

Mass for the 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time

I. Introduction

Perhaps there is no more fitting place to celebrate this last of our Masses together in Rome than right here. This is the altar of Our Lady, *Salus Populi Romani* – Health of the Roman People. The Blessed Virgin Mary is Patroness of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, of course: her Assumption into Heaven is honored at the first Cathedral in the United States, and we honor her also as Mary, Our Queen. So as we prepare to return to our Archdiocese, strengthened in faith and in love for our Holy Father and the Church of Rome, we commend ourselves to the prayers of the one who is the Mother of God, and our Mother too.

II. The Basilica of Saint Mary Major

Walking through this great Basilica, one of the first things the pilgrim notices is the beautifully detailed coffered ceiling. The gold which adorns the ceiling here is the first gold brought back from the New World by Christopher Columbus in the closing years of the 15th century.

You'll notice a "Confessio" in this Basilica as well – that is, an area below the altar, as in St. Peter's in the Vatican, that is accessible by two sets of curving stairs. Whereas in St. Peter's, the Niche of the Pallia is below the altar (and the tomb of St. Peter below that) the great relic beneath the altar in this church is unfortunately not here right now. The reliquary has been removed for restoration – so that just means we'll all have to come back to Rome another time! In any event, the relics which are usually under the altar here are three or four simple boards of wood – and those boards are said to have come from the Manger of Bethlehem, which received the Infant wrapped in swaddling clothes on the first Christmas night.

Furthermore, the main altar of this Basilica, under the baldacchino, is said to contain the relics of Saint Matthew, the Apostle and Evangelist. And in the chapel across the Basilica from us, which is also now closed for renovation, lies the body of Saint Pius V, who was Pope from 1566 to 1572, he was a Dominican, and as such he wore a white habit. When he was elected, he didn't want to stop wearing the white

habit, so that is why the Popes wear white to this day. He was also the one who, following the Council of Trent, standardized the Mass as it was celebrated everywhere until Second Vatican Council: the so-called Tridentine Mass, which we know today as the Mass in the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite.

III. Salus Populi Romani

The icon of Our Lady and the Child Jesus which you see above this altar, is the most important and venerated image of Our Lady in this City. An ancient Roman legend holds that this image was painted by Saint Luke the Evangelist, and that the wood that it is painted on was the top of a table built by Christ in the workshop of Saint Joseph. The icon is said to have been brought to Rome by Saint Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine the Great, in the 4th century.

For innumerable centuries this icon has been venerated here, and whether or not it is traceable to the holy house of Nazareth, the Blessed Lady, whose image is before us, has unfailingly come to the help of her sons and daughters who have called upon her intercession and her motherly protection.

IV. Disregarding the message that was reported

Finally, in our Gospel this morning, we hear of the Lord Jesus raising the daughter of Jairus from the dead. Before he worked this miracle, however, Jesus and Jairus were met with naysayers who didn't even want him to bother, because they assumed that nothing could be done to reverse this seemingly definitive and hopeless situation.

So perhaps the most instructive line in this passage for us today might be: "Disregarding the message that was reported, Jesus said to the synagogue official, 'Do not be afraid; just have faith.'" In other words, Jesus refused to buy into the synagogue official's sense of futility and hopelessness. He knew there was something better, something more, because he knew the power of God, which he was about to exercise.

So, my friends, whether or not the wood of this icon was ever found in the house of Nazareth (and far be it from us to definitively exclude that possibility) we can be reasonably sure that Jesus heard his Mother, who is pictured here, speak those words as he was growing up: "Do not be afraid; just have faith."

V. Conclusion

And our Blessed Mother speaks those words to us today, as in our world, in our country, and sometimes even in our own lives, darkness seems to be all around us – and sometimes seems even to be winning.

But Mary knows that her Son is the light of the world, that he is risen from the dead, and that, as St. John wrote, “The light shines on in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

And from this venerated image, Mary smiles down upon us today, as in this City made holy by the blood of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, Mary whispers to us once again the words of her divine Son:

“Do not be afraid; just have faith.”

O Blessed Virgin Mary, Salus Populi Romani, pray for us!