



## Dedication of the Lateran Basilica in Rome November 9, 2008 A

### WHY OUR CHURCH CELEBRATES THE DEDICATION OF AN ANCIENT CHURCH IN ROME.

Each year our church celebrates the Dedication of St. John Lateran Basilica in Rome on November 9th. When the feast falls on a Sunday, it displaces the Sunday in Ordinary time that we would normally celebrate on this date.

Each diocese has a cathedral. The cathedral church in Rome is St. John Lateran and not the more famous, St. Peter's. When the Emperor Constantine officially recognized Christianity, he made generous gifts to the church, one of which was a palace and grounds formerly belonging to the Laterani family. In 324, he added a large church on the grounds. Later a baptistery was added and dedicated to St. John the Baptist. In subsequent years the entire edifice became known as St. John of the Lateran Basilica. It is our oldest church. Despite many fires, earthquakes and wars, it has survived; thereby, becoming a symbol of the *endurability* of Christianity. The observance of this feast connects our local church with the Church of Rome, which is the center of our unity. The dedication of any church recalls the heavenly Jerusalem that all church buildings symbolize.

#### ***Four reasons why it is important for us to celebrate the Dedication of St. John Lateran.***

In his book *Storytelling the Word*, Fr. Bill Bausch give us four reasons for celebrating the Dedication of an ancient church.

- ***It is our Mother Church.*** *We celebrate this feast of St. John Lateran, because it is the mother church. But that is only the surface reason. We celebrate this feast because it reminds us of our origins. Rome was evangelized by Peter and Paul and countless missionaries. In turn, Rome, being the world center at the time, the heart of the Roman Empire, sent missionaries out to the west. Most of us are European in origin, although that is fading, and so the faith comes to us by way of Rome and not directly from Jerusalem where the faith started. We have been evangelized from Rome, the mother church.*

- ***A sign of our union with Rome.*** *"To be in union with Rome," means to be in union with our origins, with*

*that faith proclaimed by Rome's imports from the mid-east, Peter and Paul. Rome is where Peter eventually lived and died and passed on the faith. The Lateran Palace or St. John Lateran's is the place where Peter's successors have lived and died and passed on the faith. It's our Christian equivalent of the Governor's Palace in Williamsburg or Independence Hall in Philadelphia. It's an historical sign and symbol of our deep rootedness, our connection with the past, our touchstone of faith and with the long line of popes who have presided there.*

- ***Buildings are expressions of what is important to us.*** *There's another reason why the Catholic world celebrates a church building in another part of the world. We are reminded that the building of temples and churches is a natural, poetic instinct we humans have. We need symbols and rituals in order to live. The poor of France know the Eiffel Tower could be melted down and the money given to them, but they would resist, knowing they do not live by bread alone. The Dome of the Rock for the Arabs, the Wailing Wall for the Jews, Westminster Abbey for the Anglicans, Sancta Sophia for the Turks, are all more than buildings. They enshrine national history and aspirations and house celebrations and rituals. They give identity and cohesion. Which is why tyrants' and invaders' first act is to destroy a people's shrines and literature. Without them, the people are nothing.*

*This feast reminds us that our church, however grand or humble, is a sign of transcendence, a gathering for us to worship and say out loud: Jesus Christ is Lord!*

- ***St. John Lateran reminds us that we ourselves are unfinished.*** *A final reason we celebrate this feast of our mother church, St. John Lateran, is that it reminds us that we ourselves are unfinished temples. We indeed have a great history of grandeur. Over the centuries the church has been responsible for more good and decency and help than will ever be realized. The constant media focus on our failings should not blind us to the enormous good we have done throughout the ages, and still do. Catholic Relief Services is the largest private relief service in the world. Think of all the Mother Teresa's there are, the countless Catholic hospitals, schools and clinics, leprosaria. Perhaps the biggest assistance to AIDS patients is the Catholic Church, although you would never know it. We have taught people to read and write and sing. We have healed, consoled, buried, and*

converted. We're in every part of the globe ministering to others, day and night, endlessly. We have done Christ's work.

***But, of course, we are, as I said, unfinished. Just as St. John Lateran had to be restored many times throughout the centuries because of the ravages of time and vandals, so has the whole church. We have sinned and we have constant reforms and renewals to call us back to our origins. This is the reason we celebrate this feast. It recalls struggles, countless martyrs, sacrifice, Peter and Paul, missionaries, and it challenges us to see how far we have strayed from the message they left us at so great a price. To that extent, this feast beckons us to reform.***

### **Some reasons to be proud of our Catholic Church in the United States**

A parishioner passed along to me some interesting and impressive statistics from an article written by Sam Miller, a prominent Cleveland Jewish businessman. Miller wonders why newspapers would carry a vendetta against the Catholic Church one of the most important institutions in the United States. Then Miller gives some impressive statistics:

- The Catholic church educates 2.6 million students daily. This is a savings of about 18 billion dollars to the American taxpayer.
- The Catholic church has 230 colleges and universities in the United States with an enrollment of about 700,000 students.
- The Catholic church has a non-profit hospital system of 637 hospitals which account for hospital treatment of one out of every five people—not just Catholics—in the United States today.
- As stated earlier, *Catholic Relief Services* is the largest non-government relief service in the world. I wish I had more statistics on the work of CRS and Catholic Charities.

### **My visit to New Orleans**

As you may remember, Katrina happened the end of August 2005. The eye of the storm hit Biloxi and not New Orleans.

When Fr. Doug Doussan left his parish, St. Gabriel the Archangel the day before the hurricane, he expected to return a day or two later. He did not expect any serious damage to the parish's facilities. But then those levees broke and all hell broke loose.

