

MARY'S SHRINE

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Mary, Mother of Mankind

THE SOUTHERN CRYPT: FROM MORTUARY CHAPEL TO MEMORIAL HALL

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

During his seminary years at the North American College in Rome, Bishop Thomas J. Shahan, the founder of the National Shrine, received an extracurricular education in early Christian art and inscription from Giovanni Battista de Rossi (1822-94), a Roman-born scholar and employee of the Vatican Library and the leading force in the development of the field of Christian archaeology. Having been schooled in the practices and treasures of the catacombs of Rome, Shahan hoped to re-create both the art and liturgical practices of the catacombs at the National Shrine.

The catacombs of Rome, once thought to be hiding places for the early Christians, were places of burial and of worship for a faith that had yet to come of age. A very early publication of the National Shrine referred to the Crypt Church as “the catacomb under the sanctuary of the main church.” Although the Crypt Church is not a place of burial, it is a place of worship. Thus, it is not a catacomb but catacomb-like by virtue of its art and architectural style. It is a place where sacrament and sign, as depicted in stone, mosaic, and ceramic, form an active bond with the mysteries of faith, particularly the intimate and essential relationship of Mary within the story of our salvation history.

On a rainy and cold Easter Sunday, 20 April 1924 at 9:00 a.m. in the Crypt Church, Reverend Doctor Bernard A. McKenna, personal secretary to Bishop Shahan and the

first director of the National Shrine, offered the first Mass in the National Shrine. Bishop Shahan preached.

Amid all the pomp and grandeur that a construction site could muster, the capacity congregation (900) sat on folding chairs situated between support beams and joists and knelt upon the rough, unfinished concrete floor. Among the more distinguished diplomats at the event was Sir Esme W. Howard, British Ambassador to the United States (1924-30), a good friend and a benefactor of the National Shrine (Memorial Hall tablet, 11W). Also among the notables were Don Juan Riaño y Gayangos, Spanish Ambassador (1914-26) and Dean of the Diplomatic Corps in the United States, Admiral William S. Benson, US Navy, Retired (Memorial Hall tablet, 30W), and General Tasker H. Bliss, US Army, governor of the Soldiers’ Home (1920-27). All three of these men were also present at the Foundation Stone ceremony. (See Rohling, *The First Stone*, 2020, available through the Shrine bookstore.)

Four years later on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception (8 December 1928) the Crypt Church was completed with the solemn presentation of the main altar by the International Federation of Catholic Alumni (IFCA). On this occasion, the altar dedicated to Our Lady of the Catacombs became known as the “Mary Memorial Altar.” Under the auspices of the IFCA, more than 30,000 women who held “even a remote kinship with the name



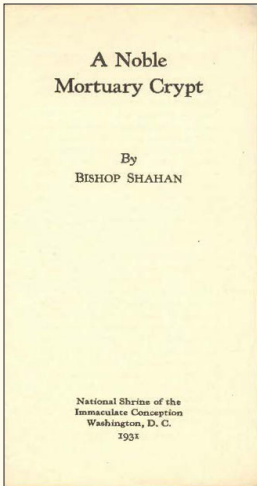
BNSC Archives

Easter Sunday 1924

Mary” contributed to the donation of this altar of Algerian Onyx. Their names are sealed within the altar. Mrs. Clara Douglas Sheeran, co-founder and former president of the IFCA, who established the altar fund in 1919, and Mrs. Mary Blake Finan, the sitting president, presented a check to Bishop Shahan in the name of the “Marys of America.” (Both women and members of the IFCA were present at the Foundation Stone ceremony of 1920.)



8 December 1928



keeping with the ancient funeral practices of the Roman catacombs. “This beautiful old Catholic custom is well known to all who have visited the great medieval cathedrals of England and Ireland, whose richly carved ecclesiastical brasses, of Catholic origin and sentiment, preserve even yet the names and virtues of the faithful ... [these] models of artistic lettering ... [are] enriched with our immemorial Catholic symbolism of immortality” and epitaphs of our Catholic ancestors.

