

Turning to Our Lady of the Snows

In addition to the possibility for local celebrations that commemorate the dedication of a diocesan cathedral or a parish church, the universal Church liturgically celebrates the dedication of four Roman basilicas: St. John Lateran (Nov. 9), those dedicated to Sts. Peter and Paul (Nov. 18) and St. Mary Major (Aug. 5).

Dedications of churches are important in the life of faith. The ritual for dedicating churches is quite similar to a baptism – in both, blessed water and sacred chrism are used. The reality is that these buildings represent Christ and ourselves, who as members of his body build up the Church as “living stones” (1 Pt 2:5). We are temples of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 6:19) and should live dedicated to the Lord’s service as do these sacred structures.

The importance of the four Roman basilica churches whose dedications are celebrated throughout the world each year relates to the roles they fulfill. St. John Lateran basilica is the pope’s cathedral, the mother church of the universal Church, and something like the parish church of every Catholic throughout the world. The basilicas of Sts. Peter and Paul recall the foundational role and witness of the martyrs who established the Church at the center of the world. And the basilica of St. Mary Major is the largest church dedicated to Mary in Rome and one of the most ancient shrines honoring the Mother of God.

St. Mary Major basilica contains a variety of ancient mosaics that date back to the fifth century. It is also home to a variety of important relics, especially a wooden fragment from the crib from Christ’s nativity. Also there rest the remains of several popes and the tomb of St. Jerome, fourth-century

scholar and Doctor of the Church who translated Scripture into Latin from the original Hebrew and Greek.

St. Mary Major's history dates back to the fourth century, when a church was constructed on its present site under the direction of Pope Liberius, and for his connection to its erection the church is sometimes called the Liberian Basilica. While the original church lasted only about 100 years, work commenced on the current edifice in the fifth century. Today, much of it remains intact – although it has been amended and enlarged at several junctures.

Our Lady of the Snows Legend

The optional memorial of the Dedication of St. Mary Major, celebrated on Aug. 5, recalls the importance of Mary in the life of the Church. But it also calls to mind the Marian title of Our Lady of the Snows. In fact, Aug. 5 for centuries was known as a feast dedicated to Mary under that title.



The Miracle of the Snow by Masolino da Panicale was originally part of the altar commemorating the foundation of the St. Mary Major basilica in the center of Rome. Public domain

According to a legend that prevailed for centuries, Pope Liberius was involved in the church's initial construction because of a rich couple who were without heirs and wanted to give their fortune to honor the Blessed Virgin Mary. After asking in prayer in what way they could honor her, the legend

states that Mary appeared to them in a vision. Afterward, on Rome's Esquiline Hill, seemingly in answer to their request, snow fell from the sky – miraculously so, since snowfall on a Roman August day would be extremely abnormal. As a result, the couple determined a church must be built to honor the Blessed Virgin on the site where the miraculous flurries fell.

The legend has not necessarily stood the test of time. In fact, no mention is made in regard to any supernatural origin behind St. Mary Major's construction before the year 1000.

Whether the legend is true or not, devotion to Mary under the title Our Lady of the Snows has endured. Several basilicas, shrines and churches are named in honor of this Marian title throughout the world. The title's popularity reiterates Mary's status as a beacon of hope for Christians who so many times turn to her in times of trial, perhaps when it seems that a miracle is needed, no less when it looks like all hope is lost. In other words, through Mary's mediation, recourse to God's mercy is sought when some way needs to be made out of what looks like no way – embodied in the legend of a miraculous snowfall at the pinnacle of Roman summer.

National Shrine

Devotion to Mary under the title of Our Lady of the Snows is primarily fostered in the United States in Belleville, Illinois – just across the Mississippi River from St. Louis – at the National Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows under the direction of the congregation of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

The construction of this shrine seems fitting and appropriate to have been started and operated by missionaries since they understand, perhaps more than anyone, the importance and need to implore Mary's aid amid often difficult and seemingly impossible circumstances.

The Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate congregation was founded by French bishop St. Eugene De Mazenod in 1816. The founder placed his new missionary order under Mary's maternal protection and care. The Oblates came to North America not long after their founding, and they are known for their work in remote locations throughout the continent.

The Our Lady of Snows shrine in Belleville traces its origins back to the 1940s, inspired by German Oblate Father Paul Schulte. Known as "The Flying Priest," Father Schulte was a pilot and had the distinction of being the first priest to celebrate Mass while airborne – in the Zeppelin airship Hindenburg just a year before its explosion.

Father Schulte put his talent as a pilot to work delivering medical supplies to Oblate missions, typically near the Arctic Circle. He once risked death himself while carrying out a lifesaving medical mission to rescue a brother Oblate priest who was on the brink of death. Flying through extreme weather, Father Schulte credited the success of his heroic ministry to Our Lady of the Snows – to whom he already had devotion and reportedly "when he was afraid of an imminent crash during a snowstorm, he promised Our Lady to spread her devotion under that title if she came to his aid and saved him in this emergency."

He did just that after his transfer to the Oblate's now-closed St. Henry Preparatory Seminary in Belleville, alma mater of Chicago's late Cardinal Francis E. George, who was also with the Oblates. Father Schulte was sent there during World War II because he was German and some suspected him of being a Nazi spy. He was ordered not to travel and was kept under FBI surveillance. This gave him the opportunity to deliver on his promise to Mary.

In Belleville, Father Schulte commissioned an image of Our Lady of the Snows to be painted, which depicts Mary and the child Jesus surrounded by the aura of the Northern Lights

under whom is found a missionary and an airplane making a sick call to an Inuit mission. It remains at the shrine in Belleville today. A perpetual novena was established in 1943 in honor of Our Lady of the Snows, and as devotion to her grew, the Oblates inaugurated construction of a shrine to honor her in 1958.

Turning to Mary

The shrine, one of the largest outdoor shrines in the United States, is a place of pilgrimage, attracting around 350,000 visitors annually. As with all its counterparts, the shrine is primarily a place of prayer, conversion and healing – particularly through encounters with Mary’s son in the sacraments.

Those who honor Mary under the title of Our Lady of the Snows, or any other title, are asking Mary to beg God to make a way out of no way, to bring his grace into their lives no matter the circumstances, and to find peace and happiness in the will of God.

Those who honor Mary seek, and hopefully find, what she had in her heart some 2,000 years ago when she said “yes” to the Lord’s plan as a young peasant girl. What those who pray to Mary long for and receive is the hope that inspires the daring, intrepid missionaries who spread the Gospel with confidence that she will intercede for them.

Through Mary’s “yes” to the Lord, she made what seemed like a way out of no way – her “yes” brought salvation to a world awaiting it in darkness. Ultimately, those who turn to Mary are turning to her Son – as has been clear since the earliest days of Marian

devotion. Mary makes her Son present to the world. And she teaches us to glorify him with our thoughts, words and deeds as members of his mystical body, the Church.

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Our Lady of the Snows shrine in the United States

The shrine of Our Lady of the Snows is located in Belleville, Illinois, across the Mississippi River from St. Louis. The shrine offers a hotel, restaurant, gift shop, conference center, playground and 200 acres of prayerful trails for meditation. The community invites pilgrims to join them in spiritual renewal to deeply trust in the Blessed Mother's powerful intercession, including a yearly novena that runs July 28-Aug. 5.

To learn more about Our Lady of the Snows shrine in Illinois, visit snows.org.