



Photograph by Geraldine M. Rohling

# The Catacombs of Rome and the Crypt Church

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*Fractio Panis*, the breaking of the bread, based on the fresco of the 2nd century in the Greek Chapel in the catacomb of Priscilla.

Deep within the city of Rome, beneath the splendor and grandeur of its exterior, there is a treasure of early Christian art that ornaments the walls and cubicles of the catacombs. These frescoes, at one time understood only by Christians, chronicle the origins and glories of the early community of believers of the second and third centuries. Deep within the Crypt Church of the Basilica of the National Shrine, there is a treasure of Christian art derived from these same Roman catacombs.

An early publication of the National Shrine referred to the Crypt Church as “the catacomb under the sanctuary of the main church.” Once

thought to be hiding places for the early Christians, scholars now tell us that the catacombs were places of burial and of worship for a faith that had yet to come of age. In this sense, the Crypt Church is not a catacomb but rather catacomb-like, by virtue of its art and as a place where the living community gathers to pray and to listen to the word of God. It is a place where sacrament and sign, as depicted in ceramic and mosaic, form an active relationship, a place where the mysteries of faith are celebrated and the intimate and essential relationship of Mary in salvation history is explained.

The artistic integrity of the Crypt Church was of particular importance to Bishop Thomas J. Shahan, founder of the National Shrine. During his seminary years at the North American College in Rome, Bishop Shahan received an extracurricular education in early Christian art and inscription from Giovanni Battista de Rossi (1822-1894), a Roman-born scholar



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*Panis et pisces*, bread and fish, represents the miracle of the loaves and the fishes, which in the early Christian community, was looked upon as the first and foremost symbol of Eucharist. This depiction is identical to that of the Callistus catacomb, 2nd century, except for the water symbol.

and employee of the Vatican Library and the leading force in the development of the field of Christian archaeology. Shahan once commented that he learned more from de Rossi than from any of his “formal” teachers. As a scholar, a member of the faculty, and as the rector of The Catholic University of America, Professor Shahan (1889-1928) spent much time, thought, and ink on the study of the Roman catacombs, the art of Christian antiquity, and the catacomb representations of Mary. This is reflected in a 1910 statement by Bishop Shahan regarding his vision of the National Shrine: “Its wall spaces and ceilings ought to be covered with noble historical frescoes depicting the origin and the glories of



Catholics in the United States, and particularly in these parts.”

In order for the decorative plan of the Crypt Church to be truly catacomb, Mary Chase Stratton, the artist given the task of providing the “catacomb” decorations, made a pilgrimage to Rome, where she spent weeks within the catacombs studying and making sketches of the designs, the subjects and subject matter, and the composition of the images. The results, referred to by Bishop Shahan as “legible decoration,” have created a pictorial theology in ceramic of the first four centuries of Christianity based on the art of Christian antiquity and the Roman catacombs. ☪



Early Christian artwork did not depict the countenance of God (Ex 33:20); only indicated the presence of God. The extended three fingers refer to the Trinity. The rays issuing forth from the outward palm denote the blessing of God.



*Adoratio Magorum* or adoration of the magi shows two magi, a common alternative to the three, and is taken from the catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus, 3rd century.



*Virgo Deo consecrate*, the vesting of a virgin with a veil is similar to the fresco in the catacomb of Priscilla, 3rd century.