

# THE ROMAN HOLY YEAR CHURCHES:

**First in a Series**  
By Father Robert F. McNamara

Pilgrims to the Roman Holy Year customarily make devotional visits to the four most notable churches (or basilicas) in Rome: St. Peter's, St. Paul's, St. John Lateran, and St. Mary Major. We thought it might be interesting, especially to those who plan to go to Rome this Holy Year of 1975, to know something about these memorable churches.

Let's take them in reverse order. That makes St. Mary Major the subject of the present article.

This church of St. Mary has several names. One is St. Mary of the Crib. Perhaps as early as the Fourth Century, the original church had a little chapel modeled after the stable at Bethlehem; and even today the Blessed Sacrament chapel contains a marble crib set dating from the 13th Century—the oldest "creche" in existence. The church is also called Our Lady of the Snows. This is because an old legend says that Pope Liberius, dreaming one Aug. 4, was inspired to build a shrine to Our Lady on a spot where snow covered the ground. He found the spot next day, and the snow — although Rome seldom sees snow in winter, and never in the August heat. There he erected the church. Now whether there is anything to the snow legend or not, the first

structure apparently was built by Pope Liberius, so it is sometimes referred to as the Liberian Basilica.

But the favorite name is St. Mary Major. It received this name from Pope Sixtus III, who rebuilt and enlarged it to its present basic dimensions about the year 432. He dedicated it as the Basilica of Great St. Mary, the Mother of God. In Latin, "Great (or greater) St. Mary" is "Sancta Maria Major"; in Italian it is "Santa Maria Maggiore"; in English it is "St. Mary Major".

The reason why the Pope enlarged the church is fascinating. For several years around the year 430, a heresy called Nestorianism had denied that Christ was truly a God-man: his human nature, said Nestorius, was a real human person, so Mary could not be called the Mother of God; only of Christ. Now Christians had for years called Mary the Mother of God (meaning, of course, that He whom she bore was truly a divine person). So there was a church council held to define the matter, and this ecumenical council, held at Ephesus in Asia Minor in 431, declared Mary's right to the title "Mother of God." It was to celebrate this victory that the Pope enlarged the church. Furthermore, he installed, in the arch crowning the altar, some mosaic pictures of Mary's life —

Fifth Century pictures that still glow forth today.

Furthermore, in the rich Borghese Chapel, facing the chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, there is an ancient icon of Mary and the Child commonly known as "The Salvation of the Roman People", because the Romans have often venerated it, especially in days of plague and war (including World War II).

The gold leaf on the coffered ceiling is said to have been from the gold brought back by Columbus (this was a church patronized by the kings of Spain). More important still are the memories of saints connected with the great Marian church. Many saints came to pray before the ikon: St. Gregory the Great, St. Henry II, St. Bridget of Sweden, St. Francis Borgia, SS. Philip Neri, Charles Borromeo, Stanislaus Kostka, John Berchmans. In the chapel of the Crib, St. Ignatius Loyola offered his first Mass, and St. Cajetan had a vision of the Holy Child.

I myself love St. Mary's very dearly. It was at the altar of the Crib that I offered my first Mass in 1936. This Holy Year I have been asked to lead a Rochester pilgrimage in early June. You may guess how much I long to pray once more before the Nativity altar in this magnificent basilica of Great St. Mary, the Mother of God.

## I. Basilica of St. Mary Major



Photo by Anthony J. Costello

### The Church 1975



Fr. Andrew Greeley

I can't figure the Catholic opposition to the "ethnic thing."

The rediscovery of ethnicity is one of the major cultural developments of recent years. The American Jewish Committee was deeply involved in the beginning of the "ethnic revival" and now has a major institute involved in ethnic research and practice. The Ford Foundation has made grants in the field for the last five years (as I have grateful reason to know). The government is becoming involved too, and has set up an ethnic component for the bicentennial celebration. The mass media, while often viewing the subject with distaste, have resigned themselves to its importance. (vide Kojac, Columbo, Baretta, etc.)

Younger scholars (many of them Catholic) are pouring out first-rate academic research on the subject. When "ethnicity" began publication a year ago, we were not sure that we could fill up a year's worth of issues with scholarly articles. Now we have a backlog of more than a year. Ethnicity has become respectable—almost.

