

Fr. Roger J. Landry

Sacred Heart Retreat Center of the Carmelites of the Sacred Heart of Los Angeles, Alhambra, CA

Feast of the Dedication of the Archbasilica of St. John in the Lateran

November 9, 2014

Ezek 47:1-2.8-9.12, Ps 46, 1 Cor 3:9-11.16-17, Jn 2:13-22

Encountering Jesus in the Temple of His Presence

- “The most holy Church of the Lateran, the mother and head of all the churches of the city and the world!” These words, in Latin, greet every pilgrim entering through the front door of the Archbasilica of St. John Lateran in Rome and clearly proclaim the Lateran’s significance in Christianity. The Lateran is the mother of every church edifice because it was the first Christian basilica in history and, as Pope Francis said this morning in his Angelus meditation in St. Peter’s Square, “As there is a mother in a family, so does the venerated Cathedral of the Lateran become a ‘mother’ to the churches of all the communities of the Catholic world.” It is the head, because Rome, it is the see of St. Peter, the vicar on earth of the Head of the Mystical Body. It is the principal Church of the principal local Church in the world, the Diocese of Rome. The Lateran, not St. Peter’s, is the Pope’s Cathedral, where his *cathedra*, the chair symbolic of his teaching authority, rests. The Lateran, not the Vatican, is where the Popes resided for the first millennium of legalized Christianity (324-1308). This is the reason why on November 9 every year not just the Diocese of Rome but the whole Roman Catholic Church celebrate the feast of the dedication of their Head and Mother. “With this feast,” Pope Francis said, “we profess, in the unity of the faith, the bond of communion that all the local Churches, spread throughout the earth, has with the Church of Rome and with its Bishop, the successor to Peter.” St. John Lateran is, we can loosely say, the Cathedral of the world.
- The history of the Lateran is, in many ways, the history of the Church. During these days of retreat we’ve been pondering the reform of the Church that Pope Francis has been seeking to catalyze, beginning with our own shaping up spiritually. And the Lateran Archbasilica is a fitting symbol for the Church that as theologians say is *semper reformanda* or always in need of reform. Over the centuries, the Lateran has been multiply pillaged by vandals, three times decimated by fire, toppled by an earthquake, and neglected by the Popes and faithful sometimes for decades. After every deformation, however, the Lateran rose again, continuing to proclaim to the city and the world the Church’s faith, through the words of the popes and five ecumenical councils held there, and through the language of its art and architecture.
- That perpetual reform is also depicted in its name. The true and original name of the Basilica is “Christ the Savior,” which is emblazoned on the front of the Basilica’s façade. Every reshaping in Church history happens when Christians return to Christ and to the salvation he came to bring into the world. When Pope Sergius III rebuilt the Basilica after a 9th century earthquake, he rededicated it to the Savior through the intercession of St. John the Baptist, because, symbolically, we needed to hear once more St. John the Baptist’s summons to conversion, to make straight the paths for Christ, to level the mountains of our pride, and fill up the valleys of a shallow spiritual life, so that we could encounter Christ. Pope Lucius II (1144-1145) added the intercession of St. John the Evangelist to the dedication as a means to remind of what St. John wrote in his Gospel, that “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” The rebuilding of the Church always involves living more fully with the Lord who came to live with us. (The name Lateran comes from the Roman Senatorial family of Plautus Lateranus who at the time SS. Peter and Paul lived in Rome owned the vast area in which the Lateran now stands.)
- Perhaps the greatest way the Lateran basilica symbolizes the ever present need for reform in the Church is, however, depicted in a statue across the Square and main thoroughfare in front of its façade. I have had the great joy for the last 19 years regularly to give guided tours of the Lateran, while I was a seminarian and young priest in Rome and on the pilgrimages I lead there almost every year. I always begin the visit outside the front entrance not looking at the façade but with our backs to the front entrance. Across a large square and busy intersection at the Roman city walls, there’s a huge statue of what looks to be a monk with a hood his head and arms upraised. It’s a statute of St. Francis of Assisi. I ask the pilgrims why St. Francis would be there and few know the answer. I tell them it’s key for their grasping the type of impact visiting the Lateran should have on them. Likewise, understanding that connection is key for us to celebrate this feast well.

