community and the loving concern they have for each other and those in need beyond our community who sustained by the Eucharist are the living stones of this Church.

In today's Gospel from John, the Apostles recall the words of Scripture, "Zeal for your house will consume me!" as they watch Jesus clean the Temple of the merchants and money changers. We need to have that same kind of "zeal", that same kind of care for our temple. Yes, we need to care for this physical building. We have, like any building, will continue to need care and repair. But, more important than painting bricks and leading windows is the care we need to take of each other by supporting each other in faith and buttressing up our trust. No one can deny that these past years have been difficult ones for the greater Church. While our faith in God may remain strong we all know that our trust and confidence in our priests and hierarchy has been eroded and with good reason. Shoring up that trust and confidence means that lay men and women as well as bishops, religious as well as priests must demonstrate a new level of respect for the good will, intelligence and prayerfulness of all as well as a dedication from all for the health of the entire body of Christ. I'm not at all sure how long it will take us to reach that kind of mutual trust and confidence once again, but I do know that it is something to which we must all be committed to or we might just find the building falling into complete disrepair.

St. John Lateran has stood as a symbol for our Church for nearly 2000 years and each time it was threatened with collapse from earth quake, fire or simple lack of care it has been strengthened, repaired and made stronger. Many times in those same 2000 years our Church has been racked by disputes, schisms, and scandal, and whenever that has happened there have been men and women of deep faith and prayer who have been instrumental in bringing a renewed sense of Christ's mission to the Church. It is just such men and women that the Church is in need of at this time. Do you love the Church enough to invest yourself in bringing that needed healing, that needed optimism, that needed energy into what may

initially seem a thankless task? Jesus said that He would never leave us orphans, and sent the Holy Spirit to guide and protect us. After all these years, the Holy Spirit has not given up on us, and we have Christ's promise that the Spirit never will. Every time we partake of His Body and Blood, we commit ourselves to being the living, breathing stones of His Church. As we say "Amen" when offered His Body and Blood this morning, let us each consciously rededicate ourselves to making His Church a strong and stable structure where all who come to find His comfort and security, a place and a community where faith and trust are strengthened, a place where the peace of Christ lives.