

Pilgrimage to the Patriarchal Basilica of St Mary Major

First and Head of all Marian Churches in the World

Celebration in Honour of the Immaculate Heart of Mary



The rain returned to Rome on Thursday morning as the group left Casa La Salle for the pilgrimage to the Basilica of St Mary Major. Mass was scheduled for 8am in the Chapel of Our Lady of the Snows (or Borghese Chapel), where the ancient image of *Maria Salus Populi Romani* (Our Lady Help/Health of the Roman People) is venerated. The Basilica is one of the first churches ever built in honour of Our Lady

and holds the dignity of being first in importance in the world while being one of the four Papal Basilicas in Rome. Built in 360 following the proclamation of the doctrine of Mary as Mother of God in 431, the story of the church's building is interesting.

The reigning pope, Pope Liberius, desired to build a major church in honour of Mary in the city of Rome, and the night of the 4th–5th August 352 he was given the sign to proceed. That night a miraculous snowfall took place and on the Esquiline Hill, where the Basilica now stands, the snow formed the outline of a church. In response to what he saw as a divine command, the pope commissioned the building of the church according to the outline. Each year on the feast of Our Lady of the Snows on the 5th August (in the Universal Calendar known as the feast of the Dedication of St Mary Major) white flowers are showered down on the basilica from the roof in memory of the miracle.



Reliquary containing the Manger of Bethlehem

Today the Basilica is a vibrant center of devotion to Our Lady and possesses a number of major relics. In the confessio chapel beneath the High Altar, boards believed to be from the Bethlehem manger are preserved in a gold reliquary. The incorrupt body of Pope St Pius V lies in the basilica's own Sistine Chapel, and in a crypt chapel not far from St Pius V's tomb, the Nativity Chapel, build by some stone from the grotto of the Nativity in Bethlehem, marks the spot where the Infant Jesus appeared to St Cajetan; St Ignatius of Loyola also offered Mass on the altar of this chapel a number of times. The



coffered ceiling of the basilica is another gem, gilded in gold, the work of Giuliano da Sangallo, it was a gift of Pope Alexander VI from gold given to him by Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain. Numerous mosaics adorn the walls with paintings and statues from many of the great Italian masters, including a marble crib by the celebrated Arnolfo di Cambio. Among those buried in the basilica is the great sculptor and architect Gian Lorenzo Bernini.



Of all the beautiful objects in the basilica the most loved is the image of *Salus Populi Romani*, renowned as a miraculous image, for the Romans in particular it symbolizes the love of the Mother of God for her people and her willingness to help them: she is their Help, or more precisely, their Health. The image is a very ancient icon which, according to tradition, was painted by St Luke on a table top which had been in the possession of Our Lady made by Jesus himself when he was a carpenter. While there are many images said to be painted by St Luke and there is little evidence to prove that they are: initial examinations of the painting concluded that it was 13th century in style. However recent scientific tests on the *Salus Populi Romani* reveal there are layers beneath and the 13th century image is in fact the repainting of an older image. Among these layers is a restoration which took place in the 1100's, and there is also evidence of work carried out in the eighth century. One art historian said it could be confidently dated back to between the fifth and eighth centuries. Perhaps further research could date it earlier. Of all the supposed Lucan images, the *Salus Populi Romani* may have a better claim than any of the others. During the Marian Year of 1954 Pope Pius XII solemnly crowned the image in a ceremony in the Basilica.

The Fraternity pilgrimage to the basilica was organized as a means of honouring the Immaculate Heart of Mary, the primary patron of the association. Bishop Smith was chief celebrant of the Mass of the Immaculate Heart, joined by Fr Vincent Twomey and Fr John. Fr John gave the homily in which he reflected on Mary, who has welcomed them into her home, first as Mother to holds all her children in her Immaculate Heart, a refuge for us, and secondly as missionary who goes into the world proclaiming Christ. In both of these aspects of Mary and her vocation the members of the Fraternity can learn many lessons – to trust her, to become like her in our love for our neighbour and in a new determination to proclaim Christ in and to the world.



The Fraternity group after Mass in St Mary Major's



Michael and Anne Barden in the Borghese Chapel



Where to now? Colin O'Donoghue, Helen O'Reilly, Sr Paula, Sr Peter and John Walsh all discuss the options