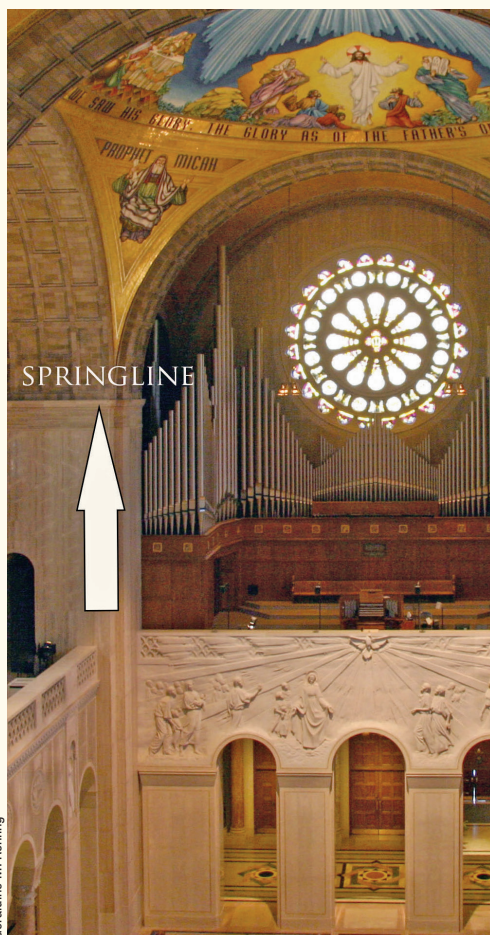


ABOVE THE SPRINGLINE

Geraldine M. Rohling, Ph.D., M.A.Ed
Archivist-Curator

This past December, as another Advent season came to a close, the National Shrine was busy preparing for the Solemnities and Masses of the Christmas season. Lush poinsettias and fir trees decorated and lightly scented the Byzantine interior of this church of pilgrimage. As in years past, I looked for something within the church as a point of reflection. This year, with the upper church “scaffolding-free” for the first time in two years, and the dedication of *The Trinity* dome mosaic on our patronal feast day (December 8) now a thing of the past, I was drawn to a memory.

Almost two decades earlier, at the turn of the new millennium, the installation of the *Universal Call to Holiness*, a marble sculpture in relief on the south nave wall, and the mosaic ceiling of the narthex, brought to completion the Great Upper Church *below* the springline—the point or line where an arch, vault, or dome begins to curve.



SPRINGLINE

Arrow points to the “Springline”

The following year, work began on a quadripartite project to complete the Great Upper Church *above* the springline. Designers, artists, mosaicists, architects, and engineers were invited to attend an information lecture. I had the honor of making the presentation which included not only the history and architecture of the church, but also the aesthetic and iconographic scheme of the Great Upper Church as formulated by the first Iconography Committee of the National Shrine (1954-58). Those who attended the lecture received a “request for proposals” and were invited to submit an “aesthetic concept study and scope of work.” Within the next year, contracts were awarded and work began on the first dome mosaic, the north nave, *The Redemption*.

In a certain sense, the north nave dome mosaic was the “test dome” for all that would follow. The basic scaffolding technique that would be developed and expanded for the Great Dome was first used on this project. Beginning in December 2005, the nave of the church became a construction site: steel trusses were assembled, hoisted into place, and bolted into the stone and brick walls at the springline. Once the east and west trusses were secured 62 feet above the nave floor, workers began bridging the trusses—which would also be the tracks used to roll the scaffold housing to the south nave—with steel trestles. As amazing as this was, ten years later, it would be “small potatoes.”



