

HOMILY for the DEDICATION of ST. JOHN LATERAN BASILICA – Year C

Reflecting on this Sunday's Feast, I'm reminded of this cute story that I'd like to share with you.

Three country preachers were discussing their attempts to get rid of the bats in their respective church bell towers.

The first said he had tried to shoot them, but that had left holes in the roof; and now he had leaks as well as bats. The second said he had tried catching the bats in a net and driving them out into the country; but the bats usually returned before he did.

The third preacher announced he had solved the problem. "I baptized them & added them to our membership," he said, "and I haven't seen them since!"

Anyhow, this Sunday the Church invites us to celebrate the Feast of the Dedication of the Lateran Basilica. Here's the history of today's Feast. It marks the anniversary of the Church of Rome, which was built on the land owned by the Laterani family, by Pope St. Sylvester I on November 9, 324. The basilica, the mother church of Christendom, was erected by Emperor Constantine to honor the episcopal seat of the pope as the bishop of Rome & the leader of the entire Catholic Church. Pope Clement XII, who reigned from 1730 to 1740, put an inscription of this church façade that reads, "This basilica is the mother & head of all churches of Rome & the world." The basilica has been the residence of the popes from the fourth century until their moving to Avignon, France in 1309. It was the result of a Western Schism/division in the Church that produced two to three rival popes and lasted for forty years. This schism is different from the East-West Schism which began in 1054 & was a permanent institutional separation between the Catholic & Orthodox Churches that still has unresolved issues concerning language, politics, & doctrine. The Western Schism, however, was resolved by the Council of Constance which resulted in the deposing of the rival popes & elected a new one, Pope Martin V in 1417. Anyway, the basilica was also the site of five ecumenical councils & was believed to hold the remains of the small wooden table on which St. Peter celebrated Mass beneath its current high altar.

What is the significant meaning of today's feast for us Catholics? As you might know, our Catholic Church is governed from the top down with the pope as its head & the bishops/cardinals as his deputies. Like all the bishops/cardinals, the pope has his own diocese in Rome. But, he is also elected to represent all bishops/cardinals of other dioceses around the world along with priests, deacons, & religious order members. Like the Feast of the Chair of St. Peter, today's Feast reminds us of the primacy & leadership of the pope. For the Church believes that his power was given to him as the successors of St. Peter when Jesus said, "Simon, you are Peter, meaning 'the rock;' & upon this rock I will build my Church. The power of the netherworld will not overcome it. For whatever you bind on earth will be bound in Heaven. And whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in Heaven."

The Church indeed believes in the authority/power of St. Peter that came right from the mouth of our Lord Jesus. For anyone who opposes the papal power, they just need to re-read the Gospel passage that I have just quoted & figure out what Jesus meant by it. Lately, we've seen some so-called "conservative" bishops/archbishops who have tried to challenge the papal power because they might have found his viewpoints or teachings contrary to theirs. Can you believe that these bishops/archbishops have demanded their priests, deacons, & religious order

members to obey them while they themselves do not practice it with the pope? Also, because of the disobedient bishops/archbishops like them over the years, the Church has suffered all kinds of schisms/divisions until this day. Moreover, I wonder how Jesus would have felt if He has found them squabble with one another over power & politics like that. In fact, once Jesus caught the twelve Apostles argue with one another about who would sit on the right & left side of Him in the Kingdom of Heaven, He gave them a lecture on who would be the greatest in His eyes; it would be the ones who act in humble service to the community & the least among them.

Besides the primacy & leadership of the pope, today's Feast also invites us to reflect on the idea of the Church. Is it a building or a community of God's faithful people? Sure the Church needs a building for its members to gather & worship; thence they could experience God's presence & feel connected to God. But, the Church comprises members of various cultures, customs, ethnicities, & backgrounds. Without its lively members, the Church will be dying or soon be dead. That is why we have seen many beautiful churches being closed or had dwindling membership in our country & around the world. So, it is very important for the modern-day Church to have the missionary spirit of St. Paul & enthusiastically go out into the world to share the Good News of Jesus. If we do not share the vision & spirit of Jesus & St. Paul, we would remain just a church building & will not grow our membership & invite more people to be a part of the Kingdom of God. Sooner or later, the Church would wither & disappear from the face of the earth. Unfortunately, that would be contrary to Jesus' wishes & today's First Reading's message, namely, the Church must be the source of life-giving water & spiritual nourishment for the world.

My dear brothers & sisters, do you believe in the power & leadership of the Pope? Also, what is your idea of the Church? Is it a static building or a lively & life-giving community? As a lively & life-giving community, we must live out our faith & let it change the world. Let me leave with you the following reminder of the Second Vatican Council on what the Church offers to human activity through its members: "...One of the gravest errors of our time [, said the Council] is the dichotomy between the faith which many profess & the practice of their daily lives... Let Christians follow the example of Christ who worked as a craftsman; let them be proud of the opportunity to carry out their earthly activity in such a way as to integrate human, domestic, professional, scientific, & technical enterprises with religious values under whose supreme power all things are ordered to the glory of God."