



THE BASILICA

of the NATIONAL SHRINE of the IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

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BASILICA BACKGROUNDER

The Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception is the largest Roman Catholic church in North America and is one of the ten largest churches in the world. Designated by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops as a national sanctuary of prayer and pilgrimage, the Basilica is the nation's preeminent Marian shrine dedicated to the patroness of the United States—the Blessed Virgin Mary, under her title of the Immaculate Conception.

Though the Basilica 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

Plans for building a national church to honor the Blessed Virgin Mary in the United States were presented to and approved by Pope Pius X in 1913. In 1920, the cornerstone of the National Shrine was laid. The first Mass was celebrated on Easter Sunday 1924, in the Crypt Church, which was still under construction. The Crypt Church was completed in 1926, while construction of the Crypt level continued through 1931. The years of the Great Depression and World War II halted further work on the National Shrine for more than two decades.

During the 1953-54 Marian Year celebrating the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception, American Catholics responded generously to renewed fundraising efforts to complete the National Shrine. In 1955, construction of the superstructure of the Great Upper Church resumed in earnest. Four years later, on November 20, 1959, the National Shrine was dedicated, though embellishment and ornamentation of its interior continues to this day.

Neither imitative nor duplicative of any other church in the world, the National Shrine and its unique architecture and art are a blend 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. Though distinctly American, the National Shrine rivals the great sanctuaries of Europe and boasts the largest collection of contemporary ecclesiastical art in the world.

The National Shrine is home to more than 80 chapels and oratories that honor the Mother of God and represent the peoples, cultures and traditions that are the fabric of the Catholic faith and mosaic of the United States. Among those represented are African, Austrian, Chinese, Cuban, Czech, Filipino, French, German, Guamanian, Hungarian, Indian, Irish, Italian, Korean, Latin American, Lithuanian, Maltese, Polish, Slovak, Slovenian, Vietnamese, and more.

The various chapels and oratories in the National Shrine are filial in that they relate to the mother shrine in the country of origin or 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 when visiting the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception.

On October 7, 1979, Pope John Paul II was the first pope to visit the National Shrine. That day, during his address 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.

On April 16, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI visited the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception on the first full day of his Apostolic Journey to the United States.

He presided over Solemn Vespers, addressed the Bishops of the United States, and bestowed the Golden Rose upon the Basilica, a rare honor granted to a church or shrine of special significance.

On September 23, 2015, Pope Francis became the third pope to visit the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. He was the first pope to celebrate Mass at the Basilica and, during the Mass, he presided over the first canonization to take place on American soil, that of Saint Junípero Serra.

During this visit, Pope Francis also blessed the first segment of mosaic fabricated for the Basilica’s central and largest dome, the Trinity Dome. Considered the crowning jewel of Mary’s Shrine, the Trinity Dome mosaic was dedicated on December 8, 2017. This dedication marked the historic completion of the Basilica according to its original architectural and iconographic plans, in advance of the one hundredth anniversary of the laying of the National Shrine’s cornerstone which will take place in 2020.

Open 365 days a year, the Basilica 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 throughout the year, receiving pilgrims from around the country and around the world. The Basilica also features daily

guided tours and operates a Catholic gift shop, a Catholic bookstore, and a cafeteria to accommodate its visitors.

Built by generations of American Catholics, the Basilica continues to depend on the generosity of the faithful to fulfill its enduring mission:

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.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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