

Dedication of St. John Lateran

A study on accidental death occurrences shows that (a) 20% of all fatal accidents occur in automobiles, (b) 17% of all accidents occur in the home, (c) 14% of all accidents occur to pedestrians on streets or sidewalks, (d) 16% of all accidents involve travelling by air, rail, or water, (e) 32% of all deaths occur in hospitals, and (f) only .001% of all deaths occur in church during worship services. According to this study, therefore, the safest place for you to be at any given point in time is not in your car, or in the home or in the hospital but in church!

Today we celebrate the dedication of the basilica of St. John Lateran in Rome. Why celebrate the dedication of a church in faraway Rome, you may ask. It is to remind us of the importance of the church building as sacred space set apart for our personal and collective encounter with God.

Historically, the basilica of St. John Lateran is the oldest church of Rome and the highest ranking church in the world, followed by St Peter's basilica in the Vatican. As such it is the mother of all churches. When we celebrate its dedication to God, therefore, we celebrate the mystery of God's special presence and indwelling in buildings set apart for divine worship, including our own parish church.

But more than that, because God has from all time intended the church building to be a symbol of His Church and our bodies. This is what the readings for today's feast invite us to consider. God's prototype for the church is the Jerusalem Temple, described in today's First Reading and Psalm. It's God's "holy dwelling," site of His presence in our midst, source of "living waters"—of all life and blessing. But God intended the Temple to give way to the Body of Christ.

That's what our Lord's words and actions in Sunday's Gospel are intended to dramatize. Christ's Body is now the dwelling of God's "glory" among us. It's the new source of living waters, the living bread, the new sanctuary where people will worship in Spirit and truth. By Baptism, we are joined to His Body in the Church.

Today's Epistle says the Spirit of God comes to dwell in us and makes us "God's building...the temple of God." Jesus drove out the sellers of oxen, sheep and doves, signaling an end to the animal sacrifices that formed the worship of the old Temple. In the spiritual worship of the new Temple, we offer our bodies—our whole beings—as a living sacrifice. Like living stones built on the cornerstone of Christ, together we are called to build up the new Temple of God, the Church.

As the Jerusalem Temple was, so the Church will always be under construction—until at last it is perfected in the New Jerusalem, our mother Church, come down from heaven

We know that God is everywhere. Yet when the people of God erect a building and dedicate it totally to God's service, God's glory comes to dwell in that building in such a way that the building can now be called the house of God. Solomon recalls this mystery

in his prayer of dedication of the temple in Jerusalem: "Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27). So, while we celebrate God's special indwelling in a temple, we must remind ourselves that God's presence is not confined in the temple. God is still everywhere. But God manifests His glory in a special way in some persons, places, and things. A temple or church is one such place.

In earlier days, a temple, church or shrine was revered so much as to suggest that God dwelt exclusively in such places. People went to church, participated in the service, received communion and went home without knowing who was sitting beside them in church. Spirituality was very individualistic and the man or woman sitting next to you was rather seen as a distraction in one's intimate communion with God. Worshippers forgot that we are brothers and sisters, and that we come to church to worship God as family.

To discourage this self-centered religiosity, Vatican Council II introduced some changes in how we worship that made the Mass less formal. But we swung from one extreme to the other, 180° from wrong is still wrong, and today many Christians have lost the sense of the church as a sacred place, to the point that the comportment of many worshippers in our churches today borders on irreverence. Many Christians have altogether abandoned traditional practices that were meant to remind us that we are in God's presence when we enter the church. These include such little things as dressing in a decent manner for church, signing oneself with holy water on entering the church, genuflecting or bowing to the altar or the tabernacle before taking one's seat or before leaving the church, not chatting in church, and lowering one's voice when one has cause to talk.

The loss of the sense of the sacred in church buildings and church worship might be one reason why young people are no longer keen on church attendance. If they come to church thinking it to be just another social gathering, no wonder they find it so boring. But when we realize that the church is a holy place, a place of our encounter with God, with one another and with oneself, then we bring a certain disposition of mind and body to church which helps make worship an uplifting rather than boring experience. Today's celebration of the dedication of St John Lateran invites us to renew our faith in the church as a house of prayer, a place where we come to speak to God, not to one another—that's what the social hall is for— and to cultivate habits and practices that make it easy for God to encounter us and speak to us whenever we are in church.

- Fr. David M. Chiantella