



## Explanation of The Dedication of the Lateran Basilica



### Sunday Reflection with Fr. Rafal

Dear Sisters and Brothers of St. Joseph Parish,

The feast day we commemorate today celebrates the anniversary of the Dedication of Rome's Lateran Basilica in 324 A.D. In that year, Pope Sylvester established his cathedral and residence on property given to the Church by the Emperor Constantine. As the Cathedral of the Bishop of Rome and the Pope, it is the highest-ranking church in the world.

On the façade of the basilica there is an inscription in Latin that reads, "the mother and mistress of all churches of Rome and the world." One might think St. Peter's Basilica is the head of all the churches but in fact it is the Basilica of St. John Lateran. Every bishop has a cathedral and the Pope's cathedral is the Basilica of St. John Lateran, not the Basilica of St. Peter.

You may ask, "Why is the Basilica of St. John Lateran the Pope's cathedral and not the Basilica of St. Peter since he lives next to St. Peter's Basilica?" History gives us the answer. In the early centuries, Christianity was outlawed in Rome and many Christians in Rome suffered martyrdom. The emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and the famous Edict of Milan in AD 313 allowed Christians to practice their religion in public. Constantine had been given the palace in Rome that belonged to the Lateranus family, and after his conversion to Christianity he gave it to the Pope. The Lateran Palace was then adapted to become a church and was dedicated on November 9, AD 324, and the Pope then lived in the Lateran Palace, as it was called, for the next 1000 years and the basilica was his cathedral. It was first called the Basilica of the Savior but later was also dedicated to St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist, and so it acquired the name Basilica of St. John Lateran. When the Papacy transferred to Avignon for about a century, the condition of the Lateran deteriorated so much that when the Papacy returned to Rome, the Pope lived in two other locations before finally settling adjacent to St. Peter's Basilica where he now lives.

Perhaps we could say that the many times the basilica suffered destruction of some kind is a symbol of the attacks on the Church and the hatred of some for the Church. The basilica was attacked by the Vandals twice in AD 408 and 455. It was almost totally destroyed by an earthquake in 896 and it was destroyed by fire in 1308 and 1360. The basilica is visited by huge numbers of pilgrims every year, symbolizing the love of so many people for the Church.

Those who visit the Basilica on pilgrimage, visit it not just because it is the head of all churches and the Pope's cathedral. The wooden altar on which St. Peter celebrated Mass while in Rome is inside the main altar. The heads of Saints Peter and Paul were once believed to be inside busts above the main altar. Part of the table on which the Last Supper was celebrated is said to be behind a bronze depiction of the Last Supper. At one time, the Holy Stairs—the stairs in Pilate's house on which Jesus is said to have walked during his trial—which is nearby, was also in the Lateran. They are marble stairs and now covered with wood for protection. Pilgrims ascend the stairs on their knees contemplating Jesus' Passion. The stairs were brought to Rome by Constantine's mother St. Helena.

Celebrating the dedication of the Pope's cathedral today shows our unity with the Pope and our love and respect for him. Not only that, but it shows that we are united with each other in the Church.

Have a Blessed Sunday!

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