



# Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception

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## BACKGROUNDER

### Overview of Shrine History, Significance & Current Status

The Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception is the largest Roman Catholic church in the United States and North America, and is one of the ten largest churches in the world.

It is the nation's preeminent Marian Shrine, dedicated to the patroness of the United States—the Blessed Virgin Mary, under her title of the Immaculate Conception.

The National Shrine is designated by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops as a National Sanctuary of Prayer and Pilgrimage. Though it resides in the Archdiocese of Washington, it is neither a cathedral (the seat of the local bishop/diocese) nor is it a parish church.

*“It has no parish community of its own; but rather counts every American Catholic among its numbers. No single bishop claims it as his cathedral; rather, it is the church of all the nation's bishops. Its work is not supported by a single group or organization, but is carried out through the cooperation of people throughout the country. In every way, the National Shrine is America's Catholic Church.” America's Church ©1990*

In 1913, Pope Pius X approved plans for the building of a national shrine in the United States, and made a personal contribution for its construction—the lire equivalent of \$400. The cornerstone of the National Shrine was laid in 1920. Its first Mass was held on Easter Sunday 1924. In 1926, the Crypt Church was completed. The remainder of the Crypt level was completed in 1931. The Depression and World War II halted construction of the Shrine's Great Upper Church superstructure. With the end of World War II and the prosperity of the post war years, construction resumed in the Marian Year of 1954. The Great Upper Church superstructure was completed and dedicated in 1959. Embellishment and ornamentation of the interior of the National Shrine has continued since.

The Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception is neither imitative nor duplicative of any other church in the world. Its unique architecture and art are a blending of ancient and new. Byzantine-Romanesque in style, it is constructed entirely of stone, brick, tile and mortar—without steel structural beams, framework or columns. It boasts the largest collection of contemporary ecclesiastical art in the world, including the largest mosaic of Christ

in Majesty in the world. The National Shrine is distinctly American, yet is comparable to and rivals the great sanctuaries of Europe.

Over 80 chapels and oratories have been added to the National Shrine, dedicated by various ethnic groups and religious communities. From the beginning, the Shrine was envisioned as a gift from all American Catholics to represent the devotion to Mary of many kinds of peoples, cultures, traditions and ethnic backgrounds. The various chapels and oratories are filial in that they relate to the mother shrine in the country of origin or the particular religious community to which they are affiliated. Offering the same graces and indulgences, individuals and groups can make a pilgrimage to many of the great Marian Shrines of the world at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception.

Among its many chapels and oratories are Our Lady of Guadalupe, Our Lady of Lourdes, Mary, Queen of Ireland, Our Lady of Czestochowa (Poland), Our Lady of China, Our Mother of Africa, Our Lady of LaVang (Vietnam), Our Lady of Vailankanni (India), Our Lady of Altötting (Bavaria/Germany), and many, many more.

On October 7, 1979, Pope John Paul II was the first-ever reigning Pope to visit the National Shrine. In the Great Upper Church, he proclaimed:

*“This Shrine speaks to us with the voice of all America, with the voice of all the sons and daughters of America, who have come here from the various countries of the Old World. When they came, they brought with them in their hearts the same love for the Mother of God that was characteristic of their ancestors and of themselves in their native lands. These people, speaking different languages, coming from different backgrounds of history and traditions in their own countries, came together around the heart of a Mother they all had in common. While their faith in Christ made all of them aware of being one People of God, this awareness became all the more vivid through the presence of the Mother in the work of Christ and the Church.”*

In 1990, Pope John Paul II elevated the National Shrine to the status of a minor basilica, bestowing this papal honor for its historical importance, dignity and significance as a center of worship and devotion and as an expression of a special union with the Holy Father.

On April 16, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI visited the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception on the first full day of his Apostolic Journey to the United States. He presided over Solemn Vespers, addressed the Bishops of the United States, and bestowed the Golden Rose upon the Basilica, a rare honor granted to a church or shrine of special significance.

Pope Francis became the third pope to visit the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. He did so on September 23, 2015, during his Apostolic Visit to the United States. He was the first pope to celebrate Mass at the Basilica. During the Mass, he presided over the first canonization to take place on American soil, that of Saint Junípero Serra.

Open 365 days a year, the Basilica of the National Shrine receives an estimated one million visitors annually. Six Masses or more are celebrated daily, and Confessions are heard five hours daily. The Basilica is host to diocesan, ethnic, and group pilgrimages bringing pilgrims in from around the country and around the world. The National Shrine also features daily guided tours and operates a Catholic Gift Shop, a Catholic Book Store, and a cafeteria to accommodate its visitors.

Built by American Catholics, the National Shrine depends solely on individual contributions to continue its mission as it states:

*The Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, a Catholic church dedicated to the patroness of our nation, is a place of worship, pilgrimage, evangelization and reconciliation. It offers visitors the occasion for a deepening in conversion, a step forward in the journey to God, with Mary as the model for that journey. This monumental church, raised by Catholics of the United States because of their devotion to Mary the Mother of God, gives visibility to their faith and Catholic heritage. Mary's Shrine invites people from across the country and beyond into the saving moment of faith, hope and charity, so that they may be reconciled and transformed into living symbols of Christ's presence in the world. It is here that the faithful gather to worship God, give honor to Mary, and are sent to spread God's Word wherever they go.*

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FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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