

FR HUGH'S HOMILY FOR DEDICATION OF THE LATERAN BASILICA

It was on a trip to Rome in the 70s that I first saw the Lateran Basilica. I was thinking of a quick walk round but when I got there the whole square in front of it was filled with people for a Communist demonstration and listening to their leader Berlinguer. The basilica has always sat in the middle of Rome surrounded by whatever was happening in the city, even featured in Roman Holiday with Audrey Hepburn and Gregory Peck and Godfather III, and today we celebrate its dedication, its birthday you might say.

It is the cathedral of the Bishop of Rome and so the seat of the Pope as the city's bishop, and when Pope Francis was elected one of the first things he said to those in the square below was to ask the people of Rome for their prayers as he took up his new office.

It is the people that the building always represents. As St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians said to us today, "You are God's building," as he addresses the Corinthians and us. And the Lateran sits in the middle of the people of Rome with no walls around it, unlike the Vatican. In many ways its life has been part of that of the people, and just as Notre Dame in Paris is loved by the people, even if they don't worship there, as we saw at the fire, so the Lateran sits among the people. It has been destroyed by earthquake, burnt to the ground twice, ravaged by Napoleon's troops and sacked, and the Nazis turfed out some of its occupants. But in amongst all that, as the cathedral, it has been the centre of the diocese's charitable work and during the war managed to shelter Jews and Italian politicians the Nazis were after.

During its chequered history there were undoubtedly times too that Jesus would have burst in and chased out whatever malpractice was taking place, when the church was not doing its job to protect the people and offer a place of worship.

Always at the heart has to be the salvation of the people. That is what Jesus is referring to as himself as the new Temple. The one who takes ultimate care of us, saves us.

Today, too as Remembrance Sunday, we remember especially the soldiers, sailors and airmen and women who have given their lives for others, for us or those in this country. We should also remember that so often leaders or politicians who send them to war without a thought for the individual. So often too they are sent for causes we might not believe in, or even are on the opposite side to us, yet they give their lives as they think is right, or these days in parts of the world where they are forced to do so. Even today we can see soldiers and others being sent into battle, ill-equipped or trained, unprepared, as they do so at the whim of those in power. We can find ourselves blaming them when it is those in charge who are responsible, who ignore the precious gift of God that is life.

The Lateran is known as the mother of churches. Given to the Pope in the 4th century by Emperor Constantine as he was becoming a Christian. The first of the basilicas. So it represents the centre of us as a Church, the Church that Christ founded. We are that church. Our church here is part of that structure centred on the Lateran, but again as St. Paul says, it doesn't matter what it looks like, though the work that people before us have put into it should always be in our hearts, each of us is a stone that builds that Temple. At the same time we are each a Temple in the way Jesus speaks of himself as such, but yet each of us also makes up the Temple that is Jesus' body here on earth.

Sometimes people use the phrase, 'we are Church.' some people hate it, but we are Jesus' Church, and the churches we build help us to come together physically to worship together as that body, and the Lateran is our mother church in this.