North nave dome

Work on the north and south nave mosaics moved rapidly. By December of 2007, both dome mosaics had been installed and dedicated. The South Gallery vault mosaic, which was half the size (1,804 sq. ft.) of just one of the nave domes (3,780 sq. ft.), was begun in April 2013

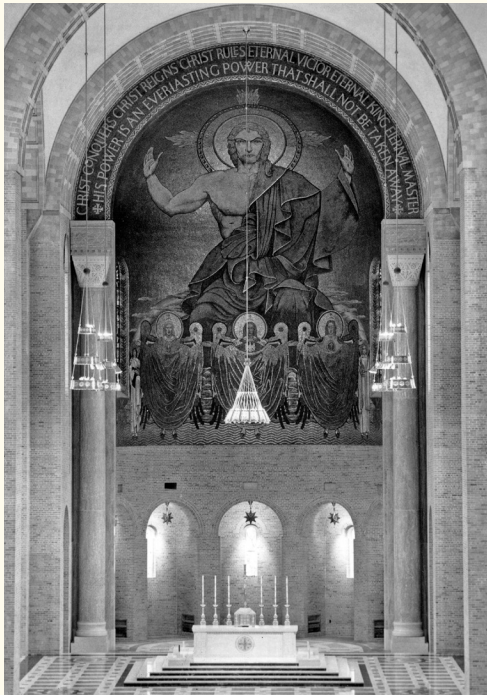
and finished by Christmas that same year. The focus now shifted to *The Trinity* dome mosaic, the largest mosaic of the National Shrine, located at the crossing or the central axis of the Great Upper Church.



Matthew Barrick

South Gallery vault mosaic

The completion of *The Trinity* dome mosaic would bring to an end the physical ornamentation of the interior of the Great Upper Church that began with the installation of the *Christ in Majesty* mosaic (July-October 1959), the only ornamentation in the Great Upper Church when the National Shrine was dedicated on 20 November 1959.



Basilica Archives

1959 Christ in Majesty Mosaic

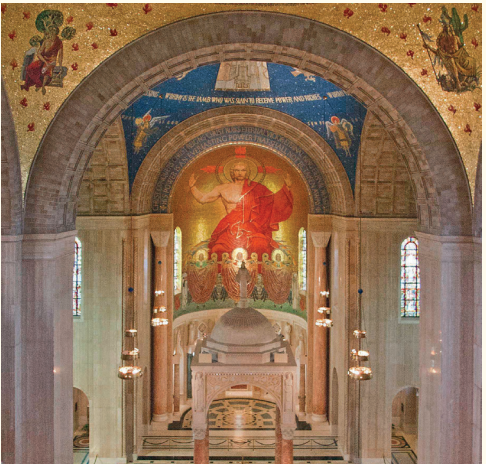
Following a year of preliminary and studio work, workers set into motion the machinery that hoisted the steel deck of the scaffolding—all 150 tons of it—62 feet above the nave floor on 13 July 2016. Work began at 11:00 a.m. and ended at 2:32 p.m.



Geraldine M. Rohling

Steel deck of the scaffolding hoisted by workers

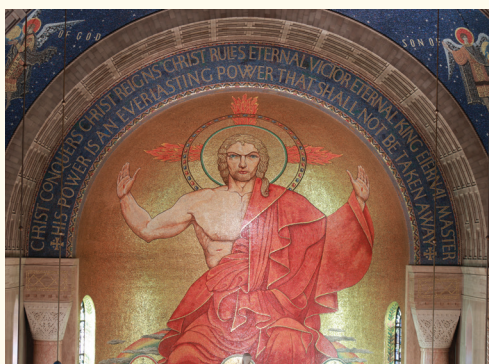
Once the deck was secured, I began climbing the stairs to the dome scaffolding. (The hoist or elevator made me nervous.) Of course, I had been photographing every possible view from the nave and the galleries for some time. Now, I would climb the seven-story staircase that led to the deck and then another ten stories through a forest of aluminum, steel, and wood, to the apex, photographing and documenting the activity above the springline. Each trip had its own, unique, ethos.



Geraldine M. Rohling

It was during these “pilgrimages” that I had a vision of the National Shrine unlike any before and definitely, unlike any that I would ever have again; an experience that would come to very few. For me, the keeper of the history of this grand and noble church, it was a moment to be documented and preserved. An experience that was not wasted.

