



Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception

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BACKGROUND

2008 PAPAL VISIT TO NATIONAL SHRINE

Overview of Shrine History, Significance & Current Status

The Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception is the largest Roman Catholic church in the United States and North America, and is one of the ten largest churches in the world.

It is the nation's pre-eminent Marian Shrine, dedicated to the patroness of the United States—the Blessed Virgin Mary, under her title of the Immaculate Conception.

The National Shrine is designated by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops as a National Sanctuary of Prayer and Pilgrimage. Though it resides in the Archdiocese of Washington, it is neither a cathedral (the seat of the local bishop/diocese) nor is it a parish church.

“It has no parish community of its own; but rather counts every American Catholic among its numbers. No single bishop claims it as his cathedral; rather, it is the church of all the nation's bishops. Its work is not supported by a single group or organization, but is carried out through the cooperation of people throughout the country. In every way, the National Shrine is America's Catholic Church.” America's Church ©1990

In 1913, Pope Pius X approved plans for the building of a national shrine in the United States, and made a personal contribution for its construction—the lire equivalent of \$400. The cornerstone of the National Shrine was laid in 1920. Its first Mass was held on Easter Sunday 1924. In 1926, the Crypt Church was completed. The remainder of the Crypt level was completed in 1931. The Depression and World War II halted construction of the Shrine's Great Upper Church superstructure. With the end of World War II and the prosperity of the post war years, construction resumed in the Marian Year of 1954. The Great Upper Church superstructure was completed and dedicated in 1959. Embellishment and ornamentation of the interior of the National Shrine has continued since.

The Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception is neither imitative nor duplicative of any other church in the world. Its unique architecture and art are a blending of ancient and new. Byzantine-Romanesque in style, it is constructed entirely of stone, brick, tile and mortar—without steel structural beams, framework or columns. It boasts the largest collection of contemporary ecclesiastical art in the world, including the largest mosaic of Christ in Majesty in the world. The National Shrine is distinctly American, yet is comparable to and rivals the great sanctuaries of Europe.

Over 70 chapels and oratories have been added to the National Shrine, dedicated by various ethnic groups and religious communities. From the beginning, the Shrine was envisioned as a gift from all American Catholics to represent the devotion to Mary of many kinds of peoples, cultures, traditions and ethnic backgrounds. The various chapels and oratories are filial in that they relate to the mother shrine in the country of origin or the particular religious community to which they are affiliated. Offering the same graces and indulgences, individuals and groups can make a pilgrimage to many of the great Marian Shrines of the world at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception.

Among its many chapels and oratories are Our Lady of Guadalupe, Our Lady of Lourdes, Mary, Queen of Ireland, Our Lady of Czestochowa (Poland), Our Lady of China, Our Mother of Africa, Our Lady of LaVang (Vietnam), Our Lady of Vailankanni (India), Our Lady of Altötting (Bavaria/Germany), and many, many more.

On October 7, 1979, Pope John Paul II was the first-ever reigning Pope to visit the National Shrine. In the Great Upper Church, he proclaimed:

“This Shrine speaks to us with the voice of all America, with the voice of all the sons and daughters of America, who have come here from the various countries of the Old World. When they came, they brought with them in their hearts the same love for the Mother of God that was characteristic of their ancestors and of themselves in their native lands. These people, speaking different languages, coming from different backgrounds of history and traditions in their own countries, came together around the heart of a Mother they all had in common. While their faith in Christ made all of them aware of being one People of God, this awareness became all the more vivid through the presence of the Mother in the work of Christ and the Church.”

In 1990, Pope John Paul II elevated the National Shrine to the status of a minor basilica, bestowing this papal honor for its historical importance, dignity and significance as a center of worship and devotion and as an expression of a special union with the Holy Father.

Open 365 days a year, the Basilica of the National Shrine receives an estimated one million visitors annually. Six Masses or more are celebrated daily, and Confessions are heard five hours daily. The Basilica is host to diocesan, ethnic, and group pilgrimages bringing pilgrims in from around the country and around the world. The National Shrine also features daily guided tours and operates a Catholic Gift Shop, a Catholic Book Store, and a cafeteria to accommodate its visitors.

