Dedication of the Lateran Basilica

Maxentius was ruling the city of Rome, but his brother-in-law Constantine aimed to control the entire western Roman empire. Constantine amassed tens of thousands of troops and advanced toward Rome from the north. Maxentius mustered his tens of thousands of troops on the north side of the Tiber River to defend the city. There, in late October of the year 312, according to the legend, anticipating the battle, Constantine saw a bright cross glistening above the sun. He heard a voice saying, "*In hoc signo,*" or "In this sign, you will conquer." He placed on the shields of his warriors what looks to us like the letter X superimposed on the letter P, but in Greek the letters Chi and Rho. The Latin words "*In hoc signo*" abbreviate as IHS, and today you'll see both these symbols, the Chi-Rho and IHS in Christian art all over the world. The next day Constantine and Maxentius engaged in heavy conflict. Maxentius was forced to retreat across the Milvian Bridge that took the Via Flaminia across the Tiber toward the city of Rome. But there Maxentius was overcome by the waters of the river and drowned. Constantine entered the city of Rome to become its emperor.

The following year, 313, Constantine authorized the Edict of Milan, which permitted the practice of Christianity throughout the empire. In Rome, the Lateran family let the church use its palace for a synod of bishops. The bishop of Rome took up residence in that palace, and its basilica was enhanced and dedicated to Christ, St. John the Baptist, and St. John the Evangelist in the year 324 on November 9. Today that Lateran basilica stands as the cathedral church for the Diocese of Rome, whose bishop, as you know, is the pope. As any cathedral has a cathedra, the chair where the local bishop sits, so the Lateran basilica has its cathedra, where the pope may sit when he celebrates Mass there. Every year on November 9 every Catholic church in the world celebrates the Dedication of the Lateran Basilica as the mother church of Rome and of the world.

Each parish celebrates its dedication and the dedication of its cathedral each year. This cathedral underwent a major renovation in 2003, so Bishop Boland rededicated it on February 22 that year. Because of conflicts in the liturgical calendar on February 22nd and 23rd, last year Bishop Johnston asked all the parishes of the diocese including this one to observe the cathedral's dedication on February 24. The bishop will preside for Mass here that day, and that night I'll give a presentation about the role of cathedrals in a diocese.

The Tiber river still flows beneath the Milvian bridge and brushes the side of Vatican City, where the pope resides today. When we sing in today's psalm, "The waters of the river gladden the city of God," we can imagine any church as an image of the entire city of God, in which the waters of baptism flow to bring life and joy to all who dwell there. Whenever you enter sacred space, but especially a cathedral, you can recall with confidence the verses of Psalm 46. "God is for us a refuge and strength…. God is within, [the city] cannot be shaken.… The Lord of hosts is with us."

Like Constantine, we each may find ourselves facing some tremendous battle in order to cross a bridge onto the path God has chosen for us. We will conquer if we keep our head in the clouds, our feet on the ground, and our heart on the cross of Christ.