The area around St. Gabriel's had *eight feet of water* on the road and six feet of water in homes and church facilities. It took three weeks for the water to subside.

Fr. Doussan's first trip back to his parish was *five weeks* after Katrina. The walls of the parish facilities were not badly damaged but everything inside was destroyed.

***First Priority.*** Fr. Doussan's first priority was to try and contact his parishioners—who had scattered to 22 States.

***Second Priority.*** Clean up the church so that those who were returning would have a place to assemble. Of course, no one returned to their homes for a long time. They just returned to some nearby neighborhoods.

For the first year or so, Fr. Doug resided in a parish in Baton Rouge. The people of the parish where Fr. Doug resided took on the job of cleaning up the church.

They had their first mass in the church on the First Sunday of Advent ('05). Of the 600 members, only a small number were initially present and all travelled to the church from somewhere outside the parish.

***Third Priority.*** Help parishioners get back in their homes. To help achieve this goal, the parish did two things. They gave needy families \$1,800 to purchase sheetrock and other important necessities. Second, they asked the volunteers who came to the parish to help parish members recover their homes.

### **2,000 Volunteers**

In the past three years, over 2,000 volunteers have come to St. Gabriel's to help them recover. These volunteers come from many parts of the country.

When I arrived on Friday afternoon, a dozen men and women were about to leave. They had come from Chicago. Their red shirts read: *Hope is on the Way*. They spent a week at St. Gabriel's.

The next day a group of men and women arrived from Indiana to also spend a week at St. Gabriel's. I was present when Fr. Doug showed his new visitors slides of the facilities after the Katrina floods had gone away. I was also present when a parish representative showed the visitors the projects that they would be working on for the week including the home of a parish member.

### **Financial Help**

About 57 parishes of the Archdiocese suffered damage. The archdiocese was insured for \$13 million dollars. The Archbishop and his advisors had to make some very difficult and painful decisions. It was decided to close a bunch of parishes, including St. Gabriel's.

Fr. Doug requested that the parish remain open. The Archbishop consented as long as he understood that he would receive no insurance money. He agreed. But the archdiocese also received millions of dollars of aid from

a National Collection taken up across the country. St. Gabriel's received \$1.2 million to help them restore their church. While I was there, the construction company worked on the church Monday-Friday. On Saturday, it was set up for their two weekend masses. They hope that the church project will be completed by Christmas.

*Ascension parish has donated \$40,000 towards the restoration of St. Gabriel's.* Fr. Doug and his people are most appreciative. Fr. Doug would love to come to our parish to thank us. I hope that this can happen next year.

*A pleasant surprise. Sitting in the front of the church for Sunday mass was Sr. Helen Prejean, author of Dead Man Walking, a book which became a successful movie. Sr. Helen a member of St. Gabriel's, is rarely present because of her travels. She goes across the country addressing the Capital punishment issue. I was glad to be able to briefly speak with such a wonderful advocate for an end to capital punishment in our nation.*

### **Closing Parishes**

A sad feature of the Katrina event is the closing of several parishes. When I was there two weeks ago, I read the diocesan newspaper. The front page had stories of three parishes that were about to have their last Mass. Some parishioners had spent their whole lives in some of those parishes. There was a lot of anger and sadness connected to the closing of parishes. Some parishes being closed were not damaged and were financially solvent. They were being closed because they were located only a few hundred yards away from another parish. The Archbishop closed these parishes because of a priest shortage.

We can only imagine the pain and trials that many of the people and parishes have gone through in the past three years. Because we are human, we sometimes complain about small things in our lives or in our parish. A visit to New Orleans or Biloxi would quickly cure us of such complaints.

On the lighter side, I did get to visit some spots in the lovely Big Easy. Over 30 years ago, I had gone to summer school at Loyola University which is located on *St. Charles Avenue*. I enjoyed very much my revisit to this lovely avenue with its gorgeous big trees. I also visited the *Garden District* which has a lot of old homes, many of them with great stories connected to them. And of course, I loved listening to some jazz music downtown. Oh how those musicians love their music. I hope heaven will have lots of heavenly jazz.

### **November thoughts on death and dying**

As I stated last week in my homily, November is a

month when the church remembers in a special way the faithful departed. The following are two pieces worth reflecting on. I do not know the authors names.

*Think of stepping on the shore  
And finding it Heaven;  
Of taking hold of a hand  
And finding it God's Hand;  
Of breathing a new air  
And finding it celestial air;  
Of feeling invigorated  
And finding it immortality;  
Of passing from storm and tempest  
To an unbroken clam;  
Of waking up and finding you're Home!*

### **Second Reflection**

*We give back to you O God, those whom  
you gave to us.  
You did not lose them when you gave them to us  
and we do not lose them by their return to you.  
Your dear Son has taught us that life is eternal  
and love cannot die,  
So death is only an horizon and is only the limit  
of our sight.  
Open our eyes to see more clearly  
and draw us close to you  
That we may know we are nearer to our loved ones,  
who are with you.  
You have told us that you are preparing a place for us,  
prepare us also for that happy place,  
that where you are we may also be.  
O dear Lord of life and Death.*

**A Request:** Most of you call me "Fr. Tobin" or "Father". I do like my first name Eamon (Gaelic for Edmund). My preference is to be called "Fr. Eamon" or just "Eamon". Dale Carnegie used to say that the sweetest sound in the English language is the sound of one's own name. But of course, in a parish this size this is not possible for my little mind.

I hope that I will see you at the Parish Festival next weekend. And the Blessing of the church project after the 11:30 Mass.

Have a blessed week,

