

The Church: The Mystical Body of Christ

Last week it was All Saints, and this week it is the Feast of the dedication of the Lateran Basilica; it seems as if the Sunday Gospels of Ordinary Time have been evicted! Don't fret though; they're back next week with the thought provoking parable of the talents. So what to say about today's Feast? Well I think that we can quite reasonably make a connection between what we celebrated last week and what we are asked to think about this week, since between them, these two celebrations are really asking us to ponder on the nature of the "Church".

The feast of All Saints really told us that the "Church" is a living and breathing community, which moves forward in faith and hope. The people who make up this community do so with a unity of purpose that manifests the desire to bring forth the kingdom. In participating in this great endeavour we look back on the lives of so many who have gone before us, and we treasure the example they gave. But we also cherish the witness and example of those living amongst us who provide such noble witness which they live out in a selfless and unheralded way. The life of Jesus provides for them the model and template which becomes the backdrop for everything they do and their holiness and real sanctity shine forth in the simple acts of love and generosity that characterises these deeds. This is the Church in action, present in the world and changing it from within, like the leaven in the dough.

The feast of the Dedication of the Lateran Basilica offers another context for how we are to understand the nature of the "Church" and this is a context which is intimately connected to what has been expressed above. It is an understanding of the "Church" as *sacrament*. When we think about *sacrament* what ordinarily comes to mind is baptism or marriage or one of the other sacraments. Very rarely do we begin to broaden our appreciation of a sacrament as a real living encounter with God, in Christ, through the Spirit. This transcendent or mystical encounter that pervades our knowledge and awareness of God, fundamentally comes from this moment of encounter which we all experience through our sacramental lives as members of the Church.

How are these two understandings linked? Perhaps the most profound and beautiful way it can be seen is in the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. As they walk along the road they meet the risen Christ and they stop to gather and to share bread. Their lives are transformed and their identity and self purpose changed by their experience that in its nature has been both physical and sacramental. They become "Church" by being animated in Christ to take on the task of proclaiming the good news, and in their gathering to receive him in a sacramental exchange, which inundates their very being.

In celebrating the feast of the Dedication of the Lateran Basilica, we are joining our lives with all other Christians who find through their encounter with Jesus both a physical and sacramental dimension to their calling. Lives are made holy and sanctified by a sacred exchange initiated through a coming together to share in a love made present in the risen body of Jesus. As we share the body of Christ we are also part of that body and so we share with and in each other all our moments of joy and hope alongside our experiences of fear and anxiety which both lift us up and cause us to falter. We are sustained in all of this by the knowledge that the psalmist reveals for us, that *God is for us a refuge and strength, a helper close at hand in time of distress; so we shall not fear though the earth should rock.*