

Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception

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Facts, Figures and Features *of the* Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception

EXTERIOR

The Great Dome— The Great Dome is a hallmark of the Basilica. Its diameter is more than twice that of the central dome of St. Mark's in Venice, Italy.

It features five Marian symbols:

- Fleur de lis: a type of lily symbolic of purity and royalty; it signifies Mary as the Queen of Heaven.
- Cedar of Lebanon: a stately majestic tree symbolizing incorruptibility. Treasured as a source of wealth, its timber was used to build the Temple of Solomon. It is a symbol of both Mary and Jesus.
- Tower of Ivory: an architectural symbol of virginity and vigilance; ivory symbolizes purity and moral fortitude. In Christian art, the Tower of Ivory symbolizes the Immaculate Conception.
- Star of the Sea: the most popular interpretation of the Hebrew name Miryam.
- Intertwining Monograms of A and M: the first letter of the words *Ave* and *Maria*, the greeting of the Archangel to Mary at the Annunciation.

Each symbol is contained within a six-pointed Star of David. The six-pointed star of David represents the royal Judaic lineage of Mary—the House of David.

The Knights Tower—A gift of the Knights of Columbus, the tower and 56-bell carillon it houses rises 329 feet. Though its actual height does not equal that of the Washington Monument (555 feet), its geographical location, more than 200 feet above sea level, causes it to rise nearly to the height of the Washington Monument.

Mary's Garden—Mary's Garden features a reflecting pool with a life-size statue of *Mary, Protector of the Faith*, as well as the *Magnificat* Fountain which is bordered by red granite with two lines from the *Magnificat*, Mary's song of praise, "My being proclaims the greatness of the Lord. My spirit finds joy in God my Savior." The outer walkway features prayer niches incised with biblical passages and stone benches for prayer and meditation.

LOWER/CRYPT LEVEL

Founder's Chapel—Bishop Thomas J. Shahan, the founder of the National Shrine, is the only person buried in the Shrine. His body lies three feet directly beneath the life-sized sarcophagus, in the earth. Bishop Shahan, who received papal approval from Pope Pius X in 1913 to build a national shrine to Mary, was the visionary and promoter of the project from the beginning and remained actively involved in its construction until his death on March 9, 1932.

Pope Pius X Chapel—A relic of Pope Saint Pius X is in the reliquary in the center of the altar frontal. Pope Pius X not only gave permission to Bishop Shahan to build the Shrine in 1913, but also a personal donation—the lire equivalent of \$400 toward it.

Memorial Hall—At its center stands the statue of *Mary, Mother of Mankind*. It was the first commissioned piece of art for the Shrine and was dedicated on May 8, 1937. Surrounding it are tablets of Travertine marble and Radio Black American marble walls and columns on which are inscribed the names of benefactors and those whom they wished to memorialize—individuals, families, religious, clergy, and religious community. All are enrolled in the perpetual remembrances of the Shrine. Among those memorialized are Archbishop John Carroll, S.J., father of the American hierarchy and founder of Georgetown University; Archbishop John J. Hughes, first archbishop of New York and founder of the Cathedral of Saint Patrick; Elizabeth Ann Seton, founder and first superior of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph; George Herman “Babe” Ruth, the famous home run hitter, and Knute Rockne, the head football coach of the Fighting Irish of Notre Dame.

Byzantine-Ruthenian Chapel—Represents and celebrates the Eastern Rite of the Catholic Church. It was proposed as a fitting commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the first Byzantine-Ruthenian diocese in the United States. It was dedicated in 1974.

Papal Items on Display—

Papal Rose—Pope Benedict XVI bestowed “a Golden Rose for Our Mother Mary” upon the Basilica as a sign of his reverence, esteem and paternal affection during his visit on April 16, 2008. The Golden Rose is an honor dating back to the eleventh century and its conferral is rare and considered a great privilege.

Zuchetto of Pope Benedict XVI—Worn by Pope Benedict XVI during his visit to the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception on April 16, 2008.

Pope Blessed John XXIII Stole—The Pontiff wore this gold metallic embroidered stole at the convocation of the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council on October 11, 1962. This was a gift from Francis Cardinal Spellman of New York to the Pope John XXIII for his 80th birthday. On the day of his death, June 3, 1963, the Holy Father instructed his private secretary to return the stole to Cardinal Spellman “as a token of [his] esteem and affection for the hierarchy, clergy, religious and faithful of the United States.”

