

Feast of the Dedication of the Lateran Basilica in Rome

November 9th

Dedication of the “mother church” of all Christianity: *ecclesia omnium urbis et orbis ecclesiarum mater et caput* – of all the churches in the city and the world, the mother and head



The Lateran Basilica

The Lateran Basilica in Rome is not the oldest church in Rome – that honor seems to belong to *Santi Quattro Coronati* (314); but then that depends on what sources you believe. Old St. Peter’s, the original church on the spot where the current St. Peter’s stands dates to 324, the same year as St. Lorenzo and St. John Lateran. Did you know that the Lateran Basilica is the Cathedral of the Diocese of Rome – the place from where the Bishop of Rome, Pope Leo, leads his diocese even as he leads the church universal.

The Lateran did not even start out as a church – it was a palace on the Lateran Hill that came into the possession of the Emperor Constantine who lifted the ban on Christianity in 313. Sometime later the emperor gifted it to the church and by 324 it was converted to become a church and was declared to be the “mother church” of all Christianity: *ecclesia omnium urbis et orbis ecclesiarum mater et caput* – of all the churches in the city and the world, the mother and head.

The Lateran has needed a few repairs over the years. As the Roman Empire fell, the Lateran fell into disrepair. It has been rebuilt, burned down, rebuilt, partially burned, rebuilt and finally evolved into the grand basilica you can visit today in Rome. Perhaps one of the “rebuilding” stories is of most interest to we Franciscans. It is there at the Lateran that Pope Innocent III dreamed of the Lateran falling down but held up by a small, brown robed man – Francis from Assisi who had just visited the Pope requesting permission to begin a new religious order. The Pope called Francis back to a papal audience and commissioned him to live the gospel life, to preach, and to reconcile. Even today the Franciscans maintain a house dedicated to preaching and sacramental reconciliation at the Lateran.

Before We Begin

The gospel for this feast is paired with a reading from the Prophet Ezekiel, one in which an angel offers the prophet a vision of a temple. The vision starts with the idea of the Jerusalem Temple, but shows something far more magnificent and impactful than the temple built by King Solomon which was

already destroyed by the Babylonians. The description of this future temple is described in Ezekiel 40-48 and begins when Ezekiel is taken up in a vision to a high mountain where he sees a future temple, symbolizing God's restored presence among His people. The main features of the vision are then described in the nine chapters.

In Ezekiel 40-42 the temple structure is revealed to the prophet by a man with a measuring rod who gives him a tour of the layout. There is an emphasis on precise measurements of inner and outer courts, the facing directions of gates (east, north, and south), the sanctuary and Holy of Holies, as well as other chambers. In the light of the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of its people, the precise description conveys a future order and holiness.

The glory of the Lord had occupied the Jerusalem Temple since its dedication by King Solomon, but earlier in his book, Ezekiel described the glory of the Lord leaving the Temple as a precursor to all that would befall the holy city. Now, in Ezekiel 43 the glory of the Lord returns from the east and fills the temple. God declares He will dwell among His people forever but also that this temple vision also serves to remind Israel of their deeds "*that they may be ashamed of their sins.*" (Ezekiel 43:10)

Chapters 44-46 are a detailed description of Temple worship and associated regulations.

This brings us to the magnificent description of the Temple in Chapter 47 from which is taken our first reading for the Dedication of the Lateran Basilica.

The angel brought me back to the entrance of the temple, and I saw water flowing out from beneath the threshold of the temple toward the east, for the façade of the temple was toward the east; the water flowed down from the southern side of the temple, south of the altar. He led me outside by the north gate, and around to the outer gate facing the east, where I saw water trickling from the southern side.

