

Dedication of St. John Lateran November 9

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

Introduction

With the ascent of Constantine as Emperor of Rome (306-337), the days of bloody Christian persecutions came to an end. Placed at first on an equal footing with paganism, Christianity soon became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Constantine was the son of Constantius I, Roman Emperor of the West (305-6), and Helena, a woman of obscure origins, whose fervent conversion to Christianity and legendary finding of the True Cross, won her sainthood.

The edict of Milan (313) secured Christians' freedom and legal recognition. By imperial edicts, Constantine restored Christians' property and strengthened the Church hierarchy. He ordered basilicas built over the *cellae memoriae* marking St. Peter's, St. Paul's, and other martyrs' tombs.

It was to Pope Melchiade (311-314) that Constantine gave the palace on Monte Celio, formerly property of the patrician Laterani family (hence the Basilica's designation "Lateran"), which he (Constantine) had received as dowry with his second wife, for the first Papal cathedral and residence in Christian history.

The Basilica of St. John Lateran is still the cathedral of Rome and was the Pope's official residence until the 15th century. It was built on the grounds (formerly occupied by the imperial horse-guards barracks) of Monte Celio by Constantine and was consecrated by Pope Sylvester in 324.

In the course of its history, St. John Lateran suffered just about as many disasters and revivals as the papacy it hosted. Sacked by Alaric in 408 and Genseric in 455, it was rebuilt by Pope Leo the Great (440-461), and centuries later by Pope Hadrian I (772-795). Almost entirely destroyed by an earthquake in 896, the basilica was again restored by Pope Sergius III (904-911). Later the church was heavily damaged by fires in 1308 and 1360. When the Popes returned from their sojourn in Avignon, France (1304-1377), they found their basilica and palace in such disrepair, that they decided to transfer to the Vatican, near St. Peter's (that basilica, also built by Constantine, had until then served primarily as a pilgrimage church).

Of the original Lateran basilica and palace, only the Pope's private chapel, the *Sancta Sanctorum* remains. Sixtus V removed this magnificently frescoed shrine to what has become a grimy traffic island. As an approach to the chapel, Sixtus moved from the Lateran Palace the Scala Santa, the staircase which Jesus is believed to have ascended to Pontius

Pilate's palace in Jerusalem, and according to tradition, was brought to Rome by St. Helena herself. Within what is today the Basilica of St. John Lateran are the following: (1) 2 gilded silver busts that contained what were once thought to be the heads of Saints Peter and Paul; (2) A wooden altar (part of the main altar), which legend says was used by the first popes, from St. Peter to St. Sylvester I (314-355); (3) A bronze relief of the Last Supper, behind which is a fragment of wood thought to be from the table our Lord used at the Last Supper; (4) The tomb of Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903).

Many important historic events have taken place in St. John Lateran, including five Ecumenical Councils and many diocesan synods. In 1929 the Lateran Pacts, which established the territory and status of the State of Vatican City, were signed here between the Holy See and the Government of Italy.

This feast became a universal celebration in honor of the basilica called "the mother and mistress of all churches of Rome and the world" as a sign of love for and union with the See of Peter.

1st Reading - Ezekiel 47:1-2, 8-9, 12

Ezekiel is the prophet of hope. Writing during from Babylon during the time that the members of the southern kingdom (Judah) were in exile in Babylon, his energies are all directed toward keeping the exiles' hopes alive. His work did much to regroup the exiles around the priests and the Law, making it more interior and personal; he gives new hope to those who stay faithful to Yahweh. In our reading for today, he describes his vision of the future city which has as its center the new temple (the Church of the New Covenant) from which power and life will radiate to all the tribes.

47:1 Then he brought me back to the entrance of the temple, and I saw water flowing out from beneath the threshold of the temple toward the east, for the facade of the temple was toward the east; the water flowed down from the southern side of the temple, south of the altar. ² He led me outside by the north gate, and around to the outer gate facing the east, where I saw water trickling from the southern side.

This flowing water is an allusion to the streams of water which came from Eden in Genesis 2:10-14. Hebrew legend is that this flowing water had been stopped up by the sin of Adam and then reappeared during the Exodus as the water which flowed from the rock (Exodus 17:6).

⁸ He said to me, "This water flows into the eastern district down upon the Arabah, and empties into the sea, the salt waters, which it makes fresh. ⁹ Wherever the river flows, every sort of living creature that can multiply shall live, and there shall be abundant fish, for wherever this water comes the sea shall be made fresh.

The Arabah is the deep geological rift that forms the Dead Sea and continues southward.

