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Meditations: November 9, dedication of the Basilica of St. John Lateran

Some reflections that can assist our prayer on the commemoration of the dedication of the Basilica of St. John Lateran. The topics are: the first papal chair; worship in our hearts and in the temple; caring for objects dedicated to worship.

11/09/2024

- The first papal chair
- Worship in our hearts and in the temple
- Caring for objects dedicated to worship

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IN THE early years of Christianity, the Eucharist was celebrated in private homes which some Christian families (usually those with more economic resources, and therefore larger homes) made available to the community. These were the primitive domestic churches or *domus ecclesiae*. The first Christian temple to be built in Rome was the Lateran Basilica, on the grounds previously occupied by the emperor's private guard barracks. Pope Sylvester

consecrated it in the year 318.

Initially, it was called the Basilica of the Savior, but in the medieval period, it was also dedicated to St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist. For many centuries, until the Avignon period, the papal chair was located there, which is why this basilica deserved the title

“cunctarum mater et caput ecclesiarum,” or “mother and head of all churches,” as an inscription next to the entrance still says today.

Today, we commemorate the dedication of this basilica. It is an opportunity to strengthen our communion with the seat of Peter and to delve into the significance that sacred buildings, spaces exclusively dedicated to worship, have in Christian life. One of the prefaces that can be used in today’s Mass summarizes the meaning of this celebration when it thanks God with these words: “For in your

benevolence you are pleased to dwell in this house of prayer in order to perfect us as the temple of the Holy Spirit, supported by the perpetual help of your grace and resplendent with the glory of a life acceptable to you.”^[1] — Visible churches are a symbol of the invisible Church, formed by all the baptized as “living and chosen stones.”^[2] — Therefore, on a feast like today's, we ask God to give us grace so that we can build the Church and reach our ultimate dwelling place in the heavenly Jerusalem.^[3] —

TRUE WORSHIPERS will worship the Father in spirit and truth (Jn 4:23), Jesus told the Samaritan woman who was asking about the proper place for divine worship. Christ points out that God dwelling in each person's heart is even more important than the physical place of worship (cf. *Jn*

14:23), and He assures us that He is present wherever two or three gather in His name (cf. *Mt 18:20*). As St. Paul will later teach on the Areopagus, *The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything (Acts 17:24-25).*

Putting God's transcendence and the importance of interiority in our relationship with Him first is entirely compatible with the fact that people need places where God's closeness to us is made visible. Furthermore, we are not saved individually but as a Church, as the people of God. Not coincidentally, in the Greek of the New Testament, the word "church" means assembly or gathering. Indeed, in the church, whether large or small, we gather with other

faithful Christians, and Christ becomes present among us, especially in the Eucharist. *My house shall be called a house of prayer* (Mt 21:13). We read these words in the gospel of the Mass. They can serve us to consider our attitude when we enter a church, chapel, or oratory. Do we truly feel like we are in God's house? Do we immediately direct our gaze to the tabernacle, where the Eucharist is reserved? Are we capable of maintaining an inner silence that allows us to pray? Do we seek to adore God and thank Him for his closeness, patience, and willingness to stay close to us in a way that is at once incredible and very human?

ST. FRANCIS of Assisi fervently implored the custodians of his order (those who guided the community of

each place) to humbly request the clergy “to venerate above all else the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ [...]. The chalices, the corporals, the ornaments of the altar, and everything related to the sacrifice should be precious.”^[4] —

Caring for the buildings and objects related to worship arises from faith, love, and gratitude toward the God who has come so close to us.

Alongside reason, our senses and emotions also help us reach God.

The founder of Opus Dei explained, with an evocative example, that human love is the reason for offering the most beautiful objects for worship: “As I have already told you, only when a man gives the woman he loves a sack of cement and three iron bars as a sign of his affection will we do the same for our Lord, who is in heaven and in our tabernacles.”^[5] — He also used to say that he easily understood any kind of

fault born of weakness, but found it more difficult to understand negligent carelessness: “I think that with those people who put love into all that has to do with worship, who see to it that the churches are kept with dignity and decorum, and clean, the altars resplendent, the sacred vestments beautiful and well cared for, God will look on them with special affection and more easily turn a blind eye on their weaknesses, because they prove by those details that they believe and love.”^[6] —

Mary cared for Jesus thoughtfully and attentively in Bethlehem, Nazareth, and throughout His life. Today, on the day of the dedication of the Basilica of St. John Lateran, we can ask our Mother for a bit of that great love.

[1] Preface, Common of the Dedication of a Church outside the dedicated church.

[2] Collect Prayer, Mass for the Dedication of the Basilica of St. John Lateran.

[3] Prayer after Communion, Ibid.

[4] Saint Francis of Assisi, *First Letter to the Custodians*.

[5] Saint Josemaría, Letter 6, no. 28.

[6] Saint Josemaría, *Instruction for the Work of San Rafael*, note 167.