

Feast of the Dedication of the Basilica of St. John Lateran: Celebrate Being Church

How wonderful that first celebration must have been in Rome and throughout the Church when Pope Sylvester I dedicated the Basilica of St. John Lateran in 324. Up to 313 AD Christians had been persecuted. But with the Edict of Milan in 313, Christianity was recognized by the Empire. The Emperor Constantine, prompted by his mother, St. Helena, gave part of his residence, the Lateran Palace, to be used by Miltiades, the Bishop of Rome. Only nine years before in what was truly the lowest point of the Roman Empire, little 12 year old St. Agnes had been paraded through Rome on her way to a horrible place that children shouldn't even know exist, and on her way to martyrdom. But in 313 a great change came. A sign of this change was that Christians now had their own churches, places where they could meet to praise God.

Today's celebration of the Dedication of St. John Lateran reminds us that we are the Church. In the second reading, St. Paul tells the people of Corinth that we are the Temple of God, the Spirit of God dwells in us.

We treasure our relationship with Jesus Christ. We each speak to him throughout our day. But we recognize that our individual relationship with the Lord comes from our communal relationship to Him. We are the community of the Lord. We are the Church. It is the Church that provides us with baptism, the sacrament where we are transformed by the Life of God. It is the Church that renews Pentecost within each of us giving us the Power of the Holy Spirit at our confirmation. It is the Church that nourishes us with the Body and Blood of Christ. It is the Church that gives us the gift of penance, forgiveness, and healing, the sacrament of the anointing. It is the Church that elevates marriages from civil relationships to the very presence of Christ in the woman and man's love. It is the Church that provides us with priests to continue our sacramental life. It is the Church that renews the sacrifice of the Cross on our altars every time Mass is celebrated. We are the Church.

When I travel, I enjoy visiting the Churches of the area. Sometimes, I'm in a basilica or a Cathedral from the Middle Ages or even earlier. I try to imagine the prayers that had gone up there in that Church, prayers during traumatic times, like during famines, plagues or wars. Prayers during celebrations like military victories, coronations, and sacraments, weddings and baptisms and ordinations. Sometimes I feel like the rocks of these Churches are alive with the prayers of the people of the past and the present. When we celebrate a Church, be it the dedication of St. John Lateran in Rome or the consecration of any church, we celebrate the people of that Church whose prayers unite them to the Universal Church, rendering the Presence of the Lord real.

St. John Lateran is the Pope's church. It is the Cathedral of Rome. We celebrate that church on this feast. At the same time, we also pray for those whose

churches are violated. There are Catholics and other Christians throughout the world suffering from attacks while they worship together in their churches. There are many who are victims of those who claim to be acting in the name of God, or in the name of the State, or both, but who in fact are doing the work of the devil. As Church we are one also with these our suffering brothers and sisters.

At its heart, this Feast of the Dedication of the Basilica of St. John Lateran helps us remember that we don't celebrate buildings; we celebrate Church.