

National shrine in Washington to build Italian chapel

WILMINGTON, Del. – The Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington contains chapels representing many Catholic ethnic groups in the United States – with one big exception.

“Where is the Italian chapel?” Wilmington Bishop Michael A. Saltarelli has often asked.

That very omission is why he, a cardinal and three other bishops of Italian descent are leading a campaign to build an Italian chapel in honor of Our Lady of Pompeii.

Italian-Americans are “as strong as any other ethnic community,” Bishop Saltarelli said, noting that the lack of an Italian chapel at the national shrine seemed curious at first to a group of bishops including Cardinal Anthony J. Bevilacqua, retired archbishop of Philadelphia; Bishop Paul S. Loverde of Arlington, Va.; Brooklyn Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio; and New York Auxiliary Bishop Robert A. Brucato.

The bishops eventually learned that virtually all ethnic groups were asked to contribute to the basilica and some wanted their donations to build a chapel in honor of the Madonna most cherished by those of their national heritage.

“But the best they can figure is that the Italian money went to purchase the organ,” Bishop Saltarelli told *The Dialog*, newspaper of the Diocese of Wilmington.

He said the feeling has persisted that the national shrine should have an Italian chapel, but choosing whom it would honor was the challenge. “In Italy,” he said, “every town has its own Madonna.”

Pompeii is no exception. In the 1870s, Blessed Bartolo Longo had a mystical experience in Pompeii in which he is said to have heard Mary tell him to seek salvation by promulgating the rosary. He subsequently rebuilt a church to create a Marian shrine where he placed a painting of Mary giving a rosary to St. Catherine of Siena and the infant Jesus offering one to St. Dominic.

The Italian chapel in the Washington shrine, designed by the Rambusch Decorating Co., will be located in the basilica's west foyer. It will have a mosaic inspired by the painting in Pompeii and walls adorned with the basilica's first depiction of the mysteries of light, the rosary themes added by Pope John Paul II in 2002.

"Our Lady of Pompeii is really Our Lady of the Rosary," Bishop Saltarelli said.

The bishops and Cardinal Bevilacqua donated more than \$40,000 of their own money to begin the campaign to raise the \$2 million cost of the chapel; they hope the faithful of any ethnic background will also contribute. The chapel will be completed in the fall of 2008.

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Editor's Note: Contributions marked "Italian Chapel" may be sent to: Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, 400 Michigan Ave. N.E., Washington, DC 20017.