Pope Paul VI Coronation Tiara—This tiara was worn by Pope Paul VI at his coronation on June 30, 1963. On November 13, 1964, Pope Paul VI removed the tiara from his head and placed it on the altar as a manifestation of the “renunciation of human glory and power” and

as “the new spirit of the Church purified.” Cardinal Spellman requested the honor of obtaining this tiara and putting it to use for the poor. In recognition of the generosity of the American people to the hungry and dispossessed peoples of the world, the Pope granted the request. It was presented to the National Shrine on February 6, 1968, by Archbishop Luigi Raimondi, Apostolic Delegate to the United States. This is the only papal tiara displayed outside of Rome.

Pope Paul VI Medal—This solid gold commemorative medal was presented to the National Shrine by Archbishop Egidio Vagnozzi, Apostolic Delegate to the United States, in recognition of the warmth with which the American people received Pope Paul VI during his October 1965 visit to the United States.

Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta Statue—This is the newest addition to the Basilica, dedicated on September 13, 2009. Mother Teresa was a frequent visitor to the National Shrine for the solemn profession of her sisters, the Missionaries of Charity. Her first visit was in 1972. Her last was in 1995.

The Chair of Saint Peter—This bronze sculpture is an exact copy in miniature of the original in the Basilica of Saint Peter, Vatican City. The Shrine’s founder, Bishop Shahan, obtained the statue for the Shrine while in Rome in 1925. It has been displayed since its arrival on January 1, 1926.

Our Lady of Lourdes Chapel—This was the first Chapel constructed outside of the Crypt Church. It was dedicated on May 3, 1931. This chapel contains a couple of interesting items. To the left of the altar is a relic—a white stone with the inscription, “This stone formed part of the dungeon of St. Joan of Arch Roen, France.” A hand-carved oak prie-dieu (kneeler) is from Oberammergau, Germany. It was used by Eugenio Cardinal Pacelli (who became Pius XII) during his visit to the Shrine in 1936 and by Pope John Paul II in 1979 during his Shrine visit.

Our Mother of Africa Chapel—This chapel features the sculpture *Our Mother of Africa and Her Divine Son* and a narrative bas-relief of the African-American experience from slavery to emancipation. A cherry wood cross holds the solid ebony figure of the crucified Jesus which was carved according to the 500-year old tradition of the Entebene tribe. It is the gift of the National Black Catholic Congress under the leadership of the African American Bishops of the United States. It was dedicated on August 30, 1997.

Hall of American Saints—Includes a number of firsts: Saint Frances Xavier Cabrini, a naturalized American citizen who was the first American to be canonized; Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, the first native-born American to be canonized; and Blessed Kateri Tekawitha, a Native American.

CRYPT CHURCH

Mary Memorial Altar in the Crypt Church—This freestanding altar is dedicated to our Lady of the Catacombs. It is made of translucent golden Algerian onyx. More than 30,000 women who held “even a remote kinship with the name Mary” contributed to this altar. The names of all these women are sealed within the altar.

Crypt Church Tabernacle—Where the Blessed Sacrament has been reserved since November 14, 1926. The tabernacle, crucifix, and candlesticks were crafted by Tiffany Company of New York.

Cornerstone of the National Shrine—Laid on September 23, 1920, the cornerstone is located in what is now the Oratory of Antipolo. This quadrangular four-ton block of highly polished black New Hampshire granite contains the membership scrolls of *Salve Regina*, the original newsletter of the Shrine, coins “of the realm” and the certificate of attestation.

Our Lady of Hope—This chapel of Italian white Carrera and Fior de Pesco marble, ornamented with bronze sculptures of Mary and two angels, is the gift of Bob and Dolores Hope in memory of Avis Townes Hope, the mother of the entertainer. The chapel was dedicated in May 1994. Dolores Hope has been a frequent visitor of the National Shrine and attended its dedication in 1959.

UPPER CHURCH

Statue of Mary Immaculate—Standing atop the Baldachin over the main altar, this 7'2" tall statue of Mary is larger than life, yet it is dwarfed by *Christ in Majesty*. Its position atop the Baldachin before *Christ in Majesty* symbolically and significantly represents “*To Jesus, through Mary.*”

Christ in Majesty—Located in the North Apse, this mosaic is one of the largest of Christ in the world at 3610 square feet. It contains 3.5 million tesserae of mosaic in 3,000-4,000 total shades of color, 300 of which are shades of red and 200 of which are shades of gold. On the day of dedication, November 20, 1959, this mosaic was the only interior ornamentation of the Upper Church. This is a Byzantine representation of Christ—the Apocalyptic Christ who comes as the absolute reproving Lord and final judge (raised right eyebrow) and with the love and compassion of the Good Shepherd (relaxed left eyebrow). The scarlet cloak signifies Christ as the Redeemer. The span between Christ’s hands (of his outstretched arms which reach out to embrace the world and which are in a position of prayer) is 34 feet across. The span of each hand is five feet across, while the span from his chin to hairline is 7 feet tall.

