

HOMILY

Dedication of the Lateran Basilica in Rome

The Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 9, 2008 – Year A

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If I were to ask you, “What is the first ranking church in Christendom?” most of you would answer, “St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome.” But that is wrong. For Catholics, the first church in the world is the Basilica of St. John Lateran. It is the oldest church in Rome and has been described as the mother of all the churches in the world. Above its doors is the inscription, “*The mother church of Rome and of all the Churches in the world.*” (The mother of all the churches in the city and in the world—and their head – *Omnium urbis et orbis ecclesiarum mater, et caput.*)

Today we celebrate the Dedication of the Lateran Basilica done in Rome on the 9th of November 324 by Pope St. Sylvester. Every bishop has a cathedral and the Pope is the Bishop of Rome. His cathedral is the Basilica of St. John Lateran, not the Basilica of St. Peter.

The first three centuries of Christianity were difficult times, especially in Rome, where the Christians were fed to the lions. When Emperor Constantine became Christian in A.D. 313 and made Christianity the state religion, Christians could finally come out of the shadows and live their faith openly. But there were no churches then. The very first place set aside for such a purpose in Rome was a wing of the palatial home of the Laterani family being used by Constantine. The first church built on that property was called “*The Basilica of the Savior.*” Later, the church was dedicated to St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist, and so it was called the Basilica of St. John Lateran. From then on, except for a few periods (such as the Avignon Papacy and the Italian revolution), most of the popes have been crowned at the Lateran and many have resided and conducted official business there.

But why is this feast so significant that it supersedes the Thirty-second Sunday of Ordinary Time—Sunday being a day usually set apart for celebrating the dedication of the pope’s cathedral—far away here in the United States or in any city or country other than Rome?

1. The first thing that this feast impresses upon us is “*the universality of our faith or the Catholicity of our faith.*” Our faith is a worldwide fellowship. It is fellowship united around the person of Jesus whom the Lateran Basilica, as well as other churches all over the world, signify. We are celebrating this unity and the universality of our faith.
2. For us Catholics, the Holy Father is the Vicar of Christ, the visible head of the Church. In him and in his Church, we see the abiding presence of Jesus, the source of life and salvation, as prophet Ezekiel saw in the Temple of Jerusalem the abiding presence of God and the source of God’s abundant blessings of all living creatures.
3. Why would Jesus go about cleansing such a holy place as the Temple of Jerusalem? After all, the activities that were going on there in the Temple were legal. They were for the purpose of promoting worship of the one true God. Animals for sacrifice were sold at the Temple area as a convenience to the pilgrims who traveled a long distance to come to the Temple. The moneychangers exchanged secular coins, which were not acceptable for such payment. Again, this was considered a great convenience for the people. What, then, was wrong?
4. One thing we notice in the cleansing of the Temple is that Jesus did not deal harshly with the buyers. His harsh, angry action was against the sellers. They are said to be making the Temple a “market square.” Making worship places market squares, losing the sense of purpose of the sacred spaces, profaning them with secular activities is what led the Lord to this revolutionary action. The Temple authorities (they are the Scribes and the Pharisees) were indulging in such “business activities” in the Temple. Religious activity became business activity.

The abuses which infuriated Jesus are several:

- ✦ The merchants selling animals and the moneychangers at work had converted the Court of the Gentiles into a noisy market, making it impossible for the Gentiles to worship Yahweh.
- ✦ The Temple authorities, by sharing the profit made by merchants and moneychangers, had converted the Temple into a “hideout of thieves.”
(Mark and Luke)
- ✦ The merchants sold the animals and birds for sacrifice at unjust and exorbitant prices (18 to 20 times the regular price outside the Temple).
- ✦ The animal inspectors, bribed by the merchants, disqualified even the healthy animals brought by poor shepherds and farmers for sacrifice. This was an unjust extortion at the expense of poor and humble pilgrims, who were forced to buy animals and birds from the Temple booths. Jesus would not take this glaring social injustice perpetrated in the name of religion.
- ✦ Roman coins bearing the images of pagan gods and the emperor were forbidden as offering in the Temple. The money changers, who took Roman coins in exchange for the Temple coin (Galilean shekel), demanded one-sixth of the value of the coin as their commission, even from the poor people who had to pay one-and-a-half-days of their daily wage as their annual Temple tax. What especially enraged Jesus was not that a fee was being charged, but that the amount being charged to the poor was exorbitant and, hence, unjust. What was happening was again another great social injustice in the name of religion. In fact, the money changers were street-level representatives of a corrupt Temple banking system. The Temple banking system had become an instrument of injustice, fleecing the poor to benefit the powerful.

By chasing the money changers and merchants from the Temple, Jesus was questioning the validity of the entire sacrificial system itself. It is here that today’s second reading from the Letter to the Corinthians becomes very relevant. The true temple where God abides is the human person. True worship—worship and spirit and truth—is to be offered in that temple. Human persons should not abuse their

bodies with immorality, licentiousness and make them market squares. They have to be preserved for the purpose for which the Creator has made them. They are his dwelling places. They are to be treated with respect. Nobody has the right to destroy them.

The point that John brings in the Gospel extract of today is that Jesus is the True Temple. The emphasis, therefore, is not on cleansing the Temple of Jerusalem, but on replacing the Temple with the Temple of Jesus' body—the Church—of which we all are living stones. We, as parts of this living body, are also Temples of the Holy Spirit of God. Treating our bodies, as well as the bodies of others, with respect is the worship that we are called to offer to God. Let us not trade them for anything meant to turn them into marketplaces.

Lateran Church and all other churches are sacred spaces that inspire and motivate us to this sort of worship—worship in spirit and truth—with great respect for our bodies and the bodies of others that form the Body of Christ, the New Temple! They are spaces where our external actions of worship lead to internal acts of worship. Today's feast and Jesus' action of cleansing the Temple of Jerusalem teaches us to replace all our old modes of worship by the new one, to replace the external with the internal, the buildings with the people of God, and fill our sacred spaces with the Spirit of God, his Holy Spirit!

Reading I: Ezekiel 47:1-2, 8-9, 12. Wherever the river flows, every sort of living creature that can multiply shall live and there shall be abundant fish, for whatever this water comes the sea shall be made fresh.

Reading II: I Corinthians 3:9c-11, 16-17. Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If any one destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for the temple of God, which you are, is holy.

Gospel: John 2:13-22. ***“Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.”***