Yet the official and unofficial elites of the Church ignore it. A few pages were conceded in the bicentennial discussion guide, "ethnics" were permitted to testify at the rigged Bicentennial "hearings," but only after everyone else had spoken, and they were cut off because there wasn't enough time. Catholic journals of opinion usually pay little attention to ethnicity. "America" recently renewed its editorial warning that "too much" ethnic consciousness was a bad thing.

Catholic columnists (like the respected Msgr. George Casey) are dubious, "Commonweal"

types repeatedly flail Michael Novak for his ethnic themes, Geno Baroni is conveniently ignored; Catholic colleges and universities have little in the way of ethnic courses.

How come?

A Jewish colleague suggested that the reason might have something to do with his explanation of why ethnicity dropped from the notice of American sociologists after the Second World War.

The students who flocked to a great New York university on the G. I. Bill were mostly Jewish kids from the East Side and Brooklyn. Their teachers were also Jewish but cosmopolitan and sophisticated (one even changed his name to sound as WASP as possible); they were also ashamed at the obvious "Jewishness" of their bright but unpolished students. Part of the education of this brilliant generation of American sociologists included an effort to "de-ethnicize" them. It didn't work, thank heavens, and one of those students, Nathan Glazer, would later combine forces with an improbable Irishman to write the turning-point book, "Beyond the Melting Pot."

But the attempt was serious. One of the professors (the name changer) used to go out of his way to violate dietary laws in the presence of his horrified students. He was only a few years ahead of them out the neighborhood, and he was more ashamed of his own past than he was of his students.

Could it be that the Catholic cultural elites are ashamed of the ethnics because they are ashamed of their own pasts—and maybe just a bit guilty at having deserted the neighborhood for the Big World?

#### NEW OFFICERS

Mary Jo Montello, chairperson of AYM's Maplewood Sanitarium Birthday Club (MSBC), has announced new officers. They are: Miss Kathy O'Reilly, secretary; Miss Anita Amering, treasurer.

Miss Amering, activities director for Aberdeen Nursing Home, has been named Adult Adviser of MSBC.

## News from Hornell

#### HORNELL MEETING

**Hornell** — There will be a meeting of all festival chairpersons and anyone interested in this year's upcoming festival at St. Ignatius. Volunteers are asked to meet in Loyola Hall at 7:30 p.m., April 3.

#### ARTICLE ACCEPTED

**Hornell** — Mrs. Joan Lindeman, kindergarten and remedial reading teacher at St. Ann's School, recently signed a contract with Instructor Magazine to publish her article, "One Stump - One Class Learning." The article is about the instructional use of a tree stump in primary grades and will feature pictures of two of her current kindergarten pupils.

#### MARRIAGE ENCOUNTER

**Hornell** — Married couples who are interested in an informational meeting concerning Marriage Encounter are invited by Tom and Mary Secondo to call 324-1986 for the time and place of the April 8 meeting.

#### DONATION

**Bath** — Precious Blood Council, Knights of Columbus of Bath recently presented the pediatrics section of Ira Davenport Memorial Hospital with a check for \$325 to provide equipment which included a wheel chair, walker and blood pressure unit. The gift was made in conjunction with a statewide K of C program for handicapped children. Present were John Gaydos, chairman, charitable and benevolent committee; and Matt Yaninas, past grand knight.

#### PRAYER DAY

**Hammondsport** — "Become Perfectly One" was the theme proclaimed at the annual World Day of Prayer service held Mar. 7 at St. Gabriel's. Taking part in the services were men and women from the four village churches with Mrs. William Schirmic of St.

Gabriel's, leader. Other participants included Mrs. George Wells of the First Methodist Church; Dean S. Hereford of the First Presbyterian Church; Mrs. William Shield and Mrs. George Remyly of St. James Episcopal; Miss Carole Bearer; and Mrs. J. A. Spencer of St. Gabriel's.

The unique feature of this year's celebration was that the congregation took an active part in the service several times. At one time, the leader admonished the group to "stand and face the east and make an act of contrition." Then followed similar

instructions for the west, north and south. The words used were: "WE have failed to love your people... as you love them. Have mercy upon us, O Lord." At another time, under the part of the program listed as "God Calls Us to be One," the leader asked all to join hands as the Scripture was read by Miss Bearer. At the end of the program, all the people on the right side read from the words of Christ, followed by all the people on the left side, responding.

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