

AN EDIFICE COMPLEX?



Basilica of Saint John Lateran¹

Each November 9th Catholics throughout the world will celebrate the dedication of a building: the Lateran Basilica in Rome. What's up with this? Don't we have better things to do? Do we suffer from an "edifice complex"?

Threshold

For centuries our ancestors were persecuted¹ by the State and practiced their religion out of sight either below ground (literally underground in the catacombs) or rather quietly in private homes. In the early 300's the Emperor Constantine made the Catholic Church the official religion of the Roman State and gave the Pope the estate of the Laterani family, which included a large basilica. Each year---as we commemorate the dedication of this formerly secular edifice as the first large, above-ground, visible **church building** in our history---we are calling attention to this **pivotal moment**

¹ A virtual tour of the Lateran Basilica is available at www.vatican.va

when Catholicism crossed the threshold into civic respectability (with its opportunities and challenges) and visibility. At this pivotal moment Catholicism became **institutional** (“Boo!”) or put another way more **incarnate** (“Yea!”)

Spiritual, Religious and Nones

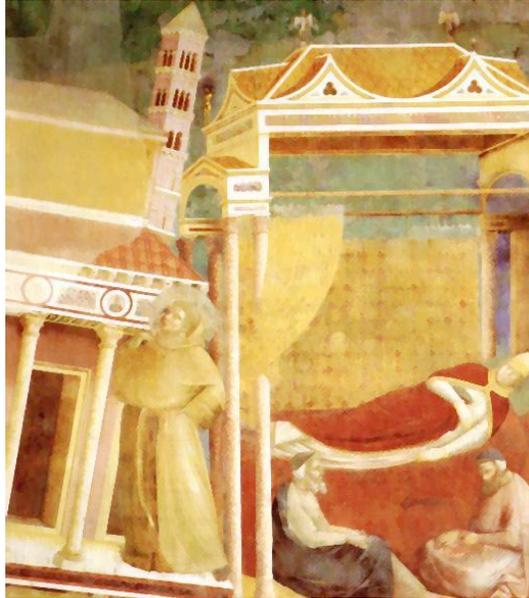
In our time many in Western, economically prosperous areas identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious” or as “None” when asked to name their religious affiliation. This phenomenon reminds those who chose to practice a religion to own the deficits, shortcomings, sins and scandals of their group. To be a member of a religion is to come out from the shadows, to enter the arena of human affairs, to become visible, criticize-able, fallible. Visibility enables us to be challenged and to become more authentic.

Virtual or Real?

“Here comes everybody!” is one way of describing the Catholic Church. Another observation is that Catholicism “a mile wide and an inch deep”. I really *like* being Catholic: being a visibly imperfect member of a visibly imperfect group in which we dare to allow the Holy Spirit to move us to become more and more incarnate more and more visible, accountable. “Institution” is not a dirty word and like any good thing can be misused. Hospitals, schools, hospices, shelters, human service centers, facilities in which strangers are welcomed, people are fed, clothed, have a chance to bathe, find refuge from abusive relationships, choose life rather than abortion: these are all institutions within which love becomes incarnate, moves out of our head and into our

bodies. Virtual religion is a contradiction. How can a virtual religion be virtuous? I think our spirituality takes a step up when we (in our mess) descend into the human mess with a heart open to connect and serve.

Pope Innocent's Dream



It is not for nothing that in the center of the apse of the Lateran Basilica there is a painting titled “Pope Innocent’s Dream” depicting the entire edifice of the Lateran collapsing but being upheld by a small, frail figure: **St. Francis of Assisi**. Pope Francis often reminds us that all we have and do as Catholics rests upon our union with Christ and thus upon our seeing and serving Christ in our suffering sisters and brothers.

Spiritual Chiropractic

As we enter into November, the Month of the Holy Souls, I am grateful to Bishop N.T. Wright for realigning my thinking with the phrase *“Heaven is important but it is not the end of*

the world". As we remember the Holy Souls, let's not forget that having our souls united with the Risen Christ is not the goal. The goal is for *our whole person*---soul and body---to be united with Christ. In fact, the goal is for *all creation* to be reconciled to God in Christ. The goal is not for earth (matter; creation) to end, but for God's "Kingdom to come ***on earth as it is in heaven.***"

The final scene in the final book of the Bible (Revelation) has the heavenly city ***coming down to earth! Heaven and earth are one!*** Angels are souls. We have not been created to become angels; we have been created to become fully human beings: embodied spirits, enfleshed souls, incarnate beings. Matter matters. In fact, matter matters so much that we Catholics have been moved by love to **institutionalize** our care for the material remains of our loved ones through making and maintaining **cemeteries**, where the bodies of our beloved "await the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come".

A Closing Thought

Whether we are "spiritual" or "religious" or "affiliated" or "none", I think these words apply: "Love your crooked neighbor with all your crooked heart."