

Dedication of the Lateran Basilica (Nov. 9, 2014)

The Feast today is the dedication of the Lateran Basilica in Rome. Does it seem strange to you to be celebrating the Feast of a church? Well, there are a couple of reasons why we do this. The first is that the Lateran Basilica is the cathedral church of Rome. You know, I am sure, that the pope is the bishop of Rome, so that makes the Lateran Basilica his cathedral. Maybe you thought that St. Peter's in Vatican City was the pope's cathedral. But actually it is not, even though the pope lives near St. Peter's and has many of the ceremonies he celebrates there.

The second reason is much more important than the first. It is the mother church of all Christian churches. It was originally built by the emperor Constantine shortly after he made Christianity the religion of the Roman Empire. It is designated as the mother and head of all churches of Rome and of the world. And that means not just Catholic churches but all churches that claim to be Christian. Remember: at this time, the fourth century, Christianity had not split into the various sects that we know today. There had not yet been a division between the Eastern Church and the Church of Rome. The Protestant Reformation was more than a thousand years in the future. So the Lateran Basilica has great symbolic value. It represents the unity of all Christians, of all followers of Christ.

I am pretty sure that non-Catholic Christian churches do not look upon the Lateran Basilica this way. Over the centuries the Basilica has become identified with the Roman Catholic Church and represents our loyalty to the Holy Father.

Still, as we celebrate this Feast today, the Liturgy reminds us that the temple of stones is a symbol of the living church, the Christian community. Long before the Lateran Basilica was built, Peter and Paul in their letters understood the Christian community as a spiritual edifice built by God with "living stones." Christians themselves, that is, us, we are the living stones built upon the one foundation of Jesus Christ who is called the cornerstone that holds it all together.

In the Gospel passage you heard Jesus teaching the people of his time to respect the temple where they worship. My interpretation is that he is

also teaching us to respect one another, the living stones that form his Church. More than simply respecting one another he asks us to love one another. It is love, of course, that's the glue, the cement, the mortar that will hold us all together.

It's interesting that historically the Lateran Basilica has been vandalized, attacked, burned, and even flooded through the centuries. Each time it has been repaired, renovated, and even rebuilt, but the original foundation is still there and even a small section of one of the original walls. For me it's another strong symbol. The Church of Jesus Christ has experienced many crises, but it has come through those crises. It still rests on its firm foundation, Jesus Christ, and though it has changed many times, and undoubtedly will change many more times, it is still the same Church, constructed with the same living stones, you and me and all of us who put our faith in Jesus and his Father and the Holy Spirit, trusting, too, in the love of God for us, our love for God, and our love for one another. It's the glue that holds it all together.