

FEAST OF THE DEDICATION OF THE CATHEDRA BASILICA OF ST. LOUIS

Today we celebrate the feast of the dedication of the Cathedral Basilica of St. Louis, the mother church of our archdiocese.

As we celebrate this great feast, let us recall the sacred rites by which the basilica was consecrated. To start with, the walls were bare and the doors were closed, symbolizing the state of the human race, created by God yet deprived of his presence within since original sin. A tent had been erected before the doors of the building that is not yet a church, and the people kept a vigil of prayer through the night. Then, at dawn, the bishop appeared in the tent in his vestments, representing Christ clothed in human flesh. First he prostrated himself, then he went around the building three times, symbolically attempting to open the closed doors, saying, “Open, O gates, and the King of Glory shall enter!” And at last the doors were opened, and the bishop said, “Peace eternal to this house, in the name of the Eternal!”

Then the bishop mingled water and wine, ashes, and salt. The water and wine symbolized the humanity and divinity of Christ; the ashes symbolize his death; and the salt of incorruptibility recalls his resurrection. Then, beginning at the altar, the entire building was sprinkled with holy water, in a sense baptizing the place. Then followed the anointing of the altar: sacred oil, recalling the sacraments of confirmation and ordination, was poured over the altar, representing the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon Christ’s humanity and our own consecration in him. From this altar now rose clouds of incense, recalling the pillar of cloud and fire that led the Israelites out of Egypt and that covered Mt. Sinai when God gave the Law to Moses. Even the greatest building is only an empty shell, until the Lord fills it with his Presence.

Indeed, the rite that consecrated the Temple in King Solomon’s day is the prototype and pattern for the rite that consecrated our own cathedral: for Christ came not to abolish the Law but to fulfill it. The death of Christ on the Cross, with the rending of the old Temple veil, does not mean the end of the sacred but rather the *revelation of Jesus Christ as the Holy One: he is the living Temple, the living Altar, the true High Priest and the one Sacrifice.*

In both the Old and the New Testament, it is God’s will that, in due time, the mobile tent for makeshift worship give way to the magnificent Temple in the Great King’s City. God’s holy people were not meant to be always “on the move” but to establish *and become* a fitting dwelling-place where God would dwell in their midst, where he could be rightly worshiped, and so draw all nations to himself. Thus the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that “when the exercise of religious liberty is not thwarted, Christians construct buildings for divine worship. These visible churches are not simply gathering places but signify and make visible the Church living in this place, the dwelling of God with men reconciled and united in Christ” (CCC 1180).

When the Lord’s people return from exile in Babylon, or when they regain their freedom under the Maccabees, the first priority is the restoration of the Temple and its worship, as a sign of Israel’s penitence and re-consecration to her vocation to be a light to the nations and a priestly people. The same applies to us: consecration (or re-consecration) to the worship of God comes

first; then from that flow missionary witness, social concern, and every good work. *But first things first*: sacred worship takes precedence over everything else.

Dom Prosper Guéranger, the restorer of Benedictine monastic life in France in the 19th century, tells us a story about Clovis, the newly-converted King of the Franks, and his encounter with the beauty of Christian holiness around A.D. 500. Clovis had a Christian wife, Clotilde; through her influence, he felt drawn to Christianity and accepted baptism though he and his people at first did not understand much of their new religion. At that time, Roman Christianity—like the political empire of Rome—seemed to be an exhausted project. And yet, Catholic Christianity, despite all the chaos of the times, was still alive, amid the ruins of the Empire; and the Faith clearly held a fascination for the barbarian peoples like the Franks, whose conversion brought a new vitality to the Church. Dom Guéranger tells us that when King Clovis first entered the Church of St. Mary at Rheims, he was amazed at the sheer beauty and glory of the sacred worship that took place there—so unlike anything Clovis had ever seen or experienced. In awestruck tones, Clovis asked the bishop St. Remigius, “Father, is this the kingdom you promised me?” And the holy bishop answered, “No. But it is the entrance of the way that will lead you there” (*The Liturgical Year*, v. 15, p. 222).