

Lateran Basilica, November 9

Year C, 2025

Ez 47:1-2, 8-9, 12 1 Cor 3:9c-11, 16-17
Ps 46 Jn 2:13-22

The Church and vocations

When November 9, which is the feast of the dedication of the Lateran Basilica in Rome, falls on a Sunday, we celebrate the feast day instead of the regular Sunday. The Lateran Basilica – whose official name is *the Basilica of the Most Holy Savior and of Saints John the Baptist and John the Evangelist in the Lateran* – is the cathedral church in Rome for the bishop of Rome, who is the pope. For the first three hundred years of Christianity, Christians were persecuted across the Roman Empire, until 313, when the Emperor Constantine granted religious tolerance throughout the empire, ending the persecution of Christians. Roughly ten years later, Pope Sylvester I dedicated the newly built Lateran Basilica as his cathedral church in Rome. A few years later, the basilicas of St Peter's at the Vatican and St Paul outside the Walls were built.

Churches are more than just buildings. They are also monuments of faith, places of spiritual refuge, oases of silence and prayer, temples of grace, where the Word of God is proclaimed and heard, where the sacraments are celebrated, where our lives begin (with baptism) and end (with funerals). Churches go by many names, names that have interesting histories and etymologies: chapel, sanctuary, shrine, oratory, church, cathedral, basilica, temple. However they are called, each church serves a similar function: a

place of worship, of refuge, of encounter. Whether it's a little wooden country chapel – not unlike our own St Patrick's – or a great stone cathedral – like St Patrick's in New York – churches are sacred, that is, they are special, set apart, not ordinarily to be used for ordinary meetings, but for holy gatherings, where all who enter seek higher things, holy things, contact with the Holy One.

This is why in the gospel Jesus took offense that the Temple, which he called “my Father's house,” was being used for vulgar purposes – buying and selling, the handling of money, haggling and trading, and the dishonesty that so often goes with such commercial matters. A temple – a church – is something sacred. Secular matters don't belong there. What is profane must remain outside the church, beyond the temple. The word *profane* itself comes from the Latin word *fanum*, which means a sacred place, like a temple. Holy things and people could be admitted to the *fanum*, while unconsecrated things or people had to remain *pro fano*, meaning before, outside the *fanum*.

To enter a *fanum* or a church, certain rituals of purification had to be observed. This was true of pagan temples as well as the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem: ritual washings of the hands or face or feet, taking off shoes, putting on scarves or religious headwear, anointings with special oils, or being incensed with aromatic smoke, saying certain prayers, observing certain gestures, like bowing or kneeling or striking one's breast. We Catholics still observe some of these forms when we enter a church, don't we?

We dip our fingers in holy water and sign ourselves with the sign of the cross. This is an act of ritual purification, of washing away our sins. We genuflect before the tabernacle as we enter our pews. We (mostly) stop talking and become silent when entering the church. We leave the profane behind, outside, and we enter a sacred place, a holy space.

We do this so automatically that we hardly realize the significance of what we're doing. But if we stop and reflect on it a little, we become aware that our gestures and speech, how we bear ourselves and how we behave, all change when we enter the Father's house, our church, our chapel, this temple dedicated to God. This is the ritual of purification, sacralization, consecration upon coming into God's house, where we attend to the things of God – holy things – prayer, sacrifice, silence, praise.

And once our worship is complete, we leave the temple and go back outside. We are again *pro fano*. But we are meant to carry the sacred with us as we go out again into the secular world, to consecrate it with the holiness that we encountered in the temple.

This is the sense of our first reading from Ezekiel. The prophet Ezekiel is granted a vision of the spiritual life of the Temple, beyond the comings and going of people and animals, beyond the prayers and sacrifice, the incense and offerings. More than what goes into the Temple, it is what flows out from the Temple that God wants Ezekiel to see: water. In the arid climate of the Ancient Near

East, water is life and wealth and hope. Ezekiel sees water flowing out from the Temple, water that gives life to all things. It turns the salt waters of the sea fresh, and every living creature that it touches multiplies and is abundant. The Temple waters give life to every kind of tree, whose “leaves shall not fade, nor their fruit fail,” but which provide food and medicine for healing. The waters flowing from the Temple give life and restore life; they nurture and they heal.

The waters are a symbol of God’s grace and God’s will for the world: to restore, to heal, to give life. Don’t you see that we are waters that flow out from the Temple? Don’t you see that when we leave Mass, we carry within us the grace of God, grace that comes to us simply by being gathered together in the name of the Lord Jesus, who promises to be in our midst when we gather in his name, grace that comes to us by hearing and reflecting on God’s Word, the Word of truth and life, grace that comes to us when we do this in memory of him, when the Eucharist is celebrated and adored and consumed as Christ himself instructed us to do?

