

Homily based on the readings from August 5, 2023 (Numbers 12.1-13; Matthew 14.22-36)

Today is an unusual day in the Church's calendar: the Memorial of the Dedication of the Basilica of Saint Mary Major. In other words, we are not remembering a particular saint, or an event in the life of Jesus, or even a theological principle – but a *building*. To be precise, we are celebrating one of the four major basilicas in the city of Rome – a structure that was consecrated by Pope Sixtus III in the year 434, and which is generally considered the oldest Marian shrine in the Western world.

For the sake of context, the other three major basilicas in Rome are Saint Peter's – which is undoubtedly the most famous and the most frequently visited – Saint Paul Outside the Walls, and Saint John Lateran. The Archbasilica of Saint John Lateran, which is actually the Pope's cathedral, has its own feast on November 9. The Basilicas of Saints Peter and Paul share a memorial on November 18.

In recent years, Saint Mary Major has become somewhat more prominent in the public consciousness – mainly because it was Pope Francis’s favorite church in Rome. He would visit the basilica every time he travelled, both before leaving the city and after he returned. As many of you know, he specifically requested to be buried there – the first pope in over a century *not* to be interred in the Vatican. His grave is noteworthy for its simplicity – it is marked only with a reproduction of the pectoral cross he wore as pope and with a one-word inscription: *Franciscus*.

Even though many pilgrims will certainly come to Saint Mary Major to pray at the Pope’s tomb, the most *important* object in the church is the famous icon known as *Salus Populi Romani* – the Protectress of the Roman People. Its presence was one of the main reasons Pope Francis was so particularly enamored with this basilica. The icon originally arrived in Rome in the late sixth century, and has subsequently been restored and refurbished numerous times – most recently in 2018. Over

the centuries, the icon has frequently been invoked during periods of plague and sickness. In fact, on March 27, 2020, during the height of the COVID pandemic, Pope Francis took the extraordinary step of bringing it to Saint Peter's Square to impart a special blessing to the city and the world.

As Catholics, we know that historic churches and works of art play an important part in our faith – but that their purpose is always to lead us to a deeper truth. In the case of Saint Mary Major, that *truth* is the role of the Blessed Mother in the salvation of humanity. The dedication of the basilica took place only three years after the Council of Ephesus – where the Fathers of the Church formally defined the doctrine of Mary as *Theotokos* – or Mother of God – in opposition to the heretical teachings of the Patriarch Nestorius. The ancient and massive building in the heart of Rome, which we celebrate today, is simply a testament to this eternal principle of our faith. The majesty of this structure echoes the words proclaimed by Saint Cyril of Alexandria *at* the Council of Ephesus:

Behold then the joy of the whole universe. Let the union of God and man in the Son of the Virgin Mary fill us with awe and adoration. Let us fear and worship the undivided Trinity as we sing the praise of the ever-virgin Mary, the holy temple of God, and of God himself, her Son and spotless Bridegroom. To him be glory for ever and ever.

*To him be glory for ever and ever.* That is the hymn sung by the stones of every church throughout Christendom – from the most exalted basilica to the lowliest chapel. That is the reason we come to these sacred places every day, uniting ourselves with countless generations in worshipping the Son of the Mother of God.