



Podcast: Saint Mary of the Snows: Dedication of the Church of St Mary Major, 5th August 2021

Mgr Daniel McHugh

Journey of Faith - Life from Holy Mass - with Monsignor Daniel McHugh

Hello, I am Monsignor Daniel McHugh.

When I'm planning weekly Podcasts related to Daily Mass I look ahead to the Feasts and Memorials in the "Ordo" of Archdiocese, which lists the Liturgical Celebrations across the Church Year beginning in Advent. In August my eye fell on the Memorial of the Dedication of the Basilica of St Mary Major in Rome on 5th August. It is a favourite Memorial of mine, probably because when I arrived as a young student in Rome, October 1961, we spent our first few nights outside Rome at the College summer villa, where the Chapel is dedicated to Our Lady of the Snows. That Chapel was where I set out on my Roman Journey even though it is some miles away at Palazzola on Lake Albano opposite the Papal Villa at Castel Gandolfo. The Chapel there was dedicated under the title of Our Lady of the Snows in the 1300s. Many Chapels and Churches, especially in the Alps, have this dedication which has its origins in the Basilica of St Mary Major in Rome, one of the most beautiful Churches dedicated to Mary in the world. It all began with a miraculous fall of snow in 358AD. A wealthy couple, with great devotion to Mary, asked her how they might dispose of their property in her honour. Following a vision on 5th August, marked by a fall of snow on the Esquiline Hill, Pope Liberius determined that a Church be built to honor Our Lady. This Church he called Our Lady of the Snows, and sometimes, the Liberian Basilica. The fall of snow is often said to be a legend, but it grew in popular devotion. The recent fall of hailstones in Italy at the end of July 2021, tends to reinforce the thinking of those, who would say it was not an impossibility, and the title Our Lady of the Snow has endured.

On 5th August each year, during the Celebration of the Liturgical Feast of the Dedication of the Basