

OUR LADY OF THE CATACOMBS

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The Crypt Church, dedicated to Our Lady of the Catacombs, is the heart of the National Shrine. The “original” church, it was the first part to be completed. In 1924 it was the location for the celebration of the first public Mass inside the church of the National Shrine. On that first Sunday, Easter Sunday to be exact, the Shrine was still a construction site; folding chairs stood upon an unfinished concrete floor, between support beams and joists. The “main altar” was small, handmade of wood in 1774 by Father John Carroll, the future father of the American hierarchy, for use at the family home in Maryland during a period of anti-Catholicism in the Colonies. It was first used on this land, the site of the National Shrine, as the main altar for the blessing of the land on 16 May 1920; then again at the Mass for “our soldiers and sailors, living and deceased” the day after the dedication of the Foundation Stone (23-24 Sept 1920). Its size and mobility allowed it to accompany the construction progress. The historic “Carroll altar” was the perfect solution to a temporary situation.

Throughout the history of the National Shrine timing was everything. Either by chance or by design, Shrine events have been heightened by their occurrence in the liturgical and civil calendars. Such was the case in December 1926. On the last Sunday of that year, following the 9:00 a.m. Mass, the Carroll altar was removed from the Crypt Church in preparation for the installation of a new altar. The next day, workers

from the Johnson Marble Co. of Boston began work for the installation of an altar made of delicate Algerian Onyx. The installation was completed on Friday, the last day of 1926. On New Year's Day 1927, what was then the feast of the Circumcision of Our Lord and, even then a holy day of obligation, Reverend Bernard A. McKenna celebrated a solemn high Mass on the new altar in the presence of Bishop Thomas J. Shahan, who preached the sermon. The honor of celebrating the first Mass was a kindness shown to the first director of the Shrine by its founder.

The prevailing Code of Canon Law (1917) stipulated that Mass be said on a properly consecrated altar. The consecration of an immovable altar such as this was usually done in conjunction with the dedication of the church. It would be another 32 years however, before construction of the National Shrine would be completed and the National Shrine dedicated.

So how was it that Mass could be celebrated on this new altar?



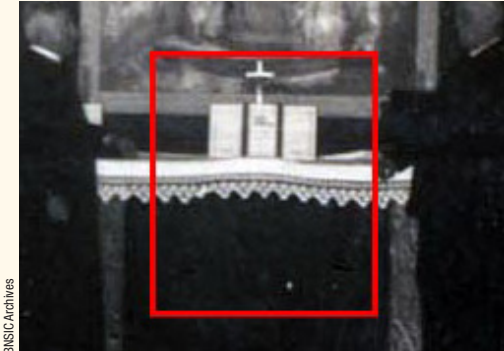
From 20 April 1924 to 17 October 1959 canonical “portable altars” or also known as “altar stones” were used in the Crypt Church. Their size was approximately that of a standard book, enough to sustain a chalice and paten, though some were larger. They carried the usual

Portable altar or stone.



1924, Carroll Altar.

five crosses found on the *mensa* or table of a permanent altar and the *sepulcher*, the opening which contained the first class relics of two martyrs, a practice that was common to altars of that period. In effect, the portable altar was a “mini mensa” or smaller version of the main altar. Like a permanent main altar, it required a document or attestation of consecration, which was often affixed to the back of the stone. Unlike the main altar, the portable altar did not have the title of a saint. These portable stones were placed on the mensa of each altar in the Crypt Church including the main altar. They are visible as “bumps” in vintage photographs of the Crypt Church. One such “bump” is visible in a 1925 photo of the temporary altar in the center chapel of the east apse shown here.



1925, Altar of the East Apse.

In 1959 prior to the solemn dedication of the National Shrine, Archbishop Patrick A. O’Boyle and Auxiliary Bishop Philip Hannan consecrated all sixteen permanent altars in the Crypt Church and the altar in the Lourdes Chapel. This was done in one day. The “portable altars” were removed and later archived.

