Saint John Lateran

The Temple of His Body, the Church

In every diocese, a cathedral stands as a symbol of the unity of the local church gathered around its bishop. The cathedrals throughout the world also witness to the communion of the church universal, with the Holy Father as her chief shepherd. This is why the anniversary of a cathedral's dedication is celebrated as a feast day in each diocese. Since the pope is uniquely charged with the care of the entire church, his cathedral—Saint John Lateran—is not simply the diocesan cathedral; it's the mother of all other cathedrals and has been since 324 CE.

Both the Lateran Cathedral and this special feast celebrate our Christian unity. Jesus founded the church to gather us into one under the successors of Saint Peter, and to this day, Masses are celebrated at Saint John Lateran on the high altar, under which rests the remains of a small wooden table on which Peter is said to have celebrated the Eucharist. The witness and ministry of the Holy Father continues to connect and unite us to Christ, the cornerstone of the church.

Jesus's comments about the temple in today's gospel were not understood at the time to refer to his own body. Not until these words were recalled in light of resurrection faith were they truly comprehended by the disciples. "He was speaking about the temple of his body." For ages, we longed for a sanctuary where God would reside and where his glory would be revealed to the nations. Jesus is the realization of this dream.

With Christ as the cornerstone, we are built up as living stones into a people chosen and set apart by God. Now we belong to Christ, the true foundation, and are recipients of his gift of mercy. His Holy Spirit now dwells in us, his holy temple.

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Church buildings are on the minds of many these days, as various parishes go through the processes of renaming, closing, clustering, and so on. It could seem either very odd or extremely appropriate to be celebrating a church building on this Sunday.

Nearly two centuries ago, Pope Clement XII placed these words on the Lateran basilica façade: "Mother and head of all churches of Rome and of the world." This church (not Saint Peter's Basilica) is the formal seat of the bishop of Rome, the pope. In a sense, this feast isn't only about one particular church in Rome but about us as the church as well. So we might ask: What sort of church are we supposed to be?

The Scripture readings today explore the deep, broad, and rich image of temples: from Israel's temple (Ezekiel) to the new temple, Jesus (John), to the temples of the Holy Spirit that each of us are (Paul). Allow the variable prayer texts and music choices of this day to reflect all of this.

What needs to flow forth from the church today, in order to give life? As we encounter tensions or contradictions between buildings and communities and individuals, how do we all continue to change and grow (even as the signs around us seem to say change and contract)?

Focus the liturgy today on the various "temples" that we have—and that we are. Above all, sing and pray and celebrate with trust and joy in God.