

Sunday November 9 Dedication of St. John Lateran Basilica



We Are Church In the first three hundred years of its existence the Church was persecuted throughout the world. The persecution was somewhat sporadic. Sometimes, the Roman authorities would close their eyes to Christians, not bothering with them. Other times they would only persecute Christians if an individual Christian was denounced by someone.

Quite often, the Emperors, such as Domitian and Diocletian, would declare that all Christians had to be found and put to death. Even in the best of times, Christianity was a dangerous way of life. Christians had to meet in people's homes, or in underground cemeteries like the catacombs. They could not build Churches; the authorities would know where they were. But Christianity continued to spread throughout the Roman Empire. In the year 313 the Emperor Constantine declared in the Edict of Milan that Christianity would no longer be persecuted. His mother, St. Helena, had become a fervent Christian. He would become a Christian himself. Now, Constantine and his mother lived in a palace in Rome that had been owned by the Laterani family. Constantine turned a wing of that palace over to the Church. This was the first Christian Church in Rome.

It was dedicated to Our Lord the Redeemer and to St. John the Baptist. Therefore it is known as the Basilica of St. John Lateran. From the pope of that time, Melichiades, on to the present, St. John Lateran has been the Cathedral Church of Rome. The popes themselves lived there until they moved to the Vatican Hill in the late middle ages. The Cardinal that administers Rome for the pope continues to do so from St. John Lateran. What must it have been like in those earliest days when Christians could call St. John Lateran their own Church? Can you imagine the emotion? They had their own place. They could come to Church and worship openly, and without fear. The first basilica would have been modest, a simple structure, but then as time went on rebuilding and refurbishing would provide a great, beautiful edifice for worship. Still, from the very beginning the Christians knew that as great as this building and other buildings might be, culminating in the Basilica of St. Peter on the Vatican Hill, still, it was the people not the building that made the Church. St. Paul put it this way to the Corinthians and

to us: You are God's building.

Are you not aware that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?....The temple of God is holy, and you are that temple. (1 Cor 3:16-17) Today's celebration is not really about a place, after all. It is about us. We are the Church. Together we are a place of refuge from the terrors of the world. Together, united with Christ, we are a people of love in a world of hatred. Do you ever get to the point that you just can't take what society has become? Religion is openly scorned. Catholics are mocked by the liberal media as being out of the mainstream of thought that mainstream being anyone who sees things as they do. Opposition to obvious blatantly immoral acts like abortion is portrayed as representing a right wing fringe movement, even though this opposition represents the opinion of the vast majority of the country.

Our young people have been given a very strange view of what is morally acceptable. They are taught this deranged concept: anything is permissible as long as the bad results of an action are prevented. This is wrong. For example, the concept would be that it is OK to get drunk, as long as you have a designated driver.

Or that it is OK to engage in casual intimate actions as long as you have protection from AIDS or pregnancy. The beauty of creation has been sacrificed to a pornographic world that has neither need nor desire for God. Sometimes you just want to run to a Church to get away from it all. And we do. We run to the Church as our one refuge of sanity.

The Church we run to is not just a building, it is the people. United with Christ, we the Church, have the courage to oppose the idiocies and inadequacies of our society. The people who first walked into St. John Lateran were elated to have their own building, but they knew that they already had their own Church. They had the courage to remain faithful to Christ throughout the persecution of the Romans and the mockery of their world. We who walk into St. Ignatius today and every Sunday are elated to have this building, elated to call this God's house, but we know that we, not the building are the Church.

Like our spiritual ancestors we pray for the courage to remain faithful to Christ. Faithful to Christ through the persecution of the so-called intelligentsia, faithful to Christ despite the mockery of the world. And we will remain faithful. We are as strong as the people who first worshiped at St. John Lateran. We are the Church.

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