Although the installation of the permanent main altar was completed in 1926, the altar itself was not finished. Fourteen niches of gold mosaic capped with a scallop design, the symbol of pilgrims and pilgrimage, awaited hand-carved onyx statues of Jesus, the 12 Apostles, and Saint Paul.



Altar without statues.

The statues were placed in November 1927, in time for Thanksgiving and for the donation of the funds raised by the International Federation of Catholic Alumnae (IFCA). The altar in honor of Our Lady of the Catacombs, a title that is the same as that of the Crypt Church, was the gift of the “Marys of America.” Consequently, the altar has often been known informally as the “Mary Memorial Altar.”

As early as 1915/6, the IFCA suggested an appeal to their membership for a “Mary Memorial.” Every member whose name was Mary or who held even the remotest kinship with the name, or whose mother’s name was Mary—this was “to get the men”—was invited to become a shareholder in the Mary Memorial. The appeal read in part: “Scarcely a family but holds the name sacred because of some dear one who bore it. ... Everyone who can claim ... kinship with that name ... is hereby appealed to in the most earnest manner.” The IFCA followed this appeal with another, a concerted request to parish schools to enroll “the Sisters ... the most illustrious Marys,” noting that “all religious take this beautiful name” and that “no Sister should be forgotten.” The actual period during which the IFCA actively collected for the altar was 1919 to 1928.



1928 Dedication of Altar.

The fourteen figures on the completed altar, starting on the left-front and proceeding clockwise, are as follows: John, Peter, Jesus, Paul, and Andrew; Matthew and Bartholomew (Nathaniel); Matthias (replaced Judas), James (the great or older), Thaddeus (Jude), Thomas, and Simon (the Zealot or Canaanite); Philip and James (the less or younger). It is speculated



Crypt Church altar frontal.

that Thomas Johnson, “the marble king of Boston” and president of Johnson Marble Co., may have done some of the carving himself.

BNSC Archives



Thomas J. A. Johnson, 1934.

Thomas J. A. Johnson was an astute businessman and civic leader who operated a private bank in the North End of Boston (1900), served in the administration of Michael Curley, the Mayor of Boston (1930); and was honored by King Emmanuel of Italy for his assistance to Italian immigrants (1931). He was

a gentleman known for his wit, knowledge of construction, and “courageous disregard for difficulties.” His genial and frequent presence at the construction of the National Shrine was welcomed, particularly by McKenna and Shahan, who valued his personal friendship.

His association with the National Shrine was more than a series of marble contracts. A sincere Catholic, Johnson held an “ardent belief in the genuine purpose of the Shrine.” To that end, Johnson used his social and political leverage in Boston to help fund the National Shrine by hosting galas and musicales at his residences and trimming marble costs whenever possible.

Upon completion of the altar, Johnson made a personal and private donation, a gift of beauty and nobility that would enhance the new altar. Knowing his way around the artists of the time, Johnson arranged for a bronze crucifix and six large candlesticks to be designed in Paris. The name of the artist remains unknown. These beautiful pieces arrived early in June 1929 and have been in continuous use in the Crypt Church since that time.

BNSC Archives



ca. 1930 Main Altar Crypt Church.

The Romanesque

The story of the main altar of the Crypt Church is more than marble, “portable altars,” and the “Marys of America.” It finds its roots in the studies of a young priest-professor and a worldwide movement that lasted more than a century.

Long before Vatican II, there was an effort afoot

to enrich the understanding, appreciation, and experience of worship: a liturgical movement that ended up spanning more than a century and culminating with Vatican II (1830-1969). The movement included groundbreaking research into the various periods of early Christianity. Abbé Louis Marie Duchesne (1843-1922), the most influential French Catholic historian, and a disciple of Giovanni Battista De Rossi (1822-94), the father of Christian Archaeology, contributed significant historical research on early liturgical documents. *Christian Worship, Its Origin and Evolution* (*Origines du culte chrétien: etude sur la liturgie* ... 1889, English 1903) is a seminal work that remains essential reading in the study of liturgy.

Photo: Public Domain



Abbé Louis Duchesne, ca. 1922.