At the north edge of the deck, the first riser was installed but no walls, only a wood railing secured the perimeter. The fresh scent of construction-grade pine was in the air. Standing on the first riser, about five feet off the deck, I had a view of the *Christ in Majesty* mosaic in the north apse that was clean and clear. Over the years, I had climbed many stairs, crawled through brick openings, and crept along catwalks to the oculus of the north and south nave and the Great Dome. Still, I had not seen a view or vantage point that could compete with this one. It was another world; it was another dimension. I truly felt as though I had stepped through the Looking Glass into an alternative world.



Christ in Majesty Mosaic

Standing on the deck of the scaffolding, the hint of incense mixed with that of bees wax; whiffs of machine oil from the rigging served as a reality check. The view was spectacular. As I looked at the scenes in *The Redemption* dome mosaic, I thought to myself, “This must be how the Magdalene and the Apostles felt when they discovered the empty tomb: an experience that pushed every electrical circuit in their bodies to overload.” Taking a few deep breaths, I stabilized my camera, began photographing, and writing notes.



Redemption Mosaic

Throughout these two years, I had the opportunity to speak with some of the workers, men and women, and mosaicists. I was curious how they felt about this “gig.” They were in awe, of course, but had a job to do and did not get as much “reveling time” as did I. Still, I noticed that every now and then, while pausing to catch his/her breath—the physical work was very strenuous—they would be gazing about, lost in their own thoughts or taking “selfies” for their scrapbooks, but mostly awed by what they saw and proud to be a player. Each had a personal encounter and personal story to share. This team of workers was very experienced. Some compared this job to others on national monuments and buildings. This job however, was unique in their work histories. It was, after all, the installation of the last dome mosaic in the largest Roman Catholic Church in North America; a 20,000 sq. ft. work of art with a scaffolding design unique to the project.

Inside the Dome

Inside the “winter dome,” there was a chill that was tangible; patches where the heat would congregate and warm the terra cotta tiles, created an “oven effect.”



Winter Dome

When it snowed, the interior warmth caused the snow to slide down the exterior tiles until the colder temperatures equalized the tiles. During one snow storm, I could actually “hear” the snow falling. How does one “hear” snow fall? It is not the “clanging” or “banging” of snowflakes. It is the silence: snowfall muffles and absorbs sound, quieting the surrounding frenzy. This silence was unmatched; otherworldly. The summer rain was another phenomenon. One day late in July 2017, in the early evening hours, a thunderstorm began to roll in; the temperature and humidity climbed rapidly—it was very hot;



The Trinity Dome Mosaic

darkening clouds dimmed the mosaic; there was a rumble, *sotto voce*. Then came the rain. It was a soft patter against the windows, echoing ever so gently in the cupola, like whispers within a confessional. As I walked the 279 ft. circumference of the dome, the sound seemed to “accompany” me, coming from undefined directions. Soon, the storm passed and the humidity caused a haze to descend within the cupola at about the 130 ft. mark, just above the windows and a little below the feet of the Holy Trinity scene. At one point, this interplay of light came to rest at that portion of the Nicene Creed (below the image of Blessed Paul VI) in which the council fathers defined the Divine Word as “light from light.” I recalled what Saint Bonaventure wrote: “Christ the Son of God, who is by nature the image of the invisible God” is our entryway

to the “Father of Lights.” It was perfect.

Bishop Shahan sought a style and an aesthetic for the National Shrine that would inspire the patristic understanding of Beauty and Eternal Truth. This was achieved by combining the measured grace and eloquence of the Romanesque with the subtle rhythm and mysticism of the Byzantine dome and mosaic.

Ecclesiastical art is an invitation to the observer to share in the mystery of salvation through meditation and reflection. For the early Church, religious truths were shared in the artwork of the catacombs. At the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, religious truths are shared in the dome mosaics—above the springline. ☪