

The Basilica of St. Mary Major

The eternal city has four main basilicas known as the patriarchal churches: St. John Lateran represents Rome, the see of Peter; St. Paul Outside the Walls, the see of Alexandria (presided over by Mark); St. Peter's, the see of Constantinople; and St. Mary's, the see of Antioch, where Mary is supposed to have spent most of her later life.

The largest Marian church in Rome stems from the mid-fourth century. It was rebuilt by Pope Sixtus III shortly after the Council of Ephesus affirmed Mary's title as Mother of God in AD 431. For nearly sixteen centuries, St. Mary Major has held the position as a Marian shrine par excellence. It is largest church in the world honoring God through Mary. Pilgrims all over the world visit the basilica to see its treasures.

According to tradition, a Roman Patrician Giovanni and his wife were childless and prayed to the Blessed Virgin Mary that if she gave them a child, they would dedicate their wealth. They had a vision where the Blessed Mother wished to have a church built in her honor on the Esquiline Hill and as a sign, she would give snow to outline the layout of the Church – in August!

On August 5, 352 AD, snow fell on the Esquiline Hill in Rome in the middle of a heat wave. The people staked off the outline of the future basilica before the snow could melt. To commemorate the event, the faithful shower white rose petals from the basilica's dome every August 5 during Mass. One of the Blessed Virgin Mary's oldest titles is Our Lady of the Snows.

Walking into St. Mary Major, one sees three naves divided by colonnades in the style of Constantine's era. Truly remarkable mosaics from the fifth-century line the walls. The ceiling is a masterpiece of the Renaissance.

Additionally, there is a relic of the manger from Bethlehem in which baby Jesus was laid. It is venerated under the High Altar of the Basilica. The crib helped give the basilica the nickname, "Bethlehem of the West." Facing the magnificent relic, there is a marble statue of Pope Pius IX, who proclaimed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854.

Furthermore, the basilica is home to a painting of the Blessed Mother known as the *Salus Populi Romani* (the Salvation of the Roman People) for devotion. Tradition attributes the painting to St. Luke! The image was brought back from the Holy Land by St. Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine.

Finally, breaking a long tradition of popes being buried in the Vatican grottos, Pope Francis chose St. Mary Major as his specific resting place due to his deep devotion to the basilica's Marian icon.

~Our Lady of the Snows, pray for us!