

What Church Is

Paul Turner

What is the Church? We are the Church. Let's not forget that. It is our right and our responsibility to claim that identity.

We often use the word "Church" in a more restricted sense, meaning the hierarchy alone. "The Church teaches this." "The Church forbids that." "The Church has issued new rules." "The Church never changes." We throw the word around casually. We refer to the hierarchy so often as "The Church" that we sometimes forget who we are.

"Church" is also the word we use for the building where we worship. The name conveniently identifies the place and distinguishes it from the various buildings where non-Christian believers worship. We sometimes take the building for granted. Some engaged couples ask if they can be married outdoors rather than in. But the connection with nature is not as important to Catholics as the connection with the building we set aside for our most sacred occasions. And a wedding is one of those.

Although these various usages for the same word can be confusing, they are also beautifully mysterious. We are the Church, yet our leaders represent us through their ministry. We are the Church, yet our building symbolizes the people who gather there. What is true of the building is true of the people.

If you have had the privilege of participating in the dedication of a church building, you know firsthand the rich imagery of that celebration. The door, the font, the ambo, the altar, the walls, and the tabernacle are all given special honor in the celebration. So are the people. The building is set aside for worship, and the people claim it as their spiritual home.

Each year every parish church is supposed to celebrate the anniversary of its dedication. Very few do. Many parishes don't even know when the building was dedicated in the first place. Even diocesan archives may be missing some key information.

Still, the table of liturgical days lists the anniversary of the dedication of your parish church as a solemnity, meaning it displaces every other ferial day, memorial, and feast day on the general calendar. It does not take precedence over other solemnities such as the Annunciation or All Souls Day, but it ranks very high on the list of days in your local parish calendar. The missal contains a set of prayers to be used when the anniversary mass is celebrated.

When you celebrate mass on the anniversary of the church dedication, you include the Gloria and the Creed. The Gloria emphasizes the celebratory nature of the day. The Creed

reminds us of its solemnity. This day is so important to us as a Church that when we gather we profess together the Creed that makes us one.

The priest's texts for the anniversary celebration appear in the Commons in the back of the missal. The Commons are a collection of prayers and antiphons that can be used for a variety of occasions. For example, if your parish is named for a saint who does not appear in the general calendar, you may use one of the masses from the common of saints, choosing from those set aside for martyrs, doctors, virgins and religious – depending on who your saint is.

This entire section of Commons begins with the prayers and antiphons for the anniversary mass of the dedication of the church building. Why does the building rank ahead of any saint? Because the building represents the entire Church, and the celebration of its dedication always ranks as a solemnity. You find this mass even before the Commons for Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary. She who is Mother of the Church takes her place at the head of the saints who are grouped in succeeding parts of this section, but after the mass in honor of the building that represents us all.

The revised translation for all masses listed in the Commons in the Sacramentary is still in process, but the provisional translation for the revised Roman Missal will give you some idea of how we pray on the anniversary day. The prayer of the Church always sets the belief of the Church. These prayers, which concern the Church, especially do so.

The revised collect will go something like this:

O God, who year by year
renew for us the day
when this your holy temple was consecrated,
listen to the prayers of your people
and grant that in this place
pure worship may always be offered to you
and we may receive the fullness of redemption.

In this prayer, you see the importance of the annual celebration of the dedication. God renews the day for us year by year. The petition asks that pure worship may always be offered in the building, which implies that the people who offer it will be pure. If the liturgy is to please God, the Church who prays it should live pleasing God. But the prayer is not just concerned with the weekly celebration of the mass, it also concerns the end of time. It prays that we who worship in this time and space may receive the fullness of redemption.

The prayer over the offerings makes similar points.

As we recall the day, O Lord,
when you were pleased
to fill your house with glory and holiness,
we pray that you will make us
into sacrificial offerings
always acceptable to you.

Note the parallel between the building and the people, and the unity between the people and the offerings. On the day of dedication, God filled the church building with glory and holiness. On the anniversary day, we pray that God will make us into offerings that will be acceptable. This is not just about the bread and wine – this concerns the people who offer them.

After communion, the priest offers this prayer:

Let your consecrated people, Lord, we pray,
reap the fruits and joy of your blessing,
so that they may know
that what they have offered in bodily worship
on this festival day
they have received in return as a spiritual gift.

Having received communion, we pray that we may know what we have received. We worshiped with our physical bodies, but we received spiritual gifts through this communion. The first line of this prayer calls us “consecrated people,” just as the collect referred to the consecration of the church building. Once again, the building is a symbol of us. To recall its dedication each year is to rededicate ourselves to God.

This anniversary mass also comes with its own preface, which was a new composition in the post-Vatican II liturgy. It relies on scripture passages such as 1 Corinthians 3:17, where Paul says, “The temple of God – which is *you* – is holy.” It also employs the imagery of the heavenly Jerusalem from Revelation 21:2 and 10. We are God’s holy building now, and we yearn for the day when we will inhabit the eternal dwelling place, the new Jerusalem.

So what is the Church? Better yet, who is the Church? The Church is the Christian people who worship God. We live in a way that makes us an acceptable part of the sacrifice we offer in communion with Christ. We profess our belief in God. We gather annually to recall our

identity and to pledge our commitment anew. We receive the spiritual gifts that God alone can supply.

We do all this imperfectly. We are human. We sin. We get distracted. But we do a lot of things right. We worship. We learn. We serve. We believe God likes this. We are the Church.

Ministry and Liturgy 37/2 (March 2010):9-10.