



In this view, the basilica's original altar is displayed in the sanctuary, which is illuminated above by a depiction of Christ's ascension. Designed by U.S. Capitol architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe, the basilica is marking the bicentennial of its founding. (CNS photos)

# 'A gift to the Church, nation'

*Restored 200-year-old Baltimore basilica reopens Nov. 4*



Women pray in front of a statue of Mary on the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington Aug. 15.

**B**ALTIMORE (CNS) - The \$32 million restoration of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary is a gift not only to the Baltimore Catholic Church and community but to the entire nation, Cardinal William H. Keeler of Baltimore said Oct. 30.

The cardinal, seated in a wheelchair as he recovered from a broken ankle, spoke about the importance of the basilica as the first Catholic cathedral in the United States and as a symbol of religious freedom in the fledgling nation at a media preview less than a week before the basilica reopened Nov. 4.

He said the reopening would fulfill "a long-held dream of sharing (the basilica) with the



Two marble cherubs decorate part of the original altar of the first cathedral in the United States.

nation" as both a beautiful place to worship and as a reminder of a time, until the American Revolution, when Catholics were "persecuted as a devout minority."

When the cornerstone was laid for the new church in 1806, it represented "the rights of Catholics and other faiths to worship openly," Cardinal Keeler said. At that time, Bishop (later Archbishop) John Carroll of Baltimore was the only Catholic bishop for the entire country.

Designed by Benjamin Latrobe, architect of the U.S. Capitol, the basilica was renovated to restore many original architectural details and to incorporate modern electrical, heating and cooling, plumbing and security systems in a way that maintained the building's historical integrity.

"Over the course of the basilica's 200 years, it has borne witness time and again to many important milestones and visitors as the Church developed and evolved in America," Cardinal Keeler said in a statement released at the preview.

Those visitors included Pope Pius XII (as a cardinal) and Pope John Paul II, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, U.S. President Andrew Johnson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Alexis de Tocqueville, Marquis de Lafayette, the chiefs of the Sioux and Flathead tribes, St. John Neumann of Philadelphia, Blessed Teresa of Calcutta and Charles Carroll of Carrollton, the only Catholic signer of the Declaration of Independence and Bishop Carroll's cousin.

"Unfortunately, the ravages of time, inadequate maintenance and alterations took a toll," the cardinal said. "The original, brilliant design of Benjamin Henry Latrobe and Archbishop Carroll was lost, and major infrastructure improvements came to be needed."

The Basilica of the Assumption Historic Trust, established in 1976, has raised \$25 million in private donations toward the estimated \$32 million cost of the renovations.

In addition to updating the basilica's infrastructure, major changes to the basilica include replacement of 24 original skylights, illumination of the exterior at night, a new chapel in the undercroft as originally envisioned by Latrobe, re-creation of the original balconies, creation of a basilica museum and gift shop, and repainting of the walls in the original colors of pale yellow, blue and rose.

Ellington E. Churchill Jr., project manager for Henry H. Lewis Contractors, said the restoration work involved 30 months of construction, 900 cubic yards of concrete, 62,000 pounds of reinforcing steel, 20,000 square feet of metal roofing and the work of more 60 contractors representing more than 700 men and women.

"The basilica has been transformed, and we stand here today proud to have our names included as a small footnote in the history of this great place," Mr. Churchill said at an Oct. 3 ceremony marking the end of the



The Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary sits on the corner of Cathedral and Mulberry streets in Baltimore. The church was constructed after the adoption of the Constitution and Bill of Rights, which guaranteed Americans the right to worship freely.

construction phase.

Nine days of special events and services were planned to mark the basilica's official reopening. During the first service Nov. 4, Baltimore's Fort McHenry fired three cannon volleys - two for the basilica's first 200 years and the third for its next 100 - as the basilica's doors swung open.

In honor of the French contributions to the

basilica's completion and furnishing, including its bells cast in Lyons in 1831, the French ambassador to the U.S. will get a private tour of the basilica as church bells are rung simultaneously in Baltimore and Lyons.

The celebrations were to culminate in a Nov. 12 Mass concelebrated by all of the U.S. bishops, gathering in Baltimore for the fall general meeting of the U.S. Conference of

Catholic Bishops.

Cardinal Keeler, who was injured in a car accident in Italy that killed a priest who was traveling with him, said he had to leave the media preview early to go to physical therapy.

"It's all part of getting better, and I really want to get better in time for the ceremonies," he said.



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