- The statue goes back to a dream that Pope Innocent III had in 1207 of a man in a simple pauper's woolen habit with a rope for a belt holding up the collapsing basilica. The following day the friar in his dream appeared before him, along with some similarly clad spiritual brothers, asking for approval of the rule to govern the religious order the friar was hoping to found. Pope Innocent's dream was a confirmation of what the Lord Jesus himself had said to the young Giovanni "Francis" Bernardone a couple of years earlier from the crucifix in the collapsing chapel of St. Damian on the slopes of Assisi: "Francis, rebuild my Church, which you can see is falling into ruin." Francis took that command literally, went to his father's clothing store, took some valuable fabrics and sold them along with the horse in order to start repairing the Church. Over the course of the next year, he finished the job. But little did St. Francis know that he had misinterpreted the Lord and that the Lord had another, much more monumental, rebuilding project in mind. It started with Francis himself, who responded to God's grace to follow the Lord Jesus completely, uniting himself to the poor, chaste, and obedient Lord by means of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience. Soon, many others joined Francis in this pursuit. But the reconstruction extended far beyond them. Francis' mission was to help bring the Church back to her foundations so that she could be rebuilt stone by stone on the foundation of Christ. St. Peter gave the Church's architectural plans in his first letter: "Come to [Christ], a living stone, rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." Jesus Christ himself is the foundation of the Church, the cornerstone. The Church is the spiritual house built of living stones on this foundation. And these living stones are those who build their whole life on Christ. The Hebrew word for holy is *qadosh*, which means "heavy" or "solid." The saints are those who are solidly built on Christ. The Church is made of men not marble, of women not wood, of boys not bricks, of girls not glass. To celebrate the Feast of the Lateran is to recommit ourselves as living stones, building our existence on Christ. Pope Francis, who took his papal name as you know from St. Francis, was elected to lead the reform of the Church and the reconstruction project he's carrying out involves bringing the whole Church back into shape, by helping to make of us a true temple, individually and together with others, built entirely and soundly on Christ.
- The readings of today's Mass help us to ponder this personal, parochial and universal rebuilding project. In the Gospel, we see Jesus declare that the temple is meant to be his Father's house, a house of prayer not a den of thieves and sin. He overturned tables and formed a cord to drive out whatever was unfit, whatever was not holy and consecrated to God and his service. We began this Mass asking the same Lord to have mercy on us and drive out from within us whatever is unfit. Those shocked at what he was doing in the Temple asked him to give a sign of his authority to clean the temple. He replied, cryptically, "Destroy this temple and in three days rebuild it," something that St. John tells us he was speaking of his body, which would be destroyed on Good Friday but rebuilt, gloriously, on Easter Sunday. Jesus is the true temple!
- Jesus' ultimate plan is to make us, individually and together in communion with each other, part of that temple through uniting us totally with him. The temple is God's dwelling place. Jesus, God-with-us, wants to be with us not just on the outside but on the inside. The Word made flesh wants to dwell not just "among" us but "within" us. That's the shocking reality to which St. Paul points in today's second reading: "Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? ... The temple of God, which you are, is holy." St. Paul calls the Corinthians and all of us to remember who we are as God's dwelling place and to live a life of union with God. God's plan is for us to become a true tabernacle of God, just as much as the Blessed Virgin Mary was as she carried within her for nine months her embryonic Savior.
- That reality of the becoming a Temple of God's Holy presence happens through baptism, when we, like a Church, are consecrated to be a place where God dwells, is worshipped, loved, and treasured, where the Word of God resonates, where sacrifices of praise are made to God and from which sacrifices for others are launched. But the temple we become is not meant to be a static reality. We're supposed to be constantly growing, constantly reforming, constantly rebuilding, constantly being more fittingly adorned as a temple of God's presence. This is alluded to in today's first reading from the Prophet Ezekiel.
- Ezekiel sees a vision of water trickling from the eastern side of the Temple down toward the Arabah, the sandy 20 mile desert that separates Jerusalem from the Dead Sea. The Angel takes Ezekiel another 1000 cubits (about 500 yards since a cubit is the distance between the elbow and the top of the middle finger, about 18 inches for those of us who aren't in the NBA) and the water is now ankle deep; another 500 yards

and it's knee deep; yet another 500 and it's up to his waist; a final 500 and it had become a river over his head so that he could only swim across it. And along its path, it brought all types of life to the desert as it flowed into the Dead Sea — where no marine life can survive because it's 20 times the salinity of the ocean — and raised that body of water literally from the Dead, making it fresh and allowing all types of fish to live in it again. This is an image of the Christian life of the baptized. On the day of our baptism we receive a trickle of the Living Water flowing from the true Temple's — Jesus' — pierced Eastern side, the font of sacramental life for the Church. But we're to journey more deeply with that living water. By the time we're able to communicate with others and with God in prayer, this living water should be up to our ankles. By the time we're ready to receive Jesus in Holy Communion, it should be up to our knees, so that we can kneel in adoration of the One we're about to receive. At the age of Confirmation, it should be up to our chaste waists. By the time we're adults, we should be submerging ourselves in it and allowing that river of Living Water to direct us to wherever he wants us to bring vitality even in the midst of the deserts of life. The Living Water who is Jesus wants to raise from the dead whatever Dead Seas we bear inside, converting what is salty and bitter into something fresh and alive. This living water is the source of all true reform. This is the reality we sang of in today's Responsorial Psalm. "The waters of the river gladden the city of God, the holy dwelling of the Most High!" Jesus is that flowing river of reform and of joy!

