

FEAST OF THE DEDICATION OF THE LATERAN BASILICA IN ROME NOVEMBER 9, 2025

Over the past forty years or so, many Catholics have had the experience of seeing the parish they grew up in closed. For them, it was painful to see the place where they were baptized torn down or used for another purpose. Even if they hadn't been back there since their confirmation, they thought they could always count on their childhood parish being there for their spiritual needs.

The closing of a parish is a real loss, not only because of the memories it holds but because a parish becomes a part of our identity. It was the parish we grew up in, the church that we told people we went to. So it is hard not to feel as if a part of ourselves is lost too.

That is because places are important to us - especially sacred spaces. They bring us back in touch with our history - a history in which we see God working in our lives. Our parishes are the places where we are touched by God's word and welcomed into relationship with Him through the sacraments. Everything about the parish church - its stained glass windows, the smell of candle wax and incense, the color of the vestments and altar tapestries - teach us to be reverent and prayerful. Without these sacred spaces dedicated to the worship of God, our relationship with God and our inner spiritual lives would be that much poorer.

Sadly, when parishes close, many Catholics stop practicing their faith, especially those who weren't going to Mass regularly. Most Catholics, however, come to terms with it and accept that God is calling them to worship and serve in another parish. Just as we cannot always stay in our childhood home, we cannot always stay in our childhood parish. Many times, we have to move on to the next adventure that God is calling us to.

That brings us to today's celebration - the Dedication of the Lateran Basilica in Rome. It is a church building that many of us have never been to, and maybe never even have heard of. What makes it special - so special that we are setting aside a Sunday to celebrate it - is that it is the cathedral of the Bishop of Rome, the Pope. It was dedicated on this day in 324 A.D. at a time when Christians were finally allowed to practice their faith in Jesus without fear of persecution. It was the first public church built in Rome and so it is considered the mother of all the churches in Rome and throughout the western world. It is an important space where God has been worshipped and many Christians have had their faith renewed.

As important as this building is, however, we should never forget that there was already a church in Rome for over 300 years before the dedication of Saint John Lateran Basilica. It wasn't a building, but a community of believers. They had come to believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus through the work of the apostles, especially Saints Peter and Paul. They gathered for Mass and to be instructed in the faith in the homes of other believers. Inspired by this faith, they served the poorest people of the city. Their example of love drew others to believe in the gospel. Even though they were poor, the community of Christians in Rome and

throughout the Empire were flourishing through the power of the Holy Spirit working through them.

That is why, in today's second reading, long before any church buildings had been built and dedicated, Saint Paul could say, "You are God's building.... [Y]ou are the temple of God." When Saint Paul writes this, the "you" is plural. What is meant is that we, together, are the temple of God. Why? Because God's Spirit dwells in us. It is not the parish that makes us the Church. It is not a building that gives us our identity. Rather it is the Spirit of God that we have received in baptism and who sends us out to serve others that makes us the Church.

So, when a parish closes, it doesn't mean that the Church is getting smaller. It only means that that space is no longer available for us to gather in. We can simply go to another parish to worship and serve. Even if all the church buildings in the world were to be closed and torn down, the Church would still be active in the world. That is because no one can stop the presence and action of God's Holy Spirit. And that presence and action of the Holy Spirit doesn't take place principally in buildings and spaces, but in the hearts and minds of believers. As long as there are baptized believers in Jesus Christ, there will be a Church.

This feast day is an important reminder to us, not just of our history, but of our identity. Yes, the dedication of the Basilica of Saint John Lateran is an important historic event because it is the first Christian church building in Rome. But that building and its dedication point us to a more profound truth, a more profound reason to celebrate. We human beings construct buildings, but the Spirit of God builds up the Church. The Church is first and foremost a people who are gathered by God to believe in Jesus Christ and to be sent out by the Holy Spirit to transform the world.

So, just as Christians have gathered for over 2000 years, we are gathered here to hear God's word and receive Jesus in the Eucharist. This is a sacred space set aside for no other purpose than to worship God and serve others. We have many beautiful memories here. God has done many great and powerful things within these walls. But these walls cannot contain the work of the Holy Spirit. Our calling is not just to maintain this building. Rather it is to be transformed by worship so that we can serve in love. If this building is ever closed, it will not be the end of our mission. We must continue to live and witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus - in whatever way God is calling us to do that - so that the Holy Spirit can continue to build up the Church, not with bricks and mortar, but with people.