Churches, then, are not merely buildings. They are vehicles for divine grace, which flows into us and then out into the world.

Pagan shrine, Jewish temple, Christian church ... what type of person is most often associated with these sacred places, these places of worship? The priest, naturally. There were pagan priests who administered the rites of the pagan temples. There were

Jewish priests, who saw to the observance of the law and the sacrificial offerings in the Temple. And then there were Christian priests, the priests of Jesus Christ, instituted by the Apostles to act as shepherds and teachers, as leaders and guides, to celebrate the rites and rituals of the sacraments instituted by Christ himself as means of divine grace, most especially the Holy Eucharist.

The association between priests and church buildings is ancient and historic. This association is so powerful and strong that in art, and most recently in film and television, whenever a priest is portrayed, he is almost always found in a church. Perhaps being a priest makes me notice these things in a particular way. I find it curious that on shows and series, when someone meets with a priest, the filmmakers almost always have that meeting take place in a church rather than in the priest's office. Which is curious because most of our meetings are not held in the church, but in offices and conference rooms. Surely this cinematic license is pointing to a deep psychological and intuitive association between the priest and the church, which is the place where priests perform the most priestly of their duties. Maybe we priests should start taking some of our more spiritually-oriented appointments in church rather than in our offices. I'm going to think about this very seriously.

Anyway, this past week, from November 2 through November 8, was vocations awareness week in the United States, a week dedicated to reflecting on the priesthood and the call to the

priesthood. Our diocese currently has 46 seminarians preparing for the priesthood. This year alone we admitted some 14 new men as seminarians for our diocese. You can see their faces on the poster in the back of the church. There are many dioceses in the US with much larger Catholic populations that have only a fraction of number of vocations that our diocese has.

To what can this be attributed? Naturally to prayer. To the fidelity of the Catholics of our diocese who are proud to see their sons, the nephews, their grandsons, their brothers and cousins respond to God's call. We've seen a real shift in just the past ten years or so that now more seminarians come from Catholic schools than from public schools. Only a few years ago, that was not the case. Most of our vocations used to come from public schools – like yours truly. The first Catholic school I went to was the seminary. Our Catholic schools, with a greater emphasis on Catholic identity and the spiritual life, have become a real source of growth in faith, both for the students and for their families, and vocations follows.

And then there's the presbyterate of our diocese, the body of priests. So many good priests. So many happy priests. So many priests who love what they do, love their people, and love being around other priests. For a young man who sees the brotherhood of priests in our diocese, this is a real encouragement. So there are many factors that contribute to a young man's discerning a call from God to serve the church as a priest.

And one of the most important factors – all the studies show it – is when someone asks a young man if he has ever considered being a priest. Because the ask gives him permission to really consider it. Studies show that most seminarians say that one of the major factors that led to their saying yes to a vocation to the priesthood was when a priest asked if they had ever considered it. After priests, when parents asked their sons. After parents, other family members and friends. This was my own experience as well. It really started with some of my college friends and talking about the priesthood with them, and their encouraging me to consider it. Then mentor, then a priest who asked me about it. And it just moved from there.

This being vocations awareness week, it's less about the number of vocations than it is about our being aware that there are young men in our churches, in our schools, in your families, who might be silently considering such a call. Your willingness to ask a young man who seems promising to you whether he's ever considered being a priest might be just the thing that gives him permission to imagine it for himself or to talk about it with you or with his friends or family or parish priest.

Ask a young man if he's thought about becoming a priest, and most likely he'll say "sure, that's fine, but I really want to get married and have a family." Don't let that discourage you. As I've told you before, wanting to have a wife and children is the first sign of a possible call to the priesthood.

So, today, as we celebrate the dedication of a church building, the Lateran Basilica, we also call to mind the immensity of the mystery of the church, as the Body of Christ, all the members of the Christian faithful who flow into and out of the sacred encounter with Christ in his sacramental mysteries to be bearers of grace into the world. We remember the Bishop of Rome, our Holy Father, Pope Leo, as he presides in charity over all the churches, over all the people of God, a sign of unity as his motto “In Illo uno unum” bears witness: “In the One, we are one.” We are made aware of the importance of the priesthood in the life of the church and how each of us has a role to play in fostering vocations to the priesthood. And finally we pray for an increase in vocations to the priesthood, so that our church buildings may be filled with priests, priests whose zeal for God’s house, God’s people, God’s holiness will consume them to spend themselves in service, after the example of Christ Jesus the Good Shepherd, who came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life that many may live.

Give us shepherds, priests, O Lord, after your heart. Make them faithful and true. Fill your Church, O Lord, with your faithful people so that the waters of your grace may bring life and renewal to a fallen world. Amen.