He said to me, "This water flows into the eastern district down upon the Arabah, and empties into the sea, the salt waters, which it makes fresh. Wherever the river flows, every sort of living creature that can multiply shall live, and there shall be abundant fish, for wherever this water comes the sea shall be made fresh. Along both banks of the river, fruit trees of every kind shall grow; their leaves shall not fade, nor their fruit fail. Every month they shall bear fresh fruit, for they shall be watered by the flow from the sanctuary. Their fruit shall serve for food, and their leaves for medicine." (Ezekiel 47:1-2, 8-9, 12)

The overall Temple in Ezekiel is seen as symbolic of spiritual restoration, not just physical rebuilding. It emphasizes holiness, order, and God's presence. While some see it as a blueprint for a later temple, it is perhaps best seen as a prophetic vision of a future Messianic age.

The Gospel

¹³ Since the Passover of the Jews was near, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ He found in the temple area those who sold oxen, sheep, and doves, as well as the money-changers seated there. ¹⁵ He made a whip out of cords and drove them all out of the temple area, with the sheep and oxen, and spilled the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables, ¹⁶ and to those who sold doves he said, "Take these out of here, and stop making my Father's house a marketplace." ¹⁷ His disciples recalled the words of scripture, "Zeal for your house will consume me." ¹⁸ At this the Jews answered and said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" ¹⁹ Jesus answered and said to them, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰ The Jews said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and you will raise it up in three days?" ²¹ But he was speaking about the temple of his body. ²² Therefore, when he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they came to believe the scripture and the word Jesus had spoken. (John 2:13-22)

The First Reading-Gospel Connection

The gospel recounts Jesus driving out the money changers from the temple and declaring: “*Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.*” In its own immediate context, Jesus’ words point to the Resurrection as the “rebuilding” of the Temple, not as a physical building but a spiritual reality in which Jesus is the new temple—the dwelling place of God. In New Testament theology St. Paul describes this as the “Body of Christ,” the physical and spiritual reality where God dwells in Christ as the Head and in the Church as the Body.

On the feast of the Lateran Basilica, the mother church of all churches, this reading reminds the faithful that the Church is not just a building but the Body of Christ, the true temple, and the Church is where His presence dwells.

Ezekiel’s vision of water flowing from the temple, paired with this Gospel on this Feast, points to the life-giving grace flowing from God’s presence as a source of healing and renewal for the world. It describes a restored creation through divine presence - the mission of the Church in all ages.

Ezekiel 47	John 2:13–22
Water flows from the temple, bringing life to the land.	Jesus is the new temple, from whom living water (grace, salvation) flows
The temple is the source of healing and abundance.	Jesus’ body becomes the source of eternal life and healing through His death and resurrection.
God's presence returns to the temple.	God's presence is now fully revealed in Christ.

The temple of Ezekiel’s vision is Christ, and through Him, the Church becomes the living temple of God. As the mother church of Christendom, the Lateran Basilica stands as a sacramental sign of this reality. It is not just a monument of stone, but a living symbol of the Church universal, where Christ is present, and from which the waters of baptism, Eucharist, and mission flow.

A New Creation

From the beginning of the Fourth Gospel there has been a theme of newness and of creation. The Prologue refers to the power and role of the Word of God in the story of Creation. Then, very subtly, it continues to recount a new creation in the Incarnation of Jesus. In John 1:29 you see the phrase, “*the next day*” as John the Baptist testified to Jesus. “*The next day*” the first apostles are called in v.34 and following. The “*next day*” (v.43), now day four of the new creation week, Philip and Nathanael are added as disciples.

The passage immediately before our gospel passage in the Wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11). Our gospel is followed by the account of Jesus and Nicodemus (John 3:1-21). “*On the third day...*” (Jn 2:1) we find ourselves, according to the Johannine imagery, on the seventh day of the new creation week. The creation week reaches its climax - the unveiling of the public life of the Anointed One of God. The account of the wedding at Cana is relatively short (11 verses) and yet it is filled with a variety of images, theological and sacramental.