Built by American Catholics, the National Shrine depends solely on individual contributions to continue its mission as it states:

The Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, a Catholic church dedicated to the patroness of our nation, is a place of worship, pilgrimage, evangelization and reconciliation. It offers visitors the occasion for a deepening in conversion, a step forward in the journey to God, with Mary as the model for that journey. This monumental church, raised by Catholics of the United States because of their devotion to Mary the Mother of God, gives visibility to their faith and Catholic heritage. Mary's Shrine invites people from across the country and beyond into the saving moment of faith, hope and charity, so that they may be reconciled and transformed into living symbols of Christ's presence in the world. It is here that the faithful gather to worship God, give honor to Mary, and are sent to spread God's Word wherever they go.

On Wednesday, April 16, 2008, his 81st birthday, Pope Benedict XVI will visit the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. The Holy Father will view the Great Upper Church, pray in the Blessed Sacrament Chapel and at the Oratory of Our Lady of Altötting, then descend to the Crypt Church, where he will preside over Solemn Vespers and deliver an address to the Roman Catholic Bishops of the United States.

The Great Upper Church

Escorted by Rev. Msgr. Walter R. Rossi, Shrine Rector, Pope Benedict XVI will enter the Shrine via the East Portico. He will walk through the Great Upper Church, and view the newly installed and recently dedicated dome mosaics—The Redemption Dome (2006) and The Knights of Columbus Incarnation Dome (2007), as well as The Universal Call to Holiness Bas-Relief and the mosaic *Christ in Majesty*, all prominent features of the Great Upper Church. The Holy Father will also pray in Blessed Sacrament Chapel and at the Oratory of Our Lady of Altötting, also located in the Great Upper Church.

The Redemption Dome

Located in the heart of the nave, the brilliant Redemption Dome depicts in beautiful mosaic, the four redemptive acts of Jesus: the Temptation in the Desert, the Crucifixion, the Descent into Hell, and the Resurrection from the Dead. The encircling text of the dome reads: “Worthy are you to receive the scroll and to break open its seals, for you were slain and with your blood you purchased for God those from every tribe and tongue, people and nation.” (Revelation 5:9) The dome mosaic was manufactured in Spilimbergo, Italy and contains over 2.5 million pieces of Venetian glass. The dome mosaic was dedicated on November 16, 2006 at a Mass celebrated by The Most Rev. Donald W. Wuerl, Archbishop of Washington.

The Knights of Columbus Incarnation Dome

Located in the south nave, the same size as the Redemption Dome, The Knights of Columbus Incarnation Dome depicts the incarnation or manifestation of Jesus through: the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Wedding Feast at Cana, and the Transfiguration. The encircling text of the dome reads: “The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. And we saw his glory—glory as of the only Begotten of the Father, full of grace and of truth.” John 1:14 The Incarnation Dome mosaic bears the name of the Knights of Columbus, the fraternal order that contributed \$1 million toward its creation and installation. The dome mosaic was dedicated on November 17, 2007 at a Mass celebrated by The Most Rev. Donald W. Wuerl, Archbishop of Washington.

The Universal Call to Holiness

This relief, located on the wall of the rear nave supporting the south gallery, ranks among the largest in the world, measuring 780 square feet and weighing more than 37 tons. Sculpted from Botticino-Classico marble from northern Italy, *The Universal Call to Holiness* illustrates a truth expressed in the dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium* (1964), “All the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity; by this holiness as such a more human manner of living is promoted in this earthly society.” Among the nearly 50 figures portrayed as being drawn to the Holy Spirit are the Virgin Mary, Pope John Paul II and Mother Teresa of Calcutta. The relief was dedicated in 1999.