The Blessed Sacrament Chapel—A gift of the clergy and bishops of the United States, among others, this chapel features a bronze tabernacle, evocative of the Ark of the Covenant, in which resides the Blessed Sacrament. The baldachin above represents Manna falling from heaven and surrounds the tabernacle.

Upper Church Sacristy Doors—The two bronze grille doors weigh a ton each, yet are perfectly balanced to close with the push of one finger. The left gate features symbols representing Mary as the Immaculate Conception and the purity of the sacrifice of the Mass: the chalice, host and fleur de lis. The right gate features symbols representing the Christ Child, the four books of the Gospel and the Ten Commandments.

Immaculate Conception Mosaic and Assumption Mosaic—Both mosaics are from the Mosaic Studios of the Vatican (*Studio del Mosaico della Reverenda Fabbrica di San Pietro in Vaticano* or RFSPV).

The Immaculate Conception is a mosaic copy of the painting *La Purissima Bionda* by Murillo, the “inventor” of the composition of the Immaculate Conception as we know of today. This mosaic is the gift of Popes Benedict XV and Pius XI. It contains approximately 35,000 pieces of natural color stone reflecting some 27,000 hues and tints. The mosaic tesserae were ground to a smooth flat surface to resemble a painting rather than a mosaic. The mosaic is a bit larger than the original painting and it weighs more than three tons. Taking five years to complete, *The Immaculate Conception* mosaic was blessed and dedicated on November 12, 1930.

The *Assumption* Mosaic—Pope Pius XII commissioned a mosaic detail of Titian’s *Assumption of the Virgin* Painting. Pope John XXIII presented the completed work in 1960. Different from the technique used in *The Immaculate Conception*, the technique used for the *Assumption* leaves the enamel finish unpolished, looking uneven and reflective as a mosaic typically does.

East Transept/The Creation Mosaic—The mosaic vault of the east transept depicts the six days of The Creation as recorded in the Book of Genesis and the relationship of science to this miracle of God. At the center of the mosaic are the hand of the Divine creator and the figures of Adam and Eve. Below them, enclosed in an earth mountain, symbolizing the clay from which God formed Adam, is a human fetus. Among the upper levels of “the Void” are symbols of DNA. Extinct plants and armored fish progress into whales, manta rays and polar bears. Volcanoes produce a flowering earth; dinosaurs and animals—wild and domestic—are also visible. Skies with whirling nebulae replicate the idea of space and the future. The mosaic design is by Mary Reardon.

The Trinity Dome—The Trinity Dome is the largest dome of the five in the Basilica’s interior. It is the underside of the exterior Great Dome. The Trinity Dome is currently unornamented. Its interior adornment in mosaic is the final piece yet to be accomplished in order to complete the National Shrine according to its original iconographic plan.

Universal Call to Holiness—This relief, sculpted from Botticino-Classico marble ranks among the largest in the world measuring 17 feet from top to bottom and 52 feet across, and weighing more than 37 tons. Its theme 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.” The artist, George Carr, portrays people of all “rank and status” being drawn to the Holy Spirit. Among the nearly 50 figures portrayed in the relief are the Virgin Mary, Pope John Paul II, and Mother Teresa of Calcutta. The Universal Call to Holiness was dedicated on November 14, 1999, in celebration of the 40th Anniversary of the dedication of the National Shrine.

Our Lady of Czestochowa—The icon of Our Lady of Czestochowa displayed in this chapel is an exact copy of the original, even down to the slashes, scar and scratches that were a result of the Hussite attack on the original. In 1976, Karol Cardinal Wojtyla, the Archbishop of Krakow, visited this chapel and celebrated Mass in the Upper Church. He returned to the National Shrine and this chapel three years later as Pope John Paul II. The marble tablet on the wall in the chapel recalls this visit.

Our Lady Queen of Ireland—This oratory is a gift of the builder of the Upper Church, John McShain. The statue of *Our Lady and the Holy Child* is made of unpolished Travertine marble and is seated upon the hexagonal rock formation known in Ireland as “Giant’s Causeway.” The chandelier is made of Waterford crystal and the walls are of Connemara marble from Ireland.

Our Lady of Pompei Chapel—This chapel was dedicated in October 2008. Among its many features are the Mysteries of Light rendered in mosaic, completing the representation of all the mysteries of the Rosary in the National Shrine. The crucifix that adorns the chapel was blessed by Pope Benedict XVI during his visit to the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception on April 16, 2008.

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