

Dedication of Lateran Basilica – November 9, 2008

LESSON: The Catholic Church Is Indestructible: Introduction

Usually, when a liturgical memorial falls on a Sunday, the normal Sunday liturgy **overrides** it.

- ? This is because Sunday, the Lord's Day, the **weekly participation** in his sacrificial death and resurrection, of his triumph over sin and evil, is the real **cornerstone** of the Church's spiritual and liturgical life – it's a "little Easter."
- ? This is why it is **STILL** a **mortal sin to willingly skip Sunday Mass** - it's like telling God, "Thanks, but **no thanks** for your gift of salvation."

But today is **different**. Today a liturgical memorial falls on a Sunday, but **it** takes **precedence over** the normal Sunday Readings and prayers.

And to make the situation even more **exceptional**, the memorial isn't connected to a saint or a particular person, but to a **building**, to the first Christian church in history: the Basilica of St John Lateran in Rome.

Why is this building so **important** that today, all of the world's Catholics are all thanking God for it and celebrating the memorial of its dedication, which took place under Pope Sylvester I in the year 324 AD?

- ? Because this building is much more than **just** a building.
- ? It is a **powerful symbol**, a **tangible embodiment** of one of the most profound truths of our faith: that **the Catholic Church is indestructible**.
- ? Jesus promised that he would be with us **until the end of time**, and that through all the ups and downs of history, the gates of hell would **never prevail against** His one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.
- ? This building, this Basilica, stands as incontrovertible **evidence** that Jesus has been keeping his promise – that the devil (and the world) will **NEVER** overwhelm the Church.

And yet, look around the world today... at the sorry state of things. I think that we would **all** recognize that something is **wrong** with the world, but not everyone agrees on where that wrongness came from, nor on how to make it right.

It is our Catholic Faith that offers us, and the world, a radical vision of how salvation comes...

- ? To save the fallen world, God became man in Christ, and has invited all people to become his **children** and **partners** in salvation, by becoming **active members of the Church**.
- ? The true path of salvation, then, is a **partnership**.
- ? **Without** God and his grace, we can do **nothing**, but without **our cooperation**, God's grace will be handcuffed.

- ? He **created** us without our help, but he will save us and lead us to eternal life only if we agree **to do our part** - that's how much he respects our freedom [St Augustine].

St Paul understood this truth profoundly.

It's what he had in mind when he wrote the lines that we just heard from his Letter to the Corinthians: "**You are** God's building... the Spirit of God dwells **in you.**"

ILLUSTRATION: The History of the Lateran Basilica

This has been a year of interruptions – today's not the first time this year that Ordinary Time has been interrupted:

- ? On June 29 we celebrated the Solemnity of Sts. Peter & Paul (instead of the Sunday of Ordinary Time).
- ? September 14, another interruption to celebrate the Triumph of the Cross.
- ? Last weekend, OT was interrupted again in order to celebrate All Souls Day.
- ? Now, **AGAIN**, we “skip over” ordinary time to celebrate **ANOTHER** important day.

Today's liturgical memorial – the dedication of the Basilica of St John Lateran, in Rome in the year 324 – is a celebration of the oldest Christian church building in the world.

Why did it take **so long** for the early Christians to build a church?

The answer can be given by one simple word: **persecution.**

- ? During those three hundred years, Christianity suffered **wave after wave** of violent persecution, because the Christians **refused** to worship the false pagan gods of the Roman Empire.
- ? The Emperors believed that the **stability** of the Empire depended upon worshipping their false pagan gods, so **refusing** to worship them constituted the crime of **treason.**
- ? The Christians were perfectly willing to **abide** by Roman laws and be **productive** citizens, but they **absolutely refused to worship** anyone besides the one, **true** God, Jesus Christ.
- ? As a result, throughout the empire they were arrested, imprisoned, interrogated, and tortured.
- ? In that situation, building permanent, **public** places of worship, churches, was just **too risky.**
- ? They used **private homes** instead, just as many Christians are doing today in China.
- ? The situation changed only when **Constantine**, the son of St Helen, became emperor in 312 AD.
- ? With Constantine, who eventually became a Christian himself, Christianity was **legalized** and the age of persecution came to an end.
- ? The first church built in this **new era** of Christianity was the Lateran Basilica.