Christ in Majesty

Above the baldachin over the main altar, the mosaic *Christ in Majesty* dominates the north apse and the Great Upper Church. The largest mosaic of Christ in Majesty in the world, it was completed in 1959 and was the gift of an anonymous donor. The mosaic has 3000-4000 total shades of color, 300 shades of red, 200 shades of gold. Modeled in the Byzantine tradition, it depicts Christ in glory and majesty seated upon a rainbow throne, symbolic of pardon and reconciliation. This is the Apocalyptic Christ who comes as the absolute reproving Lord and final judge (raised right brow) and with the love and compassion of the Good Shepherd (relaxed left brow). The jeweled halo symbolizes the divinity of Christ; the cross of fire is the presence and glory of God. The scarlet cloak signifies Christ as Redeemer. His outstretched arms (with signs of the stigmata visible in the palms of His hands and in His side) reach out to rule the universe and embrace the world. The text in the arch above this great mosaic reads: “Christ Conquers, Christ Reigns, Christ Rules, Eternal Victor, Eternal King, Eternal Master. His Power Is An Everlasting Power That Shall Not Be Taken Away.” On the day of the dedication, this mosaic was the only interior ornamentation of the Great Upper Church.

Blessed Sacrament Chapel

Dedicated in 1970, the Blessed Sacrament Chapel is a gift of the bishops, priests and seminarians of the United States. It is the only chapel in the Great Upper Church where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved. The theme of the chapel, the sacrifice of Christ, is represented in the dome mosaic. Central to the dome/dome mosaic is a large crucifixion scene where Mary stands at the foot of the cross holding a vessel into which flows the blood and water from the side of Christ. The bronze tabernacle on the elevated platform beneath the dome replicates the Ark of the Covenant. The baldachin, a canopy of bronze pieces that shower the tabernacle, represents manna falling from heaven, the daily bread from the Old Testament. The tabernacle holds the Bread from Heaven of the New Testament, the Eucharist—the sacramental presence of Jesus, His body, blood, soul and divinity. Pope Benedict XVI will pray silently before the Blessed Sacrament in this chapel.

Oratory of Our Lady of Altötting

Located in the Great Upper Church is an exact copy of the early Gothic hand-carved original from the beginning of the 14th century, the statue of Our Lady of Altötting, the patroness of Bavaria. A gift of the Shrine of Our Lady of Altötting and the people of Germany, the statue is carved from linden wood and stands 25 inches tall. It is the only exact copy displayed outside of Bavaria. The Oratory was dedicated at the National Shrine on April 16, 2005. As history would have it, this date was also the 78th birthday of then Cardinal Josef Ratzinger who just three days later was elected Pope. Born in 1927 in a village near Altötting, Josef Ratzinger was a frequent pilgrim to the Bavarian shrine where the original statue is located. On September 11, 2006, during his first pilgrimage to Altötting as Pope, Benedict XVI placed his Episcopal ring at the foot of Our Lady of Altötting. Pope Benedict XVI will stop to pray at the Oratory of Our Lady of Altötting in the Great Upper Church of the National Shrine on his 81st birthday, just three days shy of the third anniversary of his election as Pope.

Crypt Church

Pope Benedict XVI will celebrate Solemn Vespers and deliver an address to the Cardinals and Bishops of the United States in the Crypt Church, the oldest part of the National Shrine. Constructed between 1922 and 1926, the first Mass was offered on Easter Sunday in 1924 while construction of the Crypt Church was still in progress. Since 1926, Mass has been celebrated here regularly.

The Crypt Church architecture and art is reminiscent of the early catacombs of Rome where the early Christians gathered together in secret. It is ornamented and adorned in the Byzantine-Romanesque style with marble, mosaic, ceramic and other forms of artistry.

Drawing upon Old and New Testament writings, as well as those of the early Church and of Catholic dogma, the Crypt summarizes the unique relationship of Mary, the Mother of God, in the history of the Church.

The Mary Memorial Altar is the freestanding altar that is the focal point of the Crypt Church. Dedicated to Our Lady of the Catacombs, it is made of translucent golden Algerian onyx. Carved statues of Jesus, the Twelve Apostles, and St. Paul occupy the niches along the base. The altar is a gift of over 30,000 women named Mary.

Jesus the Good Shepherd Chapel (directly behind the Mary Memorial Altar) features an altar upon which the tabernacle holds the Blessed Sacrament which has been reserved continuously in the Crypt Church since 1926.

There are 20 chapels and 4 oratories in the Crypt Church.

The Crypt Church is 200 feet long, 160 feet wide, and seats 400.

On April 16, 2008, the Crypt Church will host His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI for Solemn Vespers and for his address to the Bishops of the United States, who will be in attendance.

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