

NOVEMBER 9 2025 FATHER MICHAEL COUTTS

“There are four basilicas in Rome, and if I asked you which one is the most visited and well-known, you’d likely say Saint Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican. But there are three others—Saint Mary Major, Saint Paul Outside the Walls, and Saint John Lateran.

Saint John Lateran was the very first one. In the fourth century, Emperor Constantine built it on land given to him by the Laterani family—hence the name Saint John Lateran. It is, in fact, the Pope’s church. The Pope himself is the parish priest of this church.

Today, when we celebrate the feast of Saint John Lateran, we remember all the people who have prayed within its walls. As we look at this beautiful cathedral, this magnificent basilica, we might ask ourselves: what exactly are we celebrating? Do we hug the pillars? Do we kiss the floors? Do we light candles?

To understand this, let’s look back at what happened many years ago. For fourteen centuries, every cardinal who was elected Pope was installed as Pope in Saint John Lateran. But then, for three centuries, the Popes were in exile. When they finally returned, they found the basilica completely destroyed. In 1646, Pope Innocent X decided to reconstruct it.

That very same year, Isaac Jogues was tortured and martyred in Albany, New York. That same year, Shah Jahan in India was building the Taj Mahal out of grief for his beloved wife, Mumtaz Mahal. These three events—reconstruction, martyrdom, and memorial—give us a clue about what we celebrate today.

There was great pain, great grief, great sorrow—but in the end, there was victory. The more intense the suffering, the greater our desire to do something lasting to commemorate it. The more profound the loss, the more magnificent the structure we build to honor it.

Here in Canada, we are not imprisoned or killed for our faith. We do not suffer persecution. And as one of my architect friends once said to me, “That’s why our churches are so plain.” Some are so large that you could drive three buses inside and no one would even notice. There is something missing from our sacred spaces when there is no cross at the center—no reminder of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ.

As Saint Paul tells us in his letters, and as Jesus reminds us in the Gospel, it is not bricks and mortar that make a church. It is the believers. That is what we truly celebrate when we celebrate Saint John Lateran.

We celebrate the woman who, after forty years of marriage, suddenly finds her husband has walked out—and she sits in the pew, filled with confusion and pain, asking, “Why did he leave me?”

We celebrate the gay believer who sits quietly at the back of the church, wondering, “Do I belong here? Am I welcome in this house of God?”

We celebrate the couple who have lost a child and are filled with grief.

But beyond the sorrow, we also celebrate joy—the joy of the young woman who has just graduated with honors and received a prestigious job, who comes to light a candle. When you ask her why, she simply says, “God has given me so many gifts. I have to give something back to God—perhaps a candle that will burn for me when I cannot be here.”

We celebrate the couple who, for thirty years, have come to the same church every anniversary to give thanks. When asked why, the husband says, “To remember the joy and blessings God has given us.” Then he

laughs and adds, “And also because my wife made our anniversary date the password on the computer—so I’ll never forget it.”

There are so many reasons we celebrate these great churches. Not only Saint John Lateran in Rome, but Saint Andrew’s in Thunder Bay, Baie Verte and La Scie in Newfoundland, the church in North Terence Bay, Nova Scotia, and every small parish across our land.

We celebrate them because we celebrate the believers who have lived their faith there—those who have brought their children to be baptized, who have had their marriages blessed, and who have buried their loved ones

We celebrate not the stones or the architecture, but the living faith of God’s people—the true Church.

God bless you all.