It may be significant for St John that the account of the wedding feast is described as happening on the 3rd and the 7th day. In *Nb 19* these are the days on which the ritually impure were sprinkled with water so that they were (a) rejoined to the people of Israel and (b) could reenter the Temple. Without this rite

of purification they were cut off from chosen people of God. This view is supported when in *Jn 2:6* we are told that the six stone jars were for the Jewish rites of purification. But what purification is needed here? I believe that St John is connecting this event to the baptism of John. That baptism was a call of repentance to Israel as a means of purifying themselves for the arrival of the Consolation of Israel; for a new covenantal relationship with God.

All of these Johannine accounts speak of newness, renewal, or creation – the cleansing of the Temple is a part of this thread. This physical purification of the temple might remind us of the type of symbolic deeds acted out by the prophets; and, indeed, Jesus' approach to the temple on this occasion resembles that of Jeremiah (Jer 7). The action, though not a miracle, is a sign, a double sign. The temple, soon to be destroyed, stood in need of purification. And its function would be replaced by the risen body of Christ.

Cleansing the Temple

¹³ Since the Passover of the Jews was near, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ He found in the temple area those who sold oxen, sheep, and doves, as well as the money-changers seated there.

From Josephus, a Jewish historian who wrote in the later part of the 1st century AD, we know that in this period the temple functions were under the control of the Sadducees and the high priest Annas. As high priest he also served as the Treasurer of the temple with his sons as assistant treasurers. Their avarice and greed for money lead this spectacle to be called the "bazaar of the sons of Annas". They used the ritual of Temple religious life to implement a scam on the people of Israel: temple sacrifices brought from home were mandatorily inspected for blemish, for a fee. Blemish was always found. But a pre-inspected, blemish-free sacrifice could be purchased in the temple compound, for an exorbitant price, but not with Roman coinage (the images violated the law). The money changers exchanged Roman coins into specially minted temple coins, at a profit. It is against this background that Jesus cleanses the temple.

¹⁵ He made a whip out of cords and drove them all out of the temple area, with the sheep and oxen, and spilled the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables, ¹⁶ and to those who sold doves he said, "Take these out of here, and stop making my Father's house a marketplace."

"Jesus' actions in the Temple are narrated in one long complex sentence in the Greek text (vv. 14–16), which creates a mood of urgency and haste, thereby underscoring the intensity of Jesus' actions. Just as Jesus never hesitates as he moves through the Temple, so, too, vv. 14–16 never hesitate. John alone among the Gospels mentions sheep and cattle and the detail of Jesus' whip. John's picture of Jesus in the Temple is large and dramatic, as Jesus herds animals and people out of the temple court, pouring out money and overturning tables as he goes." [O'Day, 542]

"Christian interpretations that see this story principally as an illustration of the extortionist practices of the Jewish temple authorities are disregarding the realities of temple worship in Jesus' day: cattle, sheep, and doves were required for burnt offerings in the Temple (see Leviticus 1 and 3). It was commanded in the Law. There were inevitable abuses of the temple system, but in vv. 14–16 Jesus confronts the system itself, not simply its abuses. This is apparent in the words he speaks to the dove sellers (v. 16). In the synoptic Gospels, Jesus quotes Isa 56:7 and Jer 7:11 (see Matt 21:13; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46), verses that focus on the distortion of a place of worship into a "den of robbers." These OT verses are absent from John, however, and Jesus may allude instead to Zech 14:21 ("And there shall no longer be traders in the house of the LORD of hosts on that day"). In a play on the word for "house" (*oikos*), Jesus complains that his Father's house has become a "house of trade." Since this trade was necessary to maintain the cultic system of sacrifice and tithes, Jesus' charge is a much more radical accusation in John than in the Synoptics. Jesus issues a powerful challenge to the very authority of the Temple and its worship (cf. 4:23–24)." [O'Day, 542]

²³ *But the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth; and indeed the Father seeks such people to worship him.* ²⁴ *God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and truth.*”

Which Temple?

