

ST. MARY MAJOR: A NEW “MUST” FOR PILGRIMS IN 2025

■ BY LUCY GORDAN



Left, Giovanni Paolo Panini’s “Interior of S. Maria Maggiore (St. Mary Major) in Rome,” ca. 1754

Below, the *Salus Populi Romani*, the miraculous image of the Virgin and Child in St. Mary Major Basilica in Rome. The 46 x 31 inch wooden panel’s image is believed to have been painted by St. Luke the Evangelist.

The Basilica of St. Mary Major was consecrated on August 5, 434, soon after the Second Council of Ephesus in 431, when an assembly of bishops affirmed the doctrine that Mary was the Mother of God. Thus, the Basilica is the first Marian sanctuary in the western world.

Located at the summit of the Esquiline Hill, the tallest (126 feet above sea level) of Rome’s seven hills, and with the tallest (246 feet) of Rome’s *campanili* (belltowers), the Basilica houses the world’s most important Marian icon, the *Salus Populi Romani*, a cedar panel measuring 46 x 31 inches believed to have been painted by Saint Luke the Evangelist.

Under the high altar is a crystal and silver reliquary containing part of baby Jesus’s manger — five pieces of sycamore wood bound together by bits of iron and recently scientifically dated to the time of Jesus’s birth.

The Basilica came to be known as the “Church of the Nativity” and “Bethlehem of the West”; for centuries, Popes have traditionally cele-

brated Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve there.

In 2001, Pope John Paul II inaugurated the Liberian Historical Museum, named after Pope Liberius (r. 352-366) which still houses the archeological excavation site under the Basilica and the eight rooms of the Historical Treasury.

On display in the latter are the most important collection of liturgical paraments from the 16th and 17th centuries in Rome, additional relics, chalices, *ostensoria*, paintings, prints and musical scores. The entrance to both is to the right side of the Basilica’s main porch.

To the left side is the Great Staircase of the Canons’ Palace of Benedict IV (r. 1740-1758). It leads to three rooms on the first floor. This new wing of the Liberian Historical Museum was inaugurated on December 11, 2024 by Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican’s Secretary of State, to celebrate the 2025 Jubilee.

At the base of the staircase is the bronze bell “La Sperduta” which dates to the pontificate of Nicholas IV (1288-1292).



Donated by the Roman senator Pandolfo Savelli in honor of the Virgin Mary, Guidotto and Andreotto Pisano recast an older bell from the time of Pope Callistus II (r. 1119-1124). According to legend, “La Sperduta” tolled every night at 2:00 AM to help lost pilgrims orient themselves in the dark. It continued to toll until 1884, when it was dismantled and housed until last December in the Vatican.

The Great Staircase opens onto the Loggia of the Blessings, added by Pope Benedict XIV in 1743 and never opened to the public until last December.

On its wall, until then the Basilica’s façade, is a full-length mosaic created by Filippo Rusuti around 1295, a few years before the first Jubilee.

Its upper register depicts Christ Pantocrator flanked on both sides by several saints including St. Peter, his brother St. Andrew, St. John the Baptist, St. James the patron saint of pilgrims, and St. Paul.

Sitting on a scarlet cushion, on a richly decorated throne, Christ holds an open book, which displays the text: EGO SUM LUX MUNDI QUI (“I am the light of the world who,” a quotation from the Gospel of St. John, 8:12).

Its lower register illustrates in four scenes the ancient legend relating to the foundation of St. Mary Major in 352 during the pontificate of Pope Liberius.

In the first scene a Roman patrician named John and his wife, who were childless, pray to the Virgin, promising to dispose their property in her honor if she will help them to have a child.

The second scene shows the Virgin Mary appearing to them in a dream and indicating where they should build a church in her honor.

In the third scene the couple is recounting their dream to Pope Liberius, who tells them that he had the same dream: to build a church in the Virgin’s honor where, during the night before (August 4th), there’d been a snowfall-obviously a miraculous event during the heat of summer.

The last scene shows the couple as well as Pope Liberius, who is leading a procession of priests and arriving at the site of the snowfall. This is the first depiction of snow in art and the reason why the Basilica was originally called “St. Mary Liberiana” and “St. Mary of the Snow”. (In remembrance of this miracle, every August 5th it “snows” white flower

petals from the ceiling above the altar in the Basilica’s Pauline Chapel, built by Pope Paul V (r. 1605-21)).