The life-giving effect of the waters is apparent from the freshening of the salt waters and the abundance of fish.

12 Along both banks of the river, fruit trees of every kind shall grow; their leaves shall not fade, nor their fruit fail. Every month they shall bear fresh fruit, for they shall be watered by the flow from the sanctuary. Their fruit shall serve for food, and their leaves for medicine.”

The striking fertility is assured by the ever-flowing water. The meaning is clear – the presence of Yahweh is a blessing, revealing itself as a life-giving power.

Alternate 1st Reading - 2 Chronicles 5:6-10, 13-6:2

Just like Samuel and Kings, the two books of Chronicles began as one book but they appear as two in the Greek version of the Septuagint and this division is maintained in the Vulgate and in later editions, including the Hebrew Bible. St. Jerome gave them the name of “Chronicles”: he called them the “Chronicle of Chronicles”. The Jews continued to call them “the events of the days” and the Greek version *Paralipomenon* because they fill in for what was omitted or only treated in passing in Samuel and Kings.

What we hear of in our reading today is the enthronement of the ark and dedication of the first temple in Jerusalem, the temple which had been built by Solomon.

6 King Solomon and the entire community of Israel gathered about him before the ark were sacrificing sheep and oxen so numerous that they could not be counted or numbered.

This is a bit of hyperbole, but it no doubt was an extremely large number.

7 The priests brought the ark of the covenant of the LORD to its place beneath the wings of the cherubim in the sanctuary, the holy of holies of the temple. 8 The cherubim had their wings spread out over the place of the ark, sheltering the ark and its poles from above.

This makes it sound as though the cherubim were free-standing statues beneath which the ark was placed. Exodus 25:18-22 tells us that the cherubim were part of the cover of the ark. The ark was in fact a throne which had the wings of the cherubim overshadowing it. As such, from a distance it may have looked rather like the seat was distinct from the cherubim. At the time of the exodus, cherubim thrones were not unique to the Israelites, other cultures had them as well. What made the ark of the covenant unique was that there was no one seated upon it. The thrones of the other nations had a female figure seated upon them.

9 The poles were long enough so that their ends could be seen from that part of the

holy place nearest the sanctuary; however, they could not be seen beyond. The ark has remained there to this day.

This was true at the time of this writing. According to 2 Maccabees 2:5-8, Jeremiah took it away and hid it in a cave to prevent its capture in 586/587 B.C. It has not been seen since.

¹⁰ There was nothing in it but the two tablets which Moses put there on Horeb, the tablets of the covenant which the LORD made with the Israelites at their departure from Egypt.

Hebrews 9:4 presumed it contained a specimen of the manna (Exodus 16:32), and the budded rod of Aaron (Numbers 17:25) as well. It is not clear whether any of these items had been removed.

¹³ When the trumpeters and singers were heard as a single voice praising and giving thanks to the LORD, and when they raised the sound of the trumpets, cymbals and other musical instruments to “give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his mercy endures forever,” the building of the LORD’S temple was filled with a cloud. ¹⁴ The priests could not continue to minister because of the cloud, since the LORD’S glory filled the house of God.

The *shekinah* glory cloud; God’s holy presence has occupied the sanctuary.

^{6:1} Then Solomon said: “The LORD intends to dwell in the dark cloud. ² I have truly built you a princely house and dwelling, where you may abide forever.”

2nd Reading - 1 Corinthians 3:9-13,16-17

In our second reading today St. Paul tells us that the Church is God’s building. We must be careful about the materials which we use to build this building.

⁹ For we are God’s co-workers; you are God’s field, God’s building.

St. Paul is using one of his favorite metaphors for the Church, God’s building, the temple in which God dwells.

¹⁰ According to the grace of God given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building upon it.

Paul is describing his ministry and the responsibility of all who follow him; they are to build upon the foundation which he has laid.

But each one must be careful how he builds upon it, ¹¹ for no one can lay a foundation other than the one that is there, namely, Jesus Christ.

Christ is the unique foundation. This Christ, preached by Paul, dwells in the hearts of the faithful and communicates His Spirit to them. In Ephesians 2:20 we find St. Paul telling us that God's family is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets and in Revelation 21:14 we find that the heavenly Jerusalem is built upon the foundation of the 12 apostles. This is not in conflict; Jesus promised to build His Church upon Peter, the Rock (Matthew 16:18) and has depended upon the apostles to provide the solid foundation (His teachings) upon which He will build and which Christ (as capstone) will hold together. Christ's Church is not only built by Him, it's apostolic from its very beginning.

12 If anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or straw, 13 the work of each will come to light, for the Day will disclose it.