¹⁷ *His disciples recalled the words of scripture, “Zeal for your house will consume me.”* With this single verse we move from historical narrative to a later time when the disciples are looking back on this event through the lens of their experience over the years with Jesus of Nazareth, the events of his death and resurrection, and all that followed. Like many other New Testament authors, John looks to Psalm 19:10 and sees in it a reference to Jesus. He has altered Ps 19:10 a bit and most scholars hold that the chance John makes is significant. In both the Hebrew and Greek (LXX) version of the psalm the verb “consume” is referring to past events. In our text the tense is in the future turning the use of the Psalm into a prophecy of the time when Jesus’ life is “consumed” on the Cross. As O’Day notes this gives Ps 69 a Christological emphasis and moves the focus from temple to Jesus’ fate.

The Need for A Sign

¹⁸ *At this the Jews answered and said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?”* ¹⁹ *Jesus answered and said to them, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.”* ²⁰ *The Jews said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and you will raise it up in three days?”* ²¹ *But he was speaking about the temple of his body.* ²² *Therefore, when he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they came to believe the scripture and the word Jesus had spoken.*

We can see the christological focus play out in vv. 18–22. The focus is clearly upon Jesus. The request (demand?) for a sign is really a question about Jesus’ authority. Interestingly, the text uses “sign” (*sēmeion*) not as the word for miracle or an act that in itself is revelatory. Jesus is being asked for “credentials” or a warrant that allows him to have taken the temple cleansing upon himself. They don’t know him. Their question likely lies somewhere between the true inquiry - “*and you are who?*” and the covert umbrage, “*who do you think you are?*” Jesus responds to their request with the saying about the destruction and rebuilding of the Temple (v. 19).

This response is found in the other gospels, but not from Jesus. It is reported to Jewish authorities at the Holy Week trials of Jesus by false witness (Matt 26:61; Mark 14:58) and later in the taunting of Jesus on the cross (Matt 27:40; Mark 15:29; cf. Acts 6:14).

In any case the response to Jesus’ words about the Temple are met with contempt (v. 20). The rebuilding of the Temple was begun circa 19 BC during the reign of Herod the Great. The reference to forty-six years of construction would suggest a date of 27 AD and so the event/date is historically plausible.

Misunderstanding

In vv. 18–20 we see the first example of the Johannine narrative technique of misunderstanding. The Jews respond to Jesus’ words about the destruction and raising of the Temple with a very pragmatic protest. Clearly their understanding is limited to the physical realm and made no approach to the deeper meaning of Jesus’ words. The verb Jesus uses to speak of the raising of the Temple (*egeirō*) points to a second, more symbolic level of meaning, however, because that verb is also used to speak of resurrection (John 2:22; 5:21; 12:1, 9, 17; 21:14).

This interchange of misunderstanding is a recurring technique in John’s Gospel: the story of Nicodemus (3:3–5), the encounter with the Samaritan Woman at the well (although with a much different result than Nicodemus), and at least four other times

The True Temple

Verse 21 (*“But he was speaking about the temple of his body”*) makes the deeper level of meaning of Jesus’ words explicit. The Evangelist tells the reader that Jesus speaks of “the temple of his body.” Since for Judaism the Temple is the locus of God’s presence on earth, v. 21 suggests that Jesus’ body is now the locus of God’s presence. This verse echoes and recalls John 1:51 where the Son of Man replaces Jacob’s ladder as the locus of God’s interaction with the world.

John’s commentary becomes an interpretation of the dialogue between Jesus and the Jews, so that the reader can discern the full meaning of Jesus’ words as well as the nature of the misunderstanding. The Fourth Evangelist frequently interjects his own voice into the narrative of the Fourth Gospel to provide the reader with insight and information the characters in the stories do not have. Verse 21 enables the reader to see the sign the “Jews” miss: Jesus has the authority to challenge the temple system because he is the locus of God’s presence on earth.