The loggia leads into the Hall of the Popes, also previously not visitable. It’s a large room adorned with many portraits of cardinals and popes through the ages as well as of one woman, Margaret of Austria, the Queen of Spain (1584-1611) hung between portraits of her husband King Philip III and of their son King Philip IV.

Their portraits are here because the Spanish Crown holds the title of “Honorable Canon” or the special protectors of St. Mary Major, although the present King of Spain hasn’t taken this title officially.

From here one door opens onto a landing of Bernini’s Staircase, a masterpiece of Baroque architecture made of travertine, now under restoration, but soon to reopen.

Originally constructed to provide access between the crypt and the papal apartments, it’s a metaphor for the human spiritual journey- its spirals, a delicate play of light and shadow, are a winding path leading from darkness to light or from earth to heaven.

Another door, on the opposite side of the Hall, leads into the three new rooms of the Liberian Historical Museum, previously the apartment for the Basilica’s canons.

On display in the first room, called “The Bethlehem of The West,” is the first crèche in the history of art. Commissioned by Pope Nicholas IV, the first Franciscan

to become Pope (r. 1288-92), its marble figures were sculpted by the Tuscan sculptor Arnolfo da Cambio.

Thanks to its innovative showcase this medieval masterpiece can now be admired up close and from every perspective.

In a nearby wall case is the so-called “Chasuble of St. Jerome”, a very rare example of a medieval liturgical vestment previously displayed in the Treasury.

The remains of this Doctor of the Church, who chose to live in Bethlehem at the original site of the Holy Crib, were moved around 1285 from Bethlehem to “Bethlehem of the West.”

The ceiling fresco of the second room dedicated to “Saint Mary of the Snow” was painted by Bolognese Baldassare Croce in 1610. It depicts the Miracle of the Snow, as does an altarpiece by the Florentine painter Jacopo Zucchi in 1580,



Crystal and silver reliquary containing parts of Baby Jesus’ manger; made of sycamore wood and bits of iron, the manger has been scientifically dated to the time of His birth



The first sculpted crèche scene in the history of art, these marble figures were commissioned by Nicholas IV, the first Franciscan Pope

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which last December was appropriately returned to the Basilica from the Vatican Museums after more than two hundred and seventy years.

Other important paintings here are “The Road to Calvary” by Giovanni Antonio Bazzi, known as “*Il Sodoma*,” and Domenico Beccafumi’s “Madonna and Child and Saints.”

The ceiling fresco in the third room depicts “The Procession Organized by Gregory the Great Holding the *Salus Populi Romani*.”

During the procession from St. Mary Major to St. Peter’s to pray for an end of the plague, the Pope had a vision of St. Michael the Archangel floating above Castel Sant’Angelo. The Archangel was putting his flaming sword back into its sheath. Pope Gregory (r. 590-604) interpreted this gesture as an answer to his prayers and the plague of 591 ended.

A second altarpiece, of this scene and also by Jacopo Zucchi, and returned here from the Vatican Museums in December, hangs in the second room.

The highlight of the third room named for the *Salus Populi Romani* is the original bejeweled, gold-plated silver frame of the cedarwood icon. Also on display is a gold arm-and-hand reliquary holding a pen, which contains relics of St. Luke.

In the same display case are many *ex-voto* offerings of magnificent jewels donated to the icon for her intercession by several Popes; for example, Pope Gregory XVI (r. 1831-1846) for saving the Romans from a cholera epidemic; in 1954 by Pius XII (r. 1939-58) for protecting most of Rome from bombardments and for ending World War II; and, most recently, in 2023, the “golden rose” ornament donated by Pope Francis.

St. Mary Major is definitely one of Pope Francis’ favorite churches in Rome. Soon after his election in 2013, he started visiting the Basilica to pray before the *Salus Populi Romani* icon asking for protection before and after every one of his apostolic journeys.

In March 2020, as COVID-19 took hold in Italy, like Gregory the Great, if in the opposite direction, Francis left the Vatican to pilgrimage on foot to St. Mary Major; he prayed in front of the Marian icon for an end of the pandemic.

His 2023 announcement that he wishes to be buried here — not in St. Peter’s — didn’t come as much of a surprise. He will join seven of his predecessors who are likewise buried in St. Mary Major’s: Honorius III (r. 1216-27), Nicholas IV (r. 1288-92), St. Pius V (r. 1566-72), Sixtus V (r. 1585-90), Clement VIII (r. 1592-1605), Paul V (r. 1605-21), and Clement IX (r. 1667-69). ○