

The focal point of today's liturgy is not a person but a building—the Lateran Basilica in Rome.

Saint John Lateran is one of the four major basilicas in Rome, along with St. Peter, St. Mary Major, and St. Paul Outside the Walls. It is unique among the four since it (not St. Peter's) is the cathedral church of the Bishop of Rome, the pope. On November 9, 324, Pope St. Sylvester consecrated a basilica on the grounds of the Lateran palace that had belonged to Emperor Constantine's wife's family. For over 1,000 years, until the pope and the administration of the church moved to France for a period of seventy years, it was from the Lateran that the pope exercised his ministry as Bishop of Rome and head of the world-wide church. Upon the papacy's return from France, since the 15th century, the pope and the central administration of the church have resided at the Vatican. Over the centuries, numbers of church wide meetings, councils, were held at the Lateran. Since it is Rome's cathedral, and Rome is the mother diocese of the whole church, Catholics throughout the world today celebrate our "mother church." An interesting footnote: since all Catholics are considered "parishioners" of the Lateran Basilica, even those who live outside of Rome can be baptized, married and buried from the Lateran Basilica. Talk of a "destination" wedding!!!!

For the people of Israel in the centuries prior to the coming of Jesus, and in Jesus' day, the Temple in Jerusalem stood as the visible symbol of God's presence and the faith covenant between God and the whole people as well as the individual believer. Today's Gospel is the familiar story of Jesus physically cleansing the Temple. Instead of being a place of prayer; commercial commerce, including a currency exchange in the Temple precincts, had turned the Temple into a type of market, a strip mall. By his prophetic act Jesus drove away the merchants, calling them to conversion; to cleanse the temples of their hearts from the practices and idols which they had allowed to populate them. What about you and me? Who or what occupies primacy of place in the temple of my heart? Have I

given myself over to attitudes and practices that have dulled the dedication of the temple of my soul and body washed in baptism, anointed and sealed in the Holy Spirit at Confirmation? Has my heart become a “market place” for some thing or someone other than Jesus? What kind of temple am I?

Following his dramatic cleansing in the Gospel, Jesus utters an amazing statement: “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up” (Jn. 2:19). Jesus states that the physical temple in Jerusalem will be replaced by an even greater temple—the temple of Jesus himself! In the place where sacrifice was offered, Jesus states He will be the new sacrifice, the reality of God’s dwelling in the lives of people and in the life of the world, the new source of unity for God’s people. Through the cross, Jesus fulfilled his prophecy by his passion, death, resurrection, ascension and the bestowal of the gift of the Holy Spirit; what we term the “Paschal Mystery.” Through faith and baptism an individual is united to Jesus’ own Passover sacrifice, his death and resurrection, and is joined to other disciples as a member of the Body of Christ, the Church-- “God’s building” (I Cor. 3:9)—the New Temple.

In every church building, as in the Temple in Jerusalem, the principal symbol of the presence of Christ and the bond between God and those gathered as the Body of Christ, the Church, is the altar—the place of worship and sacrifice. In the Rite of the Dedication of a Church the altar is anointed with Holy Chrism as the sacrament of the presence Christ, the Anointed One. Incense is then burned on the anointed altar where the sacrifice of Jesus offered on the cross is made present in our midst every time we, priest and people gather rising as a pleasing fragrance before God. The cloth covering the altar reminds us that it is also the symbol of the table of the Lord’s Supper in the Upper Room in Jerusalem where he instituted the sacraments of the Holy Eucharist and the ministerial priesthood through which his one unending sacrifice continues in the Church. From the altar flows the “living water” of God’s grace, giving and renewing divine life in each of us, continually making and keeping each of us as temples, churches, basilicas—God’s holy dwelling place!