

- Inscribed upon the façade of the Basilica of St. John Lateran in Rome are the words: “the mother and mistress of all the churches of Rome and of the world.” As the oldest church in the West, it certainly is that.
- Located on the former estate of the Laterani Family in Rome, which was ceded into imperial hands when one of the Laterani family members was accused of conspiracy, St. John Lateran in Rome is without doubt one of the most important and impressive churches in the world.
- After the Edict of Milan of 313 brought Christians out of the catacombs, Constantine gave the Laterani Estate to the Church for the building of the first Christian basilica in 314.
- And it was completed and dedicated on this day in 324 by Pope Sylvester, which is why we’re celebrating the Feast of the Dedication of St. John Lateran this Sunday.
- Today, St. John Lateran stands as a testimony to the strength of the Church in the face of persecution, and it is a repository of some of the most important relics of our faith.
- For example, the wooden altar upon which St. Peter offered the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass while he lived in Rome is contained within the main altar.
- And part of the table at which our Lord presided over the Last Supper is found behind a bronze depiction of the Last Supper above the altar in the left transept.
- But more important than the relics and the beautiful artwork and the stunning architecture of this church is the meaning behind this feast.
- Honoring the dedication of the Pope’s cathedral shows our unity with our Holy Father and our love and respect for him. More importantly, honoring the Mother Church of all Christendom shows our unity with the Church.
- Yet beyond all this, as the mother and mistress of all churches, the Basilica is itself a symbol of the Church and of the power and endurance of our Christian Faith.
- Very emblematically, throughout its history St. John Lateran has suffered numerous disasters that have nearly destroyed it. It was sacked and looted twice in the 5th century by barbarians.
- Fortunately, Pope St. Leo the Great rebuilt the church in the late 5th century, as did Pope Hadrian in the 8th century – just in time for the building to be almost completely destroyed again in 896 by an earthquake.
- More rebuilding ensued, as did more disasters, with St. John Lateran suffering terrible fires in 1308 and 1360. In fact, when the papacy returned to Rome from its Avignon exile, the terrible state of St. John Lateran necessitated moving the papal residence to the Vatican.
- Yet for all its disasters and near destruction, the mother and mistress of all the world’s churches still stands proudly as an enduring testament to the beauty, staying power, and irrepressibility of our Catholic Faith. Truly, the gates of hell shall not prevail against us.
- As the Church herself weathers various attacks and storms, both from outside enemies and those among her own members, we need to be reminded of the incredible staying power of the Church. Regardless of her enemies, Holy Mother Church enjoys God’s divine protection.
- And with this knowledge, my friends, we can smile with that hope that knows that the one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church is so much more than her earthly structures of power and authority. Even her enemies within the Church cannot destroy her, for God is in control.
- And in those times when we are tempted to focus on the negative elements of the Church, or when we’re tempted to abandon her because of bad leadership or controversies, it’s important to remind ourselves of the great graces that can only be had by being one of Her members.

- In our first reading we're given this marvelous passage from Ezekiel that speaks of the life-giving waters flowing from the temple. Ezekiel says that wherever the river flows, there is the multiplication of life, the revitalizing of that which is dead, and fruitfulness of every kind.
- Early Christians linked this passage to John 7:37, in which Jesus says: "Let anyone who thirsts come to Me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as Scripture says: 'Rivers of living water will flow from within him.'"
- The early Christians saw the water flowing from the temple in Ezekiel's vision as a foreshadowing of the waters of baptism, which we enter steeped in our sins but walk out of with purity of soul, filled with sanctifying grace and even the presence of God Himself!
- Through the waters of baptism we become members of the Church, which is Christ's own Body, and it is only in the Church that we drink of the life-giving waters of God's grace that refresh and revitalize what has been killed in us by sin, giving us new life.
- So if we want this life-giving water, if we want this saving grace, then we must be members of God's holy Church! And we must seek to be holy ourselves!
- As St. Paul says to us today, "Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? . . . for the temple of God, which you are, is holy."
- St. Paul reminds us that, as the temple of God, we're built upon the firm foundation of Christ. Upon this foundation stone the Church is built by the Apostles, and from this foundation we receive our unity and strength – but only if we are united to Christ in His Church.
- Yet, it is not enough simply to be loosely united to Christ; loose stones damage the integrity of the whole Church. We must firmly adhere to Christ, being shaped and molded by the parameters His foundation has laid for us.
- The mortar that makes us adhere to Him as we should is a composite of a living faith, obedience to His Word and teachings, and humble submission to His divine will.
- So we must come to the Church to be healed of our sins and shaped into Christ's own image, rather than trying to shape the Church into our own image.
- If we are not willing to adhere to Christ and His teachings, if we are not willing to have faith in Him or submit to His will, then we are no better than the money changers who were misusing the Temple and whom Jesus drove out of the Temple in our Gospel story.
- Yet when all of us living stones firmly adhere to Christ our foundation as we should, not only is the whole church building stronger and better built, but it is also more beautiful to behold!
- My dear friends, the one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church is our mother and our home. It is within her walls that we come into a living relationship with Christ and that our Lord Himself comes to dwell within us. It is within the Church that we are given to drink of Her life-giving streams of grace that save us and make us pleasing to God.
- While at times She is ravaged by spiritual barbarians and vandals, shaken by the earthquakes of scandal, and her teachings and traditions are assaulted even by her own leaders, we can never lose faith in God's divine protection of her.
- She is still the spotless Bride of Christ, against Whom the gates of hell cannot prevail.
- As members of the Body of Christ, we are the living stones that make up the Church. Yet we are only living stones to the degree that we conform to the foundation that Christ has set for us, which the teachings of the Church point out for us.
- Let us pray that all of us may adhere firmly to Christ, who is both our head and our foundation. Let us trust that together we will be made into a pleasing edifice in which our Lord may happily dwell.