- Let's draw three obvious consequences from the reality we celebrate today, how this feast of the Dedication of the Archbasilica of St. John in the Lateran is meant to be the occasion of our rededication, our renewed consecration, to God as a temple of his Holy Presence.
- The first consequence concerns the great joy we should have that God has chosen to come to dwell within us. As we pondered yesterday on the feast of Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity, it is a mind-blowing reality that God himself comes to dwell within us. He comes to live in us, to make his home with us, to strengthen us, to help us, to fill us with his joy and make our joy complete. This reality changes bad days into happy days, changes darkness into light, suffering into deeper union, even death into life. When I'm having a bad day, when something hasn't gone the way I would have liked, one of my habits is to just look at whatever I'm facing from the perspective of what my attitude would have been if I knew that today was the day Jesus rose from the dead. Jesus' resurrection changes everything and the reality of our being made temples is that the risen Jesus together with the Father and the Holy Spirit come to live within us. How can we, like Mary, not burst out in a *Magnificat* at how the Lord makes possible for our souls to magnify him within and our spirits and bodies to rejoice in the presence of God our savior?
- The second consequence is to make sure God is always a welcome guest, to keep the temple of our body and soul pure and clean and fitting house of worship for him. In today's Gospel, we see what Jesus does in the Temple of Jerusalem in whipping the money changers and animal sellers from the temple, because his Father's house was supposed to be a holy place of prayer rather than a den of thieves trying to charge exorbitant rates to the poor so that they could first exchange their money to temple currency at rates that would make the commissions of airport money changers today look like bargains, and they would do this to be able to buy turtle doves or lambs at many times their real cost to be able to sacrifice to God. Such greed, such lack of charity, such spiritual worldliness, were desecrating the temple and Jesus wanted the sacrilege to end. Sometimes we, too, desecrate our temple. We can be as greedy as those moneychangers. We can take advantage of the vulnerable. We can turn what should be a place of God into a place of scandal. Zeal for the Father's house consumed Jesus and that's what led to his purifying the Temple. Loving zeal for the Father and for us leads him just as severely wants to want to drive out whatever in us doesn't belong in the Church we are. In the Sermon on the Mount he told us, "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell." Zeal for his house, zeal for our salvation, still consumes him and not only should we be grateful for his healing love but share that zeal.
- St. Paul picked up on the same theme in his letter to the Church in Corinth. He reminds us, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body." Sins, he went on to say, rather than glorifying God in the body, blaspheme God, desecrate the temple and, when they're serious enough, evict God from his own sanctuary. St. Paul reminds the Corinthians and us, "The body is not meant for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up

by his power. ... [Therefore] Shun immorality.” God wants us to keep our own temple as clean as the Sisters keep this Chapel clean. If we commit venial sins, it’s like allowing this Church to fill with dust, something that will eventually conceal its beauty. If we commit mortal sins, it’s like coming into this place of God and desecrating it with painted graffiti, or tar, or filth. If someone were to do that to the Church, it would rightly be considered a “hate-crime.” Whenever we commit a serious sin, it is likewise a “hate-crime” against God and against ourselves. But God’s mercy is greater. When a Church is desecrated by a hate-crime, the damage needs to be fixed and cleaned and then the Church needs to be reconsecrated by the bishop or his delegate. When we’ve desecrated the temple of God’s presence, God himself seeks to clean it through the ministration of the bishop or his priest collaborators to clean and to reconsecrate it through a good confession, something that brings our souls back to their baptismal beauty and allows the living water to flow anew bringing life and gladdening the temple.

- The final application is to make sure that the Temple we are is put to good use in the worship and service of God and others. The Father’s house is meant to be a house of prayer. That’s why it’s so sad whenever we see closed or run down Churches. That’s why it’s even sadder when we see spiritually dilapidated men and women. Like Churches, we are supposed to be houses of worship, places where Jesus’ word resonates, Bethanias where we sit at his feet and allow him to feed us, centers where the fruit of prayer, charity, takes place in thought and deed, sanctuaries where God is at the center and adored rather than ourselves or various idols. Our daily schedule is supposed to be a “liturgy of hours,” our heart an altar, our life a Mass, in which we, together with Jesus, say to the Father and to others, this is my body, this is my blood, given out of love for you. At the end of a retreat, one of the most important resolutions to be made is to keep what we’ve been doing here within our Temple going by committing ourselves, to praising the Lord within us from the rising of the sun to its setting.
- We become ever more the temple of God, the dwelling place of the Most High, when we receive God within during Holy Communion. This is where the water flowing from Christ’s side, “the waters of the river gladden the city of God, the holy dwelling of the Most High” flows at full force within us. This is the place in which God the Father, the Master Builder, builds us on his Son. Every time we receive Holy Communion it’s meant to be a rededication of the temple we have become. During this retreat, we have heard his call to rebuild better than ever his Temple, which in some ways was falling into disrepair. We fixed up the sound system so that we can hear him better. We’ve cleaned the altar so that we can offer him ourselves. We’ve fixed the stairs and put up railings so that others can join us. We thank God for all of those graces. God has given us the grace to help us become an ever more solid living stone on Christ the cornerstone. And he wants to help us to do our part, like St. Francis and Pope Francis, to hold up the Lateran Basilica, and all that it symbolizes.