

The Catholic Church is experiencing a difficult time. However, identify one century when this wasn't true.

Indeed, some parts of the world are experiencing a flourishing Church, including Asia, Africa, and certain regions of the United States. However, in many countries and states, Catholicism doesn't seem to be thriving like it did a century ago.

Of course, anyone who is familiar with history knows that this is nothing new. The history of the Church is filled with all sorts of periods of challenge and controversy and fracturing and harmful behavior on the part of clerics and violence, war, and persecution.

There have been periods in the life of the Church when people questioned Christ's promise, "and I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell **shall not prevail** against it." Mt 16:17-19

And no point was more tenuous, more worrisome, more frightening than those first few centuries.

After Jesus' Ascension and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, no one was quite sure how the Gospel would be received by much of the Jewish community.

The first disciples were often met with anger, hostility, and suspicion. But that didn't stop them. They continued to preach what they had experienced and what others had told them about Jesus. And they brought that message to much of the known world.

Of course, much of the "known" world was under the control of the Roman Empire. This new "religion" was one of those things that got their attention. And that's when the persecutions started.

Yet, secretly, the faith persisted; individual believers persisted, secretly, of course, but steadfast, nonetheless. And those first believers waited patiently for better times, for something to change, for some springtime for Christianity. It took a very long time.

Today we gather on the Solemnity of the Dedication of the Lateran Basilica in Rome (an immovable feast always celebrated on November 9).

You might wonder why we celebrate this particular church of all the churches in the world. We do so for several reasons.

First, St. John Lateran is the cathedral church of Rome, which actually makes it the Pope's church (not St. Peter's, as you might have thought). Popes actually lived in the residence there for about 1,000 years. Additionally, it was the site of five Church councils.

However, what might make it most special is how it came about and the meaning it may hold for us in this time and place.

In the early 300s, the emperor Constantine (a non-Christian) was about to go into battle and had a vision of a cross in the sky accompanied by the words, “In this sign you shall conquer.”

In the year 312, Constantine went to war with his rival Maxentius, whom he conquered at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge.

A year later, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, which finally granted permission for Christianity to be freely practiced. Persecutions were now a thing of the past. Springtime had come.

Subsequently, the Laterini family donated a palace and property to the emperor, who soon built the first public Christian Basilica, in honor of both St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist.

Because of its history and importance, many call St. John Lateran the “mother of all churches”.

Over the years, the Church of St. John Lateran has experienced fires, renovations, and restorations, yet it has persevered through it all. It still stands. Catholicism still stands. The Church continues. Faith continues.

And that might be the most important thing to remember this day. If you are feeling discouraged by what you see happening to the Church in America, feel disheartened by church closings and declining attendance, and the resistance of some of your children to embrace the faith as you and generations before you have, don't lose hope.

The story is not over. The Holy Spirit is still alive and well and at work within the Church, within the hearts and minds of people of goodwill.

It might just be that the period we are going through is a kind of necessary time, an essential part of the process of making room for something even more beautiful in the future.

Faith is persistence in the face of doubt: Behind every success is years of quiet, relentless grind that no one ever talks about.