

Dedication of the Lateran Basilica
(Ezekiel 47:1-2.8-9.12 / John 2:13-22)
09.11.2014

Buildings & People

A couple of weeks ago, in *The Irish News*, there was a full page report on the discontent of some parishioners because Sunday Eucharistic liturgies would no longer be celebrated in their church, the oldest church in the diocese of Down and Connor. The whole emphasis of the article was on the building itself and its sentimental and historical importance.

I do not want to make any personal comments on this particular situation. However, I think that we have to be very careful because in our Christian faith what matters is not the church made of bricks and stones, precious and old as they may be, but the people who congregate inside; the living Church of God. Our primary concern should always be the community not the building and the question should be: is there a point in keeping a building when there is no community?

From that perspective, it is interesting to notice that as we commemorate the dedication of the Lateran basilica in Rome, the three official prayers for our liturgy today make no mention of this building, yet all three mention us, the people of God, as the recipients of their petitions.

Buildings are necessary and useful, but they should not distract us from what is at the core of our faith and what is expressed so pertinently by St Paul: "Do you not know that you are God's temple (...); God's temple is holy, and you are that temple" (1Co 3:16-17). Our focus is not on buildings but on people, on the Church as the living body of Christ.

For us, to commemorate the dedication of the cathedral of Rome is not to glory in a magnificent and imposing building but to glory in being in communion with the people of God in Rome and because of our communion with them we glory in being in communion with the whole Catholic Church throughout the world.

Whether we are here in Northern Ireland, Scotland, Mexico, or in France, this feast reminds us that we belong to a body which is greater than we can imagine, greater than our small congregations and parishes.

This belonging is not optional. It is the primary place of our experience of God. To welcome God in our hearts, to allow him to transform them into holy sanctuaries cannot be separated from our belonging to one another in the Church.

Pope Francis is very clear on the subject when he declares: "We are not isolated and we are not Christians on an individual basis, each one on his or her own, no, our Christian identity is to belong! We are Christians because we belong to the Church. It is a last name: if the first name is "I am Christian", the last name is "I belong to the Church". (25.06.2014)

Sometimes, at a personal level and at a community level, we may allow a certain form of individualism to creep into the practice of our faith. A few months ago, a journalist wrote a full page in the *Irish Sunday Independent* on his time in a monastic community. Very oddly, for somebody who is a Christian and who is supposed to know a bit about monastic life, he stated: "The monks pray seven times a day (...). These times of prayer in the church are intended as a support for the monks, in their personal prayer life, rather than primarily existing as communal observances." It was no surprise to me that later in the article the journalist then wrote: "There is an unexpected sense of individualism in the community, each man cast into himself". (28.09.2014)

Unfortunately, what is said about this monastic community may happen in many parishes... how many among us come to Mass on Sunday just for their personal spiritual life, as a kind of private devotion?

According to Benedict XVI, “we are in God one human family (...) supported and animated by a communitarian ‘we’” (Message for World Day of Peace 2013, 08.12.12). In essence, private Christianity is not good Christianity.

It is important for us to keep in mind that we are not just individuals seated on the same pew once a week. We belong to each another. We are together the Body of Christ. We have to be careful not to narrow the concept of Church to a small entity, to an individualistic spiritual cafeteria or fast food restaurant forgetting that our faith, because it claims to be Catholic, should encompass the whole world with its diversity, its differences, its limitations and its richness.

As she was praying, St Catherine of Siena received the following words from God: “I wanted to make you dependent on one another so that each of you would be my minister, dispensing the graces and gifts you have received from me” (*Dial.* 7). In the Church of God, we are all called to minister to one another. This is quite a challenging perspective for those who want to live their faith in a private and passive way. In the community we form, we are all expected to serve one another, to carry one another in prayer and with mercy.

It is this concrete attention to one another, this care for all the members of the Body of Christ that make the living Church of God a beautiful, luminous and attractive reality in the world, an agent of peace and unity among all men and women. Beautiful cathedrals and ancient chapels have certainly a purpose in God’s plan, yet they will never surpass the beauty and radiance of Christians inhabited and moved by the Spirit of God, gathered together by the bond love.

Maybe we could conclude with the words of the 1st century bishop St Ignatius of Antioch: “Do not try to think that anything is praiseworthy which you do privately: but unite in one prayer one supplication, one mind, one hope. (...) Let all therefore hasten as to one shrine, that is God, as to one sanctuary, Jesus Christ” (*Letter to the Magnesians* 7).