

Dedication of the Lateran Basilica in Rome

Many Catholics are surprised to discover that St. Peter's Basilica is not the Cathedral Church of Rome. Try as pilgrims might they cannot find the Bishop of Rome's Cathedra, or Chair, in that Church. Sometimes they think it's the high Baroque sculpture of the Chair of St. Peter behind the high altar. Other times some people assume it's the portable chair in which the Pope sits when in St. Peter's. Neither is true.

The Cathedral of Rome is the Church of St. John Lateran and here we find the Bishop of Rome's Cathedra. Dedicated, or made holy, to Christ our Savior in the 4th Century, it is here the Pope comes on various liturgical occasions during the year, and when he wants to speak especially to the people of Rome, to the members of his own local church.

On any given day in the life of the Church there are probably several local churches observing the anniversary of the dedication of the Cathedral in their diocese. The Dedication of the St. John Lateran Basilica is a universal feast because it reminds us of our local Bishop's communion with the Bishop of Rome. This is what makes us Roman Catholic.

Sadly today sometimes we find people who think that they can choose between their local Bishop and the Pope. This is many things, but it's not Roman Catholic. Whatever personal devotion we might have for a particular Pope, our loyal affections toward him are of no consequence in terms of being in communion with him. How we establish our communion with the Pope is through our communion with the local Bishop, who celebrates the same Eucharist as, and with, the Bishop of Rome.

It's easy to see how some people get this wrong. In years gone by the Church emphasized the role of the Pope so strongly we could be forgiven for thinking of the Pope as the Chief Executive Officer of the Church, and our local Bishop as a Branch Manager. The Pope ordered, "Jump!" and we just asked "How high?" The problem with this rather monarchical model of papal authority is that, given the whole history of the Church, it is relatively recent.

This is why the Second Vatican Council, while clear about the essential governing, teaching, and legislating roles the Pope has in the Church, was careful to recover more ancient thinking about the Pope's leadership. They showed that governing, teaching, and legislating always have a context. They taught that the Pope exercises his leadership as first among the Bishops, as the Universal Pastor, the sign of our unity, and as the one charged to teach, guard, and defend the faith of the whole Church through the way he confirms his brother Bishops in the similar tasks they have in their respective local churches. Even the root of the word "obedience" means, "to listen carefully."

So, on this feast we celebrate our unity amidst our diversity, as we focus on the Mother Church of all Roman Catholic Churches. May we gain from it a recommitment to our local Bishop, who is also a successor of the Apostles, and to respond to the present Pope's recent call to help him imagine ways in which his office of service can be a greater sign of Christian unity for the world in the future.

And may we always remember in the spirit of today's Gospel that the Church is not defined by bricks and mortar, but that the glorified Body of Christ is made of people who live out his saving love in the world today.

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