So, on Tuesday morning, 30 December 1930,

the groundbreaking for the Southern Crypt was held. The following Monday, 5 January 1931, actual work began with the steam shovel excavating the area.



1931 Steam Shovel

Ten months later, construction of the Southern Crypt was completed. The dedication of the “Memorial Chapel,” the name of which was changed from the original “Mortuary Chapel,” was planned by the Dominicans and held on Tuesday, 13 October 1931, the Feast of the Holy Rosary.

Finally, to mark the end of nine years of work and the completion of the entire Crypt, north and south, a Triduum (three days) in honor of the Immaculate Conception (6-8 December 1931), was arranged by Monsignor Bernard A. McKenna, director of the National Shrine, and headed by the Dominican priests and brothers.



Workmen 13 February 1931

The Crypt of the National Shrine, divided into the Northern Crypt or the Crypt Church and the Southern Crypt or the Memorial Chapel, was now complete. The interior ornamentation of the Southern Crypt would be different from that of the Crypt Church.

At the center of Memorial Chapel there was to

be a “beautiful Altar” of “black Kilkenny and white Carrara marble” where a Requiem Mass would be said regularly with a special memento for all whose memorial epitaphs lined the surrounding walls and pillars. The *De Profundis*, Psalm 130, would be recited at the foot of this altar. The recitation carried indulgences for the living as well as the deceased since the 18th century. In addition, there would be occasional instruction on the practice of Christian love and the spiritual care for the dead that began with the apostles and created so large a province of Christian architecture, art, music, and poetry. While the Northern Crypt would retain its supremacy in religious use, the Southern Crypt would become “very dear to the Catholic heart with its solemn devotion to the hallowed memories of our departed.” This supremacy would be further reflected in the names of the spaces. Cardinal directions would be dropped and the areas would be known simply as the Crypt Church (N) and Memorial Chapel (S). In the years to come, there would be one more change: Memorial Chapel would become Memorial *Hall*, as the “mortuary altar” was never installed.

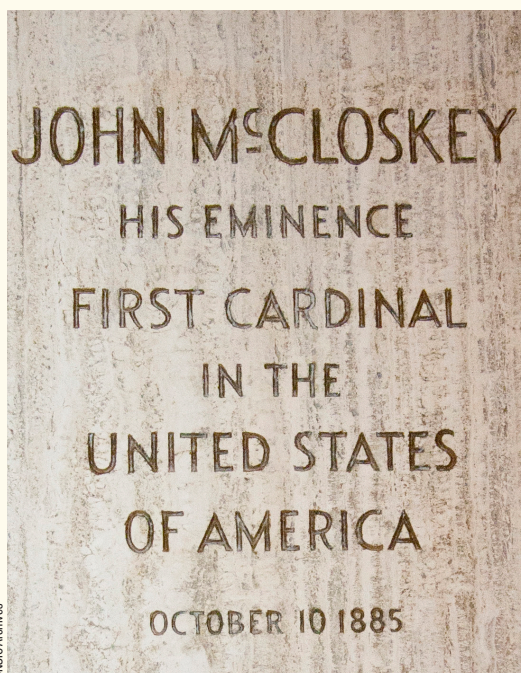
Memorial Chapel was to be as true to the catacomb chapels as possible. “A ceiling covered with frescoes in which the venerable and historic art of Holy Church, from the Roman catacombs to our own day” would be exhibited “amid the divine and consoling texts of Scripture” that spoke of the greatest prayer of thanksgiving: Eucharist. It should come as no surprise then that the catacombs were ornamented abundantly with “table” and “bread” scenes and symbols. When visiting the Roman catacombs, one is hard put to find a depiction of the passion or death of Jesus or the martyrs, as Christ’s victory over death was the defining element of the early Church. The tablets on the outer walls of the lateral chapels were to include “the ancient and venerable prayers of the Mass and Office for the Dead” in Latin and in English, which are among some of the oldest prayers of the Church. As the number of enrollments and the need for space increased however, this part of the decorative plan was omitted, as some of the epitaphs included their own mementos for the dead.

What was most appealing to the faithful was the spiritual benefits which included 104 Masses offered annually. As stated in the tablet brochure: “From above [the faithful departed] will look down with joy on your act of affectionate piety. The souls in Purgatory will be grateful to you for helping to shorten their period of probation. Mary Immaculate will look

down benignly on these holy Memorials, and in her own glorious Temple will not fail to further their petitions by her all powerful intercession.”

Memorial Chapel was to be a place of epitaphs, inscriptions, remembrances, memorials, and tributes to Christian lives well lived and a source of encouragement to the faith of the living.

Historical Tablets would be a unique addition to the chapel. Using the eight support or “foundation piers” of the actual structure, which are covered in Travertine stone, distinguishing them from the Radio Black American marble of the other columns, these “historical tablets” would be devoted to “foundational” persons or “firsts” of the Catholic Church in America. The first of the “historical” tablets was donated on 18 December 1931 by an admirer of John Cardinal McCloskey (21W), the first American cardinal. It was soon followed by



BNSIC Archives

McCloskey Tablet

inscriptions in honor of Archbishop John F. Keane, founding rector of Catholic University (20W); Archbishop John Carroll, father of the American hierarchy and founder of Georgetown College (50E); the prince-priest Demetrius Gallitzin, the first man to receive all major and minor orders, from tonsure to priesthood, within the original thirteen colonies (53E); Mother Elizabeth Ann Seton, founder and first superior of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph, Emmitsburg, Maryland (after 1850, Daughters of Charity in the United States) and the first native-born citizen of the United States



BNSIC Archives

1959 Installing Memorial Tablets

to be canonized (54E); John J. Hughes, first Archbishop of New York and founder of the Cathedral of Saint Patrick (51E); John England, first Bishop of Charleston, South Carolina and publisher of the first Catholic newspaper (23W); John Neumann, first Redemptorist to profess his vows in the United States, first Bishop of Philadelphia, and the first male citizen of the United States to be canonized (24W). As a footnote, in 1920, at the meeting of the American hierarchy just prior to the Foundation Stone ceremony, James Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore and senior churchman, informed his fellow bishops that he had put forth the Cause for Mother Elizabeth Ann Seton to the Congregation of Rites. Her canonization followed 55 years later.

The artwork of Memorial Hall is comprised of thousands of incised tablets created by stone carvers and gilders. We know by name two artists whose work adorns Memorial Hall. Lawrence A. Pefferly, a native of Dillingen, Bavaria, Germany, who received his training in Nuremberg and at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, studying under two famous German sculptors, Dr. Hans Ott and Professor Roth. Pefferly came to the United States in 1930 and worked as a sculptor and stone-carver, creating many beautiful figures and statues. He came to the National Shrine in February 1944 and was responsible for setting up and engraving the names on the tablets in Memorial Hall until his

sudden death on 8 July 1955. The exact number of letters carved by Pefferly is not known but it is in the tens of thousands. Mr. Pefferly, his wife, and his children are enrolled on tablet 65E. A second artist and co-worker, Mr. Tonelli, gilded the carvings. As of 30 January 1962, Tonelli had gilded 62,772 letters but not one for his own name.

“A Communion of Saints,” the article in the last issue of *Mary's Shrine* (Spring/Summer, 2021) told of the holy men and women who were visitors to the National Shrine and who participated in the spiritual life of this church. Today, the tablets and epitaphs in Memorial Hall include the names of persons who are remembered for their exemplary lives of faith, hope, and charity, some of whom have been raised to the dignity of the altar (canonization) and some who are on the way, some who were taken from us all too soon, some who are heroes, and some who have lived simple yet faithful lives.

When you visit the National Shrine take some time to read some of the tablets in Memorial Hall, admire the artistry, and, of course, say a prayer. While space is no longer available on the walls, perpetual prayer enrollments can still be obtained.

Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. May the souls of the faithful departed rest in peace. Amen. 🙏