

THE DEDICATION OF ST. JOHN LATERAN

“THE IMPORTANCE OF CHURCH BUILDINGS”

In preparation for today’s feast, I decided to make a brief survey. I called 20 families and, to whoever answered the phone, I asked: ‘What is the name of the Cathedral of Rome?’ Answers received:

- 9 people said that they did not know.
- 7 people answered with ‘St. Peter’s Basilica’
- 1 person said ‘The Basilica of St. Mary Major’
- 3 persons answered correctly: St. John Lateran.

St. John Lateran is the Cathedral Church of Rome and one of the four major patriarchal basilicas of Rome. A cathedral is named after the ‘cathedra’, or chair, from which the bishop teaches. The Cathedral of Rome, which was dedicated on November 9 in the year 324, has as its full name ‘The Patriarchal Basilica of the Most Holy Savior and St. John the Baptist at the Lateran.’ⁱ

In around the year 313, Constantine gave the Lateran palace and basilica to Pope Melchiades and the site became the residence of the popes from that time until 1309 with the departure of the papacy to Avignon in southern France.ⁱⁱ

The Lateran Basilica is known as ‘The Mother and Head of all the churches’. This is why it is important for the whole Catholic Church to celebrate its dedication.

Today we have the opportunity to reflect for a moment on the nature of church buildings. We all know that the word ‘Church’ refers primarily to the ‘Mystical Body of Christ’, the ‘People of God’, the ‘Ecclesia’ – those who are gathered in the name of God.

All of this is true, but we should not disregard the importance of the church building itself. We are a sacramental people and the building we use to worship God is of great sacramental importance. Father Robert Barron presents four images of church buildings:ⁱⁱⁱ

1. The Church is meant to be a Temple. This theme comes through in the readings for today’s feast. For ancient Israel, the Temple in Jerusalem was everything: it was the dwelling place of Yahweh, the First Temple of Solomon was the place where the Ark of the Covenant was kept; many of the psalms are the songs that accompanied the people as they made pilgrimage to the Temple.

Our church buildings are meant to be ‘re-presentations’ of the Temple. That is why, for example, in Catholic Churches we still have the ‘Holy of Holies.’ The Ark of the Covenant, which contained the Ten Commandments, was seen as the container of the living presence of God. We have that and more in the tabernacle, where the sacred species are kept: the living presence of God.

In addition, just as there was an altar of sacrifice in the Temple of Jerusalem, today we gather around the altar of God, presided over

by a priest, who offers the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, the unbloody re-presentation of the Sacrifice of Calvary.

The church building is a new Temple: the place of right praise, the place in which the praise of the people is rightly ordered. From our Church buildings flow forth grace for the renewal of the world.

2. Church Buildings are meant to symbolize the New Jerusalem.

The Book of Revelation speaks of the New Jerusalem coming down to earth: the perfect city, fully invaded by the presence of God. It is a place of beauty, splendence. The light in it is light that comes from the Lamb of God. Our church buildings are meant to draw us into a higher world. The church building is meant to be a sign, even now, of the Heavenly Jerusalem, the world that is yet to come.

3. The Church building is meant to signal Noah's Ark.

During that time of chaos, the flood waters had returned due to human sin, God sent a rescue operation in the form of a great ship on which a microcosm of God's goodness was assembled.

This image should remind us of our own situation: sin still pervades the world, and it is all around us. God has sent, in the form of the Church of Jesus Christ, his definitive rescue operation on which a microcosm of his good order is preserved. This is the Church gathered at the Mass, singing his praises, hearing his word, receiving his Body and Blood.

And, just as the doors and windows of Noah's Ark were opened once the flood waters receded and the life let out, so at the end of every Mass, we open the doors of the church building and out flows the life which had been preserved on the Noah's Ark of the Church.

It is not by chance that the main part of the church is called the 'nave', which comes from the Latin, 'navis', meaning 'ship'. The idea is this: stay aboard this ship, and you will find your way through the difficult waters of this world.

4. The church building is a symbol of the Mystical Body of Christ.

Through the sacrament of baptism, you were grafted onto Christ, washed clean and marked permanently. And, throughout your life, you come back to the Mystical Body to be fed by Jesus. You are nurtured like a child in the womb. And, when you die and your body is carried out, it is as though the womb of this Body has been opened and you are born in to a higher realm.

St John Paul II: "The beauty and the harmony of churches, destined to render praise to God, invite us human beings too, though limited and sinful, to convert ourselves to form a 'cosmos,' a well-ordered construction, in close communion with Jesus, who is the true Holy of Holies."^{iv}

ⁱ *Our Sunday Visitor's Encyclopedia of Catholic History*, Revised 2004, Edited by Matthew Bunson, Our Sunday Visitor, Inc. Huntington, IN, p. 533

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 534

ⁱⁱⁱ This section was taken from <http://www.wordonfire.org/resources/homily/st-john-lateran-and-the-meaning-of-church-buildings/4539/>

^{iv} Taken from *Magnificat*, November 2014, Monthly Vol. 16, No. 9, p. 123