

Ordinary 32.Dedication of St. John Lateran
11.9.25

There are, more than likely, two questions which come to mind as we enter into this homily time. The first question – which you probably ask at the beginning of every homily is, “how long will this homily last?” The second question more than likely comes in two parts, “what is a St. John Lateran; and why are we celebrating ‘St. John Lateran’ on a Sunday?”

St. John Lateran is not a person. Rather, it is one of the four major basilicas in Rome and is named after St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist. The original building was dedicated in the year 324 – when Christianity went from being an underground religion to a religion that could be practiced openly in society. The inscription above the main door of this basilica tells us that it is the “mother church and head church” of all churches in the city of Rome and the world. Every bishop has a cathedral where he presides over his diocese. As such, the cathedral is the mother church and the head church of all churches in a diocese. St. John Lateran serves that purpose for the pope and does so for all churches throughout the world.

This feast then is an opportunity for us to reflect on what the Catholic Church is. It is also an opportunity to reflect on what our role and purpose is within and for the Church.

Several years ago, Pope Francis made a few comments about what the Church is and what it is not. He used a phrase that others have mentioned throughout history. He reminded us that the Church is not a museum for saints. That is, it is not a haven for those who consider themselves perfect. Perfection is not a

prerequisite for being a part of the Church or entering the Church. The DESIRE for perfection IS a prerequisite. Pope Francis also stated that the Church is a “field hospital” for sinners. With that, the pope reminded the world that we come to Church for healing. It is also a place from which, once restored to good spiritual health, we are sent out into the world to minister to others.

Through this feast, we are reminded that the Church is not a building. While beautiful and inspiring, church buildings are temporary. They are a means to forming the members who gather there to worship. Church buildings come and go. The Church (with a capital “C”), that is the People of God, is eternal.

Throughout my years as a priest, I’ve celebrated Mass in a variety of places. Most times, the Masses I celebrated were in parish churches throughout our diocese. But I’ve celebrated Mass on a garbage dump in Nicaragua, because the community I went to visit there lived on that dump where those folks made their living collecting scraps of metal and plastic bottles and selling them to eke out a living. I celebrated Mass on top of a mountain in Haiti with a congregation whose church was destroyed by an earthquake in 2010. The walls and the little bell tower of that church came tumbling down in that earthquake. Only a rickety roof remained, questionably supported by some freshly cut tree limbs. I celebrated Mass on a cruise ship in Europe with just a few essential Mass supplies. The cruise I took lasted 7 days. But several of the Catholic passengers on that cruise and the Catholic staff on that ship hadn’t been able to participate in Mass for several weeks or months.

Despite not having a church building, the Church – the People of God – was still able to gather in those places. When we gathered we were nourished by the Word of God proclaimed in the readings. We were fed by the Body and Blood of Christ, the Eucharist. And we were commissioned, like we are at every Mass, to go in peace to love and serve the Lord (by loving and serving one another.)

To reaffirm those points, the Church uses the readings we just heard during today's Liturgy of the Word. The first reading from the Book of Ezekial speaks of the ancient Jewish Temple. That reading describes waters which flowed from the Temple. The reading is not to be taken literally. It wasn't implying that a river of water flowed out from the Temple. Rather, it was written to make the following point. In a land that was arid, water was precious. More precious than water, was the grace and love of God which is poured out on believers when they gather to worship together. Today's feast reminds us of the same. God's grace is found in abundance when we gather in church and are nourished by the Lord and his sacraments. There's an interesting detail about the basilica of St. John Lateran in Rome. Tradition tells us that near the high altar of the church is a wooden table. That table is purported to be one which St. Peter used when celebrating Mass. Symbolically, it reminds us that we are most Church when we gather together to worship and our nourished by the Eucharist at Mass.

In his First Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul also emphasizes how the Church is not a particular building. Instead, he tells us that all Catholics form the Church. He adds that Christ is the foundation of the Church. With Christ as the foundation, the

Church stands strong against anything sinful and stands strong for what is right and good. Without the firm foundation of Christ, the Church collapses. Our Church is strong, our Church works together when Christ is the one who is first in all things; when Christ is the one on whom we depend for everything.

Finally, in the gospel, we hear the story of Jesus driving out the money changers from the Temple. In that story, Jesus was asserting that the animal sacrifices of the Temple were no longer legitimate worship. He made the point that his sacrifice which would take place on the cross – the one, true, and final sacrifice – would free us from sin and unite us in faith. He also made the point that true faith in him, and the ways we live out that faith, is what leads us to the Kingdom of the Father.

This feast affirms a theme that I've preached on for the past several weeks. As individuals, we are not Church. It is only when we come together – to worship and to serve others – that we are truly Church. A single brick does not constitute an entire house. Bricks upon bricks are what make a house. Something similar is at work with our faith. We become Church as we gather together to pray and celebrate the Eucharist. We are also Church when we live out what we receive in our individual churches by sharing the Good News with others. As I mentioned at the beginning of this homily, the dedication of St. John Lateran took place in 324. That is a significant moment in history when the Church was “ordained” in a sense to publicly live out its mission. Living our Catholic faith is NEVER an individual endeavor. A truly living faith is visible when we pray together and when we put into action the faith we profess.

Today, on this feast of St. John Lateran, we celebrate what we are as Church. And we recommit to how we should be acting as Church. We are Church when we travel on a cruise. We are Church when we gather to worship in places where there is no building. We are Church right here in the heart of Dunedin. We are Church at home and at work. We are Church at school and at play. We are Church when we help and serve our sisters and brothers in need. May we never shy away from being Church – by how we worship and in the various ways we serve one another. Amen? Amen!