When paired with *Numbers 47*, as it is on the Feast of the Dedication of the Lateran Basilica, we are asked to remember that the Prophet Ezekiel (11:23) described the glory of God leaving the Temple and the city, moving to the East. John the Evangelist is at the beginning of teaching us that the glory of God has returned in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and has returned to the city and the Temple.

In the light of the Resurrection.

Verse 22 (*“Therefore, when he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they came to believe the scripture and the word Jesus had spoken.”*) like v. 17, jumps forward in time as the disciples are arriving at a deeper understanding of the meaning of the events in the Temple. Unlike v. 17, we are given a reference: after Jesus’ resurrection. It recounts what the disciples “remembered.” In John 14:26, Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit *“will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”* In John, remembrance is active reflection on the past in the light of the resurrection with the aid of the Spirit. Such reflection leads to faith and deepened understanding (see 12:16). In 2:22, remembering the past with the aid of the Spirit reveals the truth of Scripture and Jesus’ word in new ways. The combination of Scripture and Jesus’ word in v. 22 shows that the early church began to grant Jesus’ word the same authority it had already granted Scripture. [O’Day, 544]

Verse 22 makes explicit the post-resurrection perspective from which the Gospel was written. Each of the Gospels is written from a post-resurrection perspective, but in John that perspective is intentionally integrated into the Gospel narrative. The distance between the disciples of Jesus in the Gospel stories and the disciples who read the Gospel stories is bridged by v. 22, because this verse points to a time beyond the end of the Fourth Gospel narrative, to a story that gets underway as the Fourth Gospel story draws to a close. Verse 22 points to the interpretive activity of believers as they remember and claim the stories and sayings of Jesus as their own.

Reflection on Jesus the Disrupter

The scholar Gail O’Day [545] offers the following reflection on the Temple-cleansing pericope. She notes that the most common popular citation of this passage is to point to Jesus’ anger as some proof-text that anger can be righteous and justified. That is a discussion for another day, and like O’Day, I would suggest that pathway takes you away from the deeper reality of the narrative.

John 2:13–22 is popularly interpreted as an example of Jesus’ anger and hence his humanity. Jesus’ actions of taking the whip, herding out the animals, and overturning the tables are pointed to as evidence that Jesus could get angry. Such attempts to amass evidence to prove Jesus’ humanity actually undercut the power of the incarnation, however. To focus on isolated attributes or emotions as proof of Jesus’ humanity is in effect to seek after signs, to base one’s faith on the surface

evidence without perceiving the deeper reality. The underlying reality of the Fourth Gospel narrative is that “the Word became flesh” (1:14). Jesus’ humanity thus pervades everything he says and does in his ministry. The scandal of John 2:13–22 is not Jesus’ anger as proof of his humanity, but the authority this human being claims for himself through his words and actions.

Jesus, a complete outsider to the power structure of the Temple, issues a challenge to the authority of the Temple that quite literally shakes its foundations. Jesus throws the mechanics of temple worship into chaos, disrupting the temple system during one of the most significant feasts of the year so that neither sacrifices nor tithes could be offered that day. It is no wonder that the Jews who were gathered at the Temple asked for a sign to warrant his actions (2:18). Jesus was a human being just as they were; who was he to derail their worship?

Jesus explains his actions in the Temple by pointing to his death and resurrection (2:19–21). Jesus has the authority to challenge the authority of the Temple because his whole life bears testimony to the power of God in the world. John 2:13–22 is not about how Jesus’ anger makes him like other people; instead, Jesus’ bold, prophetic act in the Temple reinforces what 1:19–51 and 2:1–11 have already shown: There will be nothing hidden about Jesus’ identity in John. Jesus is the locus of God’s presence on earth, and God as known in Jesus, not the Temple, should be the focal point of cultic activity.

