

Sunday, November 9, 2014

Conventual Mass

Dedication of the Lateran Basilica      The Church As Symbol

Today we celebrate the dedication of St. John Lateran, the pope's cathedral. The observance of this feast ties the local church to the Church of Rome, the center of unity. On its façade are carved the words "Mother and Head of All the Churches." To celebrate this feast reminds us of our origins.

The Church of Rome was founded by Saints Peter and Paul as well as other early missionaries. In turn, Rome, then the center of the world, sent out missionaries to lands where most of our ancestors lived. We received our faith not directly from Jerusalem where the faith originated, but from Rome, the mother church. To be in union with Rome means to be united with our origins, with the faith of those immigrants from the mid-east, Peter and Paul. Rome is the place where they eventually lived, died, and passed on the faith.<sup>i</sup>

Originally the site of the archbasilica was occupied by the palace of the Latarani. It was confiscated by the Roman government at the time of Nero, and eventually passed into the hands of Constantine. Constantine gave it to the church no later than 311, for

we find a council against the Donatists held there in 313. About that time, the great hall of the palace was adapted to serve as a church. From then on, it was the center of Christian life in Rome; the residence of the popes, and the cathedral of the city.<sup>ii</sup>

In many ways, the history of the basilica mirrors both the physical and spiritual history of the Church. It is an apt symbol of the intersection of the human and divine dimensions of the Church with its aspects of holiness, sinfulness and renewal. These tensions, already present in the primitive Church are and will be part of our history until the Lord comes again.

It was a magnificent church from the beginning. Its splendor drew the attention of the Vandals, who sacked it. St. Leo the Great restored it but in 896 it was almost totally destroyed by an earthquake. The basilica was rebuilt only to be destroyed by fire. Once more it was rebuilt only to be destroyed by fire again in 1360. When the popes returned from their long absence in Avignon, they found the churches of Rome in ruins and once more the basilica had to be restored. It was in the seventeenth century, the baroque period that the church attained its present form. And like the ecclesial church, this basilica also has its critics: One author writes: "It was not

until the latter part of the seventeenth century that the church took its present appearance, in the tasteless restoration carried out by Innocent X... The ancient columns were now enclosed in huge pilasters, with gigantic statues in front. In consequence of this the church has lost the appearance of an ancient basilica, and is completely altered in character.” Transposed to the spiritual level, it sounds so much like the criticism leveled at the Church, the Body of Christ, ignoring the splendor and joy to be found within its walls.<sup>iii</sup>

Yes, there is a dark side to its history; fires, Vandals, earthquakes, and neglect have almost leveled it, but it always rose up again by the grace of God. This may seem a long historical note, but for me, the history of the Lateran is allegory for the church and the part that each of us plays in it. In the thirteenth century Pope Innocent III had a dream in which he saw a disintegrating Lateran basilica being shored up by a beggar. Prepared by the dream, the pope recognized in St. Francis of Assisi and his followers a movement that would renew the church.

But just as the structure of the Lateran basilica is an allegory for the glories and defeats of the church on earth, it stands as symbol beyond that. It, as well as all the churches in which Christians gather

around the Lord, points to a greater reality. In its component parts, paralleling St. Paul's image and theology of the body, it instructs us how the many members of the Body of Christ are fitted together to form the whole, God's building, whose foundation and head is Jesus Christ himself. As individual members in whom the Spirit of God dwells, by virtue of our Baptism, together we make up the Church and share alike in Christ's mission. Dedicated to the service of God by our Baptism, even as a church building is dedicated and set aside for the service of God, our lives and actions should witness to the holiness of God and God's love for us. And let's not forget that in any church building, whether it's the Lateran or a humble mission church, the greatest part is made up of very ordinary building blocks, the you, me, and all of us called to be part and support of the Church wherever Christ has placed us.

In the apse of the Lateran basilica are very ancient mosaics. In the top tier is a representation of Christ in glory accompanied by nine angels. Below that is a jeweled cross, surmounted by a dove symbolizing the Holy Spirit. The cross stands on a hill from which the four rivers of the gospels flow, and from whose waters stags and sheep come to drink.<sup>iv</sup> Those waters are not just for us. We, like

Christ, have a mission to fulfill. Having gathered in worship, having shared the Word and the body and blood of the Lord, we are to be channels for the waters that flow from Christ to the world.

Great parts of that mosaic probably date from the early days of the basilica. But it too had to be retouched and restored over the centuries. Just as St. John Lateran had to be restored throughout the centuries because of the ravages of time and vandals, so has the whole Church, and we as individuals and community within the Church need to be constantly reformed. We are a work in progress.<sup>v</sup> We have not yet attained the fullness of that life in Christ for which we have been created. This feast recalls to mind the struggles, the martyrs and the grandeur of our history as the People of God. It encourages us on our journey as we fall and rise on our way to Christ.

<sup>i</sup> <http://www.ascensioncatholic.net/lectionary//AllCycles/reflection/Lateran.html>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09014b.htm>

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