

**OMNIUM URBIS ET ORBIS ECCLESiarUM MATER ET CAPUT**

This title, translated, declares that “The Mother and Head of all churches in the City [of Rome] and the World” is none other than—St. John Lateran. Are you surprised?

For most Catholics (and indeed most Christians) the center of the Church is located at St. Peter’s in the Vatican. Surely it is the most famous pilgrimage spot in the world, after the Holy Land itself. And what drew pilgrims to it was the opportunity to stand *ad limina Apostolorum*—at the threshold of [the tombs of] the Apostles, Peter and Paul. So how did St. John Lateran come to regard itself so grandly?

Actually, the Basilicas of Ss. Peter in the Vatican and Paul Outside-the-Walls were built later than John Lateran (whose original name is the Church of Our Savior, subsequently also dedicated to Ss. John the Evangelist and John the Baptist). The name “Lateran” comes from the family name of the original owners of the property (Constantine’s wife’s family). It was the first basilica built by the Emperor Constantine for the newly-liberated Christian faith which he (at least partially) embraced. Away from the center of the City, and on imperial property, he could construct this building for the Bishop of Rome without arousing too much resentment (the same could not be said of the destruction he ordered in the building of St. Peter’s in the Vatican).

Built for the Bishop of Rome, St. John Lateran is therefore *the* Cathedral of Rome, and by extension of the world—the Mother-Church of all churches. St. Peter’s may be more popular, but St. John Lateran is therefore arguably more important.

For centuries the papal residence was also at the Lateran, and the great shift to the Vatican only took place after the popes returned from their time in Avignon in France (the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century). Today perhaps the most moving liturgical celebration in this great cathedral is that of Holy Thursday, when the Pope does the foot-washing (typically of 12 priests of the Diocese of Rome) while the choir chants *Mandatum novum do vobis...* (“A new commandment I give you: love...).

So this weekend in honoring the anniversary of its dedication, we re-affirm our own spiritual connection to the universal Church of Jesus Christ our Savior. What a good day for personal renewal of our baptismal promises, no?