

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on the Dedication of the Lateran Basilica
November 9, 2014

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On the cover of today's service leaflet is a picture of a particular church in Rome. Like many churches in the Eternal City this one is a huge pile. I have not yet met anyone who says it is on his short list of most beautiful churches in the world, or even in the city of Rome. But this church greets every person entering with unique and truly magnificent words. *Omnium ecclesiarum Urbis et Orbis mater et caput*. Mother and head of all Churches in the city and the world. It is a grand title. It may surprise some to learn that this greeting is not found on the Vatican hill but on the Lateran hill.

Perhaps it is difficult to warm to a feast day focused not on Christ or a saint but on a building. Count me in! We observe this feast commemorating a building when in September we omitted the observance of Saint Matthew's Day when it also fell on a Sunday. Not that I am against commemorating a famous church. Suffice it to say the decision as to what is observed in our liturgical calendar is beyond my pay envelope! But today is the day when in the ripe old year 325 Pope Sylvester dedicated the original church on the Lateran hill. 1690 years is a long run by anybody's yardstick, (unless you happen to be a paleontologist or astronomer!)

The annual remembrance of this dedication reminds us of the origins of the Jewish Feast of *Hanukah*. Recently in the Breviary we have been reading about the heroic exploits of Judas Maccabeus. You may remember the story. In 165BC Judas recaptured Jerusalem, which had been held by the pagan Seleucids. They had desecrated the Temple to the extent it had to be virtually rebuilt and rededicated. From that day onwards the dedication was remembered every year, not only in the Temple in Jerusalem, but in every synagogue worldwide where people met on the Sabbath. This dedication is sometimes called "The Feast of Lights." But the more common name *Hanukah* means **inauguration**. And so the annual commemoration of a central worship place had precedent in our Old Testament history.

Some of you have been fortunate enough to have visited the Lateran Basilica. But thanks to the Internet, the rest of you can spend your Sunday afternoon taking a virtual tour of the place. And what may strike you is just how much the Lateran's history mirrors the affairs of the Catholic Church herself. Like Holy Mother Church, the history of the Lateran has its ups and downs and confusions!

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Consider first the *title* of the place. Originally dedicated to Christ the Saviour by Pope Sylvester, the Lateran had one of its rebuildings after a ninth century earthquake. It was then rededicated to Christ through the intercession of St John the Baptist. Later, Pope Lucius II added the intercession of St John the Evangelist. Today the formal name of the church is a mouthful. “The Patriarchal Basilica of the Most Holy Saviour and Saint John the Baptist at the Lateran.” How would you like to be the receptionist who answers the telephone in the parish office? He or she probably just picks up the phone and says, *Lateran!*

Over the centuries there were *other* earthquakes. Vandals also pillaged the place. Three times there were devastating fires, and by 1308 the site was in ruins. No wonder when the popes returned from Avignon in 1377 they began to spend most of their time at the Vatican. So although the present Lateran basilica dates from the 16th century, for the past 620 years the Vatican has been the papal residence. Still, the Lateran’s credentials are impressive. It was the pope’s residence for a thousand years. It was also the site of five ecumenical councils.

So the career of the Lateran basilica is checkered. It is not the first church in Rome, or even the second, on the tourist’s list of “must see” places. The *paparazzi* know the way to the Vatican. But the foreign-born cabbies in Rome need directions to the Lateran! Through all of this, however, the Lateran has remained a sign of Christ in His Church, which is not a building but a people, who have themselves been built and fallen, vandalized, and reformed and renewed through the ages. And it will always be true that the Holy Father is Pope because he is the Bishop of Rome and not the other way round! The Lateran remains his cathedral. That makes the Lateran the mother church of the Universal Church. *Omnium ecclesiarum Urbis et Orbis mater et caput.*

The Universal Church is called to the dedication of all her people, just as is this venerable basilica, to Christ the Saviour. And in the Lateran basilica itself it is under Christ’s image in mosaic that the *cathedra*, the teaching chair of the Bishop of Rome, is placed. It is a powerful sign. The pope literally stands under Christ so that the faithful worldwide may better understand what the Saviour is calling us to be and to do.