

Catholic Review Column: Basilica is a Source of Great Pride

Today marks the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the patroness of our beloved Basilica in Baltimore. I am continually surprised that the Basilica remains somewhat of a “hidden gem” in Maryland. After all, as the first Catholic cathedral erected in the United States, the Basilica is considered the “Mother Church” for American Catholics, a destination for religious pilgrims, and a magnificent specimen to be admired and studied by lovers of architecture, history, and even art. It’s been designated a National Shrine and a Historic Landmark. Cardinal William H. Keeler recalls Pope John Paul II, who visited the Basilica in 1995, telling him our Basilica is recognized as a worldwide symbol of religious freedom.

Yet in spite of its extraordinary role in the history of the Church in the United States, many in our Archdiocese have never had the opportunity to visit the Basilica or are unaware of its significance.

The Basilica, at 200, received a new lease on life in 2006 when it reopened following a major and complete restoration to its original 1806 design. Thanks to the vision of Cardinal Keeler and the generosity of donors from across the globe, the Basilica was reborn, seen for the first time by countless people, including those who had been there before but who had never seen it as Archbishop John Carroll and his architect, Benjamin Henry Latrobe, had intended it. Designed around the concept of mysterious light, accentuated by 24 “hidden” skylights in the great dome which allows broad bands of light to stream into the sanctuary from an unseen source, the Basilica is unmistakably American in its design. In fact, it was President Thomas Jefferson who suggested the addition of the skylights to Latrobe’s design. And it was Latrobe who designed the U.S. Capitol. The Basilica is an American Cathedral for the American Church.

The reopening ushered in a period of renewed interest in the Basilica as hundreds of thousands of people have since come there to worship, to pray, and to learn. Tours are offered three times a day and Masses are celebrated twice daily on weekdays,

and four times on the weekend (including a Saturday evening vigil Mass).

Several national and regional liturgies have been celebrated at the Basilica, including most recently the national opening Mass of the Fortnight for Freedom. We hope the nation's bishops will also hold their liturgy at the Basilica when the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops comes to Baltimore for their fall meetings in November.

The Basilica also hosts cultural events that reflect the focus of the surrounding Mount Vernon neighborhood, which includes the Peabody Institute and the Walters Art Museum.

I am privileged to celebrate Mass there often, since my home is adjacent to the Basilica. Beginning this fall, I plan to celebrate the Sunday evening Mass as often as I can, which Msgr. Art Valenzano, the indomitable Rector of the Basilica, hopes will evangelize the increasing number of young adults moving into the downtown area.

For those who have never been, I warmly invite you to come to the Basilica for Mass and/or a tour, including the intimate chapel in the undercroft, which also includes a museum with many historic items recalling the earliest days in our Church, and the crypt where many past Archbishops are buried, including John Carroll and James Gibbons. The Pope John Paul II Prayer Garden, on the grounds of the Basilica, is also a unique experience that features a large statue of the late Pope from his visit to Baltimore.

For those who have been before, I encourage you to return. The Basilica is a unique and holy place where God's presence is palpably felt, making each visit spiritually enriching.

To watch a video about the history of the Basilica or to plan your visit, go to www.baltimorebasilica.org.