The far-reaching implications of Jesus’ complaint and his actions in the Temple should caution the interpreter against advocating a one-dimensional theory of the superiority of Christianity over Judaism when expositing this text. Jesus is not against Judaism per se. John presents Jesus as an observant Jewish male who travels to Jerusalem at the pilgrimage feasts (2:13; 5:1; 7:10; 12:2). Jesus’ challenge to the authority of the dominant religious institution in Judaism is not anti-Jewish, because it is in line with the institutional challenges of prophets like Amos and Jeremiah. Jesus challenges a religious system so embedded in its own rules and practices that it is no longer open to a fresh revelation from God, a temptation that exists for contemporary Christianity as well as for the Judaism of Jesus’ day.

Jesus’ dramatic actions in 2:13–16, through which he issued a radical challenge to the authority of the religious institutions of his day, issued a similar challenge to the institutionalism of the contemporary church. Christian faith communities must be willing to ask where and when the status quo of religious practices and institutions has been absolutized and, therefore, closed to the possibility of reformation, change, and renewal. The great danger is that the contemporary church, like the leaders of the religious establishment in the Gospel of John, will fall into the trap of equating the authority of its own institutions with the presence of God. All religious institutional embeddedness—whether in the form of temple worship, unjust social systems, or repressive religious practices—is challenged by the revelation of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Notes

John 2:13 *Since the Passover of the Jews was near, Jesus went up to Jerusalem:* Jesus goes up to Jerusalem at Passover time at the beginning of his ministry. This stands in contrast to the other Gospels, in which Jesus goes to Jerusalem but once, and then at the very end of his ministry. With regard to multiple visits, John is probably more correct historically. Our author has considerably more interest in Jerusalem than the other evangelists, an indication that his roots are more oriented in Jerusalem than in Galilee. The temple purification, however, probably occurred toward the end of Jesus’ life, as the Synoptists (Matthew, Mark, Luke) indicate, serving as a final straw leading to Jesus’ condemnation. John may well have transferred the story to this initial phase in Jesus’ life because it fits so well into his

“newness” theme and because he intends that Lazarus’ resurrection (ch. 11) be the incident leading to the crucifixion. **Passover**: this is the first Passover mentioned in John; a second is mentioned in Jn 6:4 a third in Jn 13:1. Taken literally, they point to a ministry of at least two years.

John 2:14 oxen, sheep, and doves: intended for sacrifice. The doves were the offerings of the poor (Lv 5:7). Money-changers: for a temple tax paid by every male Jew more than nineteen years of age, with a half-shekel coin (Ex 30:11–16), in Syrian currency. The festivals were times for “remembering”—that is, to liturgically recall and relive past events—as well as for feasting and celebrating. During all the pilgrimage festivals (Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles), huge crowds of pilgrims would congregate in Jerusalem (Josephus estimates as many as 2,700,000). Large numbers of animals were required, especially at Passover.

John 2:17 Zeal for your house will consume me: The wording from Ps 69:10 is changed to future tense to apply to Jesus.

John 2:19 Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up: This saying about the destruction of the temple occurs in various forms (Mt 24:2; 27:40; Mk 13:2; 15:29; Lk 21:6; cf. Acts 6:14). Mt 26:61 has: “I can destroy the temple of God...” In Mk 14:58, there is a metaphorical contrast with a new temple: “I will destroy this temple made with hands and within three days I will build another not made with hands.” Here it is symbolic of Jesus’ resurrection and the resulting community (see Jn 2:21 and Rev 21:2). **In three days**: possibly an Old Testament expression for a short, indefinite period of time; cf. Hos 6:2. **Raise...up**: The verb used is *egeirō* basically means (transitive) *waken, incite, excite, raise* or intransitively *awaken, be active, stand up, rise*. It appears in the NT most often as a synonym for “resurrect.”

John 2:20 forty-six years: based on references in Josephus (Jewish Wars 1, 21, 1 #401; Antiquities 15, 11, 1 #380), possibly the spring of A.D. 28.

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