And so, it stands as a **tangible symbol** of the **partnership**

- ? between God and his Church,
- ? between Christ and his disciples,
- ? that enabled this tiny, poor, non-military religion of Christianity to **conquer** the great Roman Empire.

APPLICATION: Living Our Mission

Since its dedication, the Lateran Basilica has been rebuilt, renovated, and redecorated **dozens** of times throughout the centuries. It **survived** barbarian raids, earthquakes, fires, and neglect, and it's still standing.

Its every detail has symbolic meaning.

- In the vestibule is an **ancient Roman statue** of the Emperor Constantine, who legalized Christianity and sponsored the construction of the Basilica.
- There is an **inscription** etched into a stone on the building's facade that calls the church the **head and mother of all Christian churches** throughout the world.
- There are statues of **Fathers of the Church** from East and West adorning the top of the basilica's façade - as if to remind us of the universality of the living Church of God.
- The front entrance of the Church is comprised of the immense, fourteen-foot-high **bronze doors** that used to serve as the entrance to the **Roman Senate building**, long before the Christian era.
- The interior is **brilliantly** decorated with
 - o paintings of the prophets,
 - o monumental statues of the Twelve Apostles in the pillars – which hold up the church
 - o riveting relief sculptures of scenes from the Old and New Testaments,
 - o colored marble floors and intricate apse mosaics,
 - o a minutely carved wooden ceiling covered with **gold leaf**,
 - o and a marble altar that contains within it the ancient wooden altar that **St Peter himself** used to celebrate Mass.

This beautiful Basilica is, as John Paul II put it, a **prayer in stone** that inspires generation after generation of pilgrims.

But it should also inspire us to **decorate our own lives** with equal attention and care, adorning our **souls** with Christ's **wisdom** and our **behavior** with his **virtues**, like courage, kindness, and elegance.

As today's Second Reading reminds us [You are God's building...You are the Temple of God...] so that we, (**everlasting temples** of Jesus Christ, his **living** basilicas,) will be as inspiring to those who come in contact with **us**, as the Lateran Basilica is to the pilgrims who come in contact with **it**.

That's what God is hoping for, and he can make it happen, if we let him.

You see, to save the world, Christ came and called us into a partnership with Him by becoming active members of the Church.

God has work for **each one** of us to do.

- Each one of us has an **absolutely unique** life.
- **No one else** has the same network of relationships.
- **No one else** has the same experience, education, and personality.
- **No one else** - absolutely no one else - can fulfill the mission that God, in his providence, has given to each one of us **individually**: to know, love, and serve him as **only we can**.

For those of us who have **already discovered** our mission, our vocation, today we should **renew our commitment** to living it out faithfully, joyfully, hopefully, and courageously.

For those who are still **seeking** their vocation, today the Holy Spirit is asking **three things**.

- First, **continue to pray**: Every day, spend **time with Christ** by reading and reflecting on the Bible, by speaking with the Lord and the Blessed Virgin Mary, asking for **guidance** and filling your hearts with God's **wisdom**.
- Second, live all your relationships and responsibilities as **Christ** would live them - faithfully, dependably; this is your **training**, your preparation for your life's mission.
- Third, **do not be afraid**. Remember, we are not in this **alone** - we are God's **partners**; we are his building, his temple.

Today's Psalm reminded us so beautifully:

- "God is our refuge and our strength,
- "an ever-present help in distress.
- "Therefore, we fear not,
- "though the earth be shaken and mountains plunge into the depths of the sea."

As we continue with this Mass, let's **thank** God for making us his partners in the salvation of the world, and let's ask him for the grace to **do our part well** – to LIVE out our partnership with Christ – becoming “living temples” of the Holy Spirit – so that just as the Lateran Basilica reminds us of Christ by its beauty – WE will remind people of Christ by the beauty and integrity and witness of our lives.