

This evening we're celebrating the golden jubilee of this church of Our Lady Help of Christians. By a happy coincidence, this is also the feast of the dedication of a famous church in Rome – the basilica of St John Lateran. So, as we give thanks for the blessings of these fifty years here in Warrnambool East, we're united with people around the world giving thanks for the blessings that have come through the Lateran Basilica and through churches in so many places through the centuries.

There would be some here with us this evening who recall the early days of Warrnambool East. They would remember the opening of Our Lady Help of Christians school in 1971. For some time, Mass was celebrated in the school. Then, in 1975, this church of Our Lady Help of Christians was opened and became the venue for Mass for this community. Other sacraments have been celebrated here also – baptisms, confirmations, first communions. There have been weddings. There have been celebrations for special occasions in the life of the community. This has been the venue for funeral prayers, when we have farewelled family and friends who have died. So, this church carries many memories for us and continues to be a place where our community can gather and celebrate our life and our faith.

This evening we're also celebrating the feast of the Dedication of the Lateran Basilica. Of the many churches in Rome, the best known is St Peter's Basilica. That's the church we most associate with the Pope nowadays. The Pope lives in a building at the Vatican, next to St Peter's, and the Pope celebrates many special occasions in St Peter's. However, this was not always the case. For centuries, the Popes were more associated with the Lateran Basilica, in another part of Rome. In fact, the Lateran Basilica is still officially the Pope's cathedral as Bishop of Rome. The word "Lateran" comes from the name of the family who originally owned the property – the Laterani. The emperor Constantine gave the property to the Church in the fourth century and the original church on the spot was dedicated in the year 324, a few years before the original St Peter's was completed.

The Lateran Basilica has the title of the mother church of churches around the world. So, in celebrating the dedication of the Lateran Basilica in Rome, we're also celebrating the many churches that have been built in later times to be places of prayer for the Christian community – including this church we're gathered in this evening. This feast celebrates the important place that church buildings have in our Christian lives. Churches are places where we gather to give praise to God and especially to celebrate Mass.

Yet this feast can also remind us that the building is not the most important meaning of "church". The first meaning of the word "church" refers to the assembly, the people. The people who gather in the name of Christ are the original Church of God. Following on from this, the building where they gather is also called a church.

Drawing on the teaching of the Scriptures, we can compare the Christian community to a building. Those who believe in Christ come together like the stones in a building to form the Christian community. We see this comparison in the words of St Paul that we heard a few minutes ago. He refers to the people as being like a house built by God, with Christ being the foundation stone.

“You are God’s building. By the grace God gave me, I succeeded as an architect and laid the foundations, on which someone else is doing the building. Everyone doing the building must work carefully. For the foundation, nobody can lay any other than the one which has already been laid, that is Jesus Christ.”

We can rightly give thanks that we have places like this church where we can gather for prayer. We give thanks particularly as we celebrate the golden jubilee of this church. We give thanks for the many times the community has gathered in this building through these fifty years. We give thanks that we have this beautiful building in which to gather.

We can also give thanks that we ourselves form a house built by God, a house built on Christ. We ourselves are the temple of God. The Spirit of God is dwelling among us.

In our Mass this evening, we pray that God will continue to bless us as we gather in this church of Our Lady Help of Christians. We pray also that God will continue to build us up as a community, so that we ourselves will be a temple where God lives.

May the Spirit of God continue to dwell in this church. May the Spirit of God continue to dwell in us day by day.

Bishop Paul Bird CSsR