The day of judgment

It will be revealed with fire, and the fire (itself) will test the quality of each one's work.

The fire tests the quality of the various building materials. Fire is the customary biblical metaphor describing the might and majesty of the divine judgment. The fire tests the work, destroying what is of poor quality and perishable (the wood, hay, and straw).

16 Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?

The "you" is the Corinthian community. It is a temple of God because the divine Spirit dwells in it. The Spirit comes into the community and gives himself to individuals through the community.

17 If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for the temple of God, which you are, is holy.

Pagans, as well as Jews, regarded desecration of a temple as a heinous crime

Gospel - John 2:13-22

The story of the cleansing of the Temple occurs in the Mark (11:15-18) at the close rather than at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Whether this is a separate occurrence, or whether it "really" happened at the beginning or end of His public ministry is unimportant to the telling of the story. The important message of the story is that Jesus will be raised on the third day after His crucifixion.

13 Since the Passover of the Jews was near, Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

The Passover was the most important of the Jewish feasts. According to the Law of Moses every male Israelite over the age of 12 had to “appear before the Lord God” (Exodus 34:23; Deuteronomy 16:16) which resulted in the custom of making a pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem.

14 He found in the temple area those who sold oxen, sheep, and doves, as well as the money-changers seated there.

Because of the many pilgrims there was a need for vendors to supply their needs (animals for sacrifice and Tyrian half-shekels to pay the Temple tax, as the tax could not be paid in Roman or Greek coinage). Unfortunately, this trading gave rise to abuses.

15 He made a whip out of cords

It is possible that this whip served as a symbol of authority rather than being an actual instrument for inflicting damage.

and drove them all out of the temple area, with the sheep and oxen, and spilled the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables, ¹⁶ and to those who sold doves he said, “Take these out of here, and stop making my Father’s house a marketplace.”

Notice that He doesn’t deprive anyone of their possessions, He simply causes them to relocate outside the Temple area. It is believed that these “merchants” had set up shop in the Court of the Gentiles; thus depriving some of the pilgrims of their place of worship.

17 His disciples recalled the words of scripture, “Zeal for your house will consume me.”

Psalm 69:9. By calling God His Father and acting so energetically, He is proclaiming that He is the Messiah, the Son of God. Jesus’ zeal has not escaped the attention of His disciples who now realize that what he did fulfilled the words of Psalm 69. Such an act of cleansing had also been prophesied of the Messianic Age by Zechariah (14:21).

18 At this the Jews answered

The Temple authorities, who would have represented the priesthood

and said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?”

He has the whip of cords, but what (or who) has given Him the authority to do this action? Demands for signs were often made of Jesus but he refused to gratify their demand; signs are for the well-disposed to confirm their faith, not for those who do not believe.

¹⁹ Jesus answered and said to them, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” ²⁰ The Jews said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and you will raise it up in three days?” ²¹ But he was speaking about the temple of his body. ²² Therefore, when he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they came to believe the scripture and the word Jesus had spoken.

Looking back through the eyes of faith, the Christian can see that this sign was in fact given at the Resurrection.

Alternate Gospel - Luke 19:1-10

Jesus has left Galilee and is on His way to Jerusalem for His passion, death, and resurrection. On His way, He meets Zacchaeus, the tax collector.

^{19:1} He came to Jericho and intended to pass through the town. ² Now a man there named Zacchaeus, who was a chief tax collector and also a wealthy man, ³ was seeking to see who Jesus was; but he could not see him because of the crowd, for he was short in stature. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree in order to see Jesus, who was about to pass that way.

A short trunk and wide lateral branches make the sycamore easy to climb.

⁵ When he reached the place, Jesus looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house.” ⁶ And he came down quickly and received him with joy. ⁷ When they all saw this, they began to grumble, saying, “He has gone to stay at the house of a sinner.” ⁸ But Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “Behold, half of my possessions, Lord, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over.”

Zacchaeus goes beyond the requirements of the law in restitution. Numbers 5:5 requires full restoration plus one-fifth. Exodus 22:4 requires double restitution in the case of livestock.

⁹ And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house

Although Jesus has apparently reached, if not entered, the house, His remarks are addressed to the crowd. Oriental custom allowed people to enter freely and gather at the edge of a banquet (Luke 7:37). The entire household shares Zacchaeus’ blessing as they had earlier suffered from his unjust practices.

because this man too is a descendant of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost.”

In Genesis 12:2-3 God promises Abraham a three-fold blessing: first, as a nation, second, as a name (dynasty/kingdom) and third, a worldwide blessing. This third promise has become fulfilled in Jesus.

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