

Dedication of the Lateran Basilica
November 9, 2014
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
John 2:13-22

When we went on the Ordinariate pilgrimage to Rome this past February, our group visited the Lateran Basilica, whose dedication we celebrate today. Often referred to as St. John Lateran, under the patronage of both St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist, when it was finished in 324 it was originally dedicated to Jesus our Savior, with its patronal feast being the Transfiguration.

This dedication to Jesus is important because the Lateran Basilica is the mother of all Catholic Churches, being the Cathedral of the Diocese of Rome and thus the seat of our Holy Father, Pope Francis. Many people think his church is St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City, but that is simply where he lives. For a thousand years, until the early 1300s, the Pope lived next to the Lateran Basilica, in a palace built for him by Constantine, on what had been the Laterani family estate. As the Pope's cathedral is dedicated to Jesus, so every church in the Catholic world is so dedicated.

We can see the connection between the Pope's cathedral and our own church made explicit in today's collect. In celebrating the dedication of the Lateran Basilica, we prayed in the collect that we praise God for the many blessings that He has given to those who worship Him here. In the same way that the Pope presides over all the bishops of the world, so the Pope's cathedral, the Lateran Basilica, presides over all the Catholic churches. So to pray here is to reaffirm our connection to the Holy See. That connection is spiritual, of course, but it is also physical.

Not only do we fly the flag of the Holy See and have a photo of the Holy Father in the vestibule of our church, the architecture of this church mimics the architecture of the Catholic Church's first public place of worship. Remember that when construction began on the Lateran Basilica in 313, Christianity had just that year become legal in the Roman Empire; and the design for the first Cathedral was based on a Roman model for large indoor gathering spaces.

That model perfectly suited the worship of Jesus Christ. The long rectangular shape enabled all the worshipers to face the same direction, pointing east, towards the glory of the Resurrection. This shape also best communicates the truth that we are headed together towards heaven, our ultimate destination, and our eyes are fixed upon Jesus, Who will get us there through His intercession on our behalf before the Throne of Grace. The design of the Lateran Basilica is the design of St. Joseph Church here in Scranton and countless other traditionally appointed churches. Even with new construction this design is experiencing a resurgence in popularity, not only because it was the first design for public worship in the Church, but because it communicates best what is happening here: with our eyes on the prize, we're headed to heaven.

This shows us that as soon as Christians were able to build churches to suit their worship, as soon as they could come out of the catacombs and private homes, they built churches for the celebration of the Mass. They did not build auditoriums for the preaching of the Word, though they certainly had that model, too, in that every Roman city of any size had an amphitheater. No, they didn't build circles, they

built arrows; and the fact that our church shape mimics the Lateran Basilica reaffirms our connection to the Holy See, our unity with the diocese that presides over all the churches.

The connection, however, doesn't stop with the shape. One of the things we notice in St. John Lateran is the reverence with which people approach this holy space. When we were there this year, and on the Pastoral Provision pilgrimage seven years ago, we noticed how many people were there just to pray, how even those who spoke did so in hushed tones; and though we were in a place that was a magnet for tourists, we saw respect for the presence of Jesus Himself in the Blessed Sacrament. We try to foster this same reverence in St. Joseph Church, a reverence that predates our time here. Those signs on each door requesting silence before the Blessed Sacrament were there when we bought the church from the Diocese of Scranton.

How we treat our spaces dedicated to the worship of God says much about how we relate to the Almighty. This is the message of the Gospel today. Jesus was angry because of how the space was being used so people could bless themselves rather than bless God, so they could pursue earthly concerns instead of their heavenly purpose. The space had become a means to an end rather than the end to which all existence points, the worship of God for all eternity.

It should come as no surprise then that Catholic churches are not traditionally built for utilitarian purposes. We have high ceilings to reflect the vault of heaven, not low ones that would help us save on heat. We have beautiful and expensive artwork, to lead to the contemplation of God and His beauty, not whitewashed walls and clear plate glass that cost less. We put in hardwood floors and bought a new organ so the praises we offer to God would reverberate well beyond these walls, though carpet would have been cheaper and we could have made do with a lower quality instrument. Though ours is a dim reflection of it, we see the same focus on beauty at St. John Lateran.

The rejection of utilitarianism in the architecture of Catholic churches, beginning with the first of all Catholic churches, reflects the rejection of utilitarianism with regard to the human person. Just as our churches are beautiful, so are our people. Just as we do not worship God as the means to an end, so we do not use people in this way either. Our collect says we pray to become living temples acceptable to God, Whom we seek in this place. If our places of worship are utilitarian, it will not be long before we conceive of God as a utilitarian and then see men and women created in God's image in utilitarian terms, as well. Jesus thrust such errors from the Temple in Jerusalem, literally driving out the merchants and their wares, declaring His Father's house is not a house of trade.

Well, just as the Lord resides here in this church, just as He resides in the Lateran Basilica, so He resides in every person who has been baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Just as His presence in the church tends to foster worship, so His presence in each of us leads us to worship Him, pulling us gently towards our final destiny. If we treat buildings like this with respect, how much more should we bow in awe and wonder at the temples of the Holy Spirit in our midst, our brothers and sisters in Christ, who personify what this and every church, even the Pope's cathedral, can merely represent. We wouldn't think of using this space as a dance hall or sports arena, or anything other than a church meant for the worship of God. Remember that the next time the temptation comes along to treat as the means to an end one of the living temples in our midst.