

# Unveiling of the Bust of Cardinal O'Brien

## **Why Celebrate a Church Building?**

Some may be puzzled by today's celebration, the anniversary of the dedication of St. John Lateran Church in Rome. Of course, it is an ancient and venerable church dating all the way back to 324. And yes, even though we associate the Holy Father with St. Peter's in Rome, St. John Lateran is actually the Pope's Cathedral Church.

But here is where it's easy for us to become confused. We've been told many times that the church is not a building – it is Christ and his People, the People of God. So why do we celebrate the feast day of a building, a church, beautiful though it may be. There are many good answers to that important question; so let's get right to them.

First, the Church is a family of faith; just as every family loves its home, so too we love our spiritual home, especially St. John Lateran, which is the mother-church of every church. The Basilica in which we have gathered is one of the most venerated churches in the United States and great care has been taken to restore and preserve it . It is a descendent of St. John Lateran, one might say, and we love it and take care of it.

Second, the church is where we gather to worship God: it is not just another building, not just another architectural masterpiece, but a place where God's people gather to encounter Christ. Here his Word comes alive; here he is present among us; here we worship God 'in spirit and truth'; and from this place we go forth to bear witness to the Gospel by our lives. The beauty of St. John Lateran and the beauty of this Basilica of the Assumption remind us that we are temples of the Holy Spirit in whom Christ and the Father have deigned to dwell. Our hearts must also be beautiful with God's grace and with all the virtues that are proper to a follower of Christ.

Third, Christ has promised to be with us until the end of time. He promised to be with us as individuals but also with his Church throughout the remainder of human

history. What a beautiful reality that Christ loves his Church so much, in spite of human weakness and in spite of our infidelities. St. John Lateran in Rome has suffered fires, earthquakes, bombings. This Basilica of the Assumption, too, has suffered periods of neglect and in 2011 was itself damaged by an earthquake. The beauty and the vicissitudes that church buildings undergo symbolize the relationship of the Church to Christ. Like any building, the Church, holy and beautiful in the sight of God, is always in need of repair – because we, its members are sinful. When we open our hearts to Christ and the Holy Spirit, the Church is renewed.

### **Builders of the Church**

Of course, churches do not build themselves... whether we are speaking of church structures or the Church herself. Bishop John Carroll laid the cornerstone of this Basilica Cathedral in 1806 and Archbishop Ambrose Maréchal completed it in 1821 but that is not the only sense in which those bishops built up the Church. They built up the church by adding to the number of Catholics, by raising up priestly vocations, by educating the young, and caring for the poor. In that more important sense they built up the Church.

Today we rejoice to honor a successor of Carroll and Maréchal who, in his years as Archbishop of Baltimore, built up this local Church. I refer, of course, to the Archbishop Emeritus of Baltimore and the Grand Master of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre, Edwin Cardinal O'Brien. At the end of Mass, a marble bust bearing his image will be unveiled as a constant reminder of how he built up the Church of Baltimore during his tenure as its fifteenth Archbishop.

In today's second reading, St. Paul tells that the only foundation upon which the Church can be built, is Christ. He advises that one must build on that foundation well and wisely. Your Eminence, our wonderful parishioners and honored guests have gathered to express our prayerful gratitude for all that you have done to strengthen the foundation of the Church by proclaiming the Name of Jesus, the Incarnate Savior, crucified and risen; by handing on the Church's teaching, in season and out of season; by strengthening our Catholic schools; by defending the Church's freedom in the Free State; by promoting vocations and family life; by providing for the Church's material and financial needs...and much, much more! We are here, Your Eminence, to say thank you for being a wise, master-builder.

## **Conclusion**

In this 225th anniversary year of the Archdiocese of Baltimore and on this beautiful Feast of the Dedication of St. John Lateran, we re-dedicate ourselves to the work of building up this local Church of Baltimore, especially the work of forming missionary disciples capable of attracting many to Christ and the Church, ready to accompany those who are searching for truth and love, eager to bring Christ and his love to the margins of society.

May God bless you, Cardinal O'Brien, and keep you and all of us, in his love!