As a young scholar, Shahan engaged in a study regimen with the finest Church historians of Europe. He too, was a disciple of De Rossi. In 1890, after a year of medieval and German language studies at the University of Berlin, Shahan went to the New Sorbonne in Paris to study with Abbé Duchesne.

Although preferring the style of the charismatic De Rossi, Shahan benefited from the erudition of Duchesne. During his first year as a professor of Church History and Patrology at Catholic University, the influence of both De Rossi and Duchesne was evident. His inaugural lecture, “The Blessed Virgin in the Caracombs” (1891), reflected his thinking and his spirituality. Within a year, the lecture was expanded into a book. In time, it became the source and resource for the Shahan vision of the Crypt Church.

Shahan felt that the contributions of the modern age could not compete with the Romanesque basilicas of early Christianity and the cathedrals of the middle ages. These structures were not only great houses of worship but also sanctuaries of artistic truth and sincerity. Shahan wanted to build a church like the basilicas and cathedrals of old: “a great school of the Word of God”; a national shrine where “the wondrous mercies of God” could be experienced (*The House of God*, 1905).

In 1914, Frederick V. Murphy, the founder of the department of architecture at Catholic University and future associate architect of the National Shrine, was asked by Bishop Shahan to develop a plan for the location of the “university cathedral.” At that time, the Shrine was to be built as a 14th Century French Gothic structure

designed by the architect F. Burrall Hoffman (New York). Murphy placed the Hoffman structure where the two main avenues of the university converged, where it would harmonize with current and future buildings in the Collegiate Gothic style. (Today, the location of the library.) In an interview many years later, Murphy recalled that it was at this time that the idea of a “crypt church” came into focus. The enthusiasm with which Shahan seized upon the crypt idea had a major impact on which part of the Shrine would be constructed first and, more importantly, the choice of architectural style. Shahan eschewed the restraints of a Gothic crypt with its forest of supporting columns. His vision was for “a great free open space unbroken by columns” (28 July 1910) with a free standing altar at its center. Shahan remembered well the Romanesque churches of Italy and their magnificent free standing altars. Such churches and altars were still in use and their history was well documented in illuminated medieval Italian Missals and manuscripts.



Morgan Library & Museum

14th Century Italian Missal.

When the story of the undertaking of this new church hit the wires, the National Shrine was described as a “noble Romanesque” structure with a crypt church finished in “early Romanesque style, making it a unique ecclesiastical creation in our country” and assuring the public that it would be the first time in this country that “all the peculiarities of [the Romanesque] style” would be recreated successfully (17 Dec 1919). This included a

grand, freestanding double altar. A “double” altar is one on which Mass can be celebrated on either side; both sides are “consecrated.”

The main altar of a church was to be the “center,” the focal point toward which everything converged. It was the *raison d’être* of the building. In 1931, the first issue of *Liturgical Arts*, the publication of the liturgical movement in the United States, listed the requirements of a “proper altar.” It was to be freestanding, made of fine materials, separated from its backdrop, and was not to be used as a stand for a statue, a monstrance, or a crucifix. It was to have 6 or 7 “well-designed” candlesticks, and it was to have a “baldachino” or canopy. With the exception of the baldachino, the Crypt Church of Thomas Shahan met all the requirements. While there was discussion and even drawings for a baldachino over the main altar in the Crypt Church, it was determined to be impractical, an obstruction of the Pewabic medallion, *God the Holy Spirit*, that adorns the space directly above the main altar.

The Crypt Church dedicated to Our Lady of the Catacombs was completed by the end of 1929. As intended ten years earlier, this “noble Romanesque” church is unique among such “ecclesiastical creations” in the United States, perhaps even in the world. Church pews were not part of the ancient style and were added in the 1960s. The grand open space of which Shahan had written so passionately came to be through the architectural and engineering efforts of Maginnis and Walsh, the Guastavino Co., and Thomas Johnson. The main altar, the gift to Bishop Shahan from the “Marys of America,” is drawn from the writings and theology of the first three centuries of the Church. It is the table of the Eucharist, the essence of our faith. It is from this church, this altar that the Basilica of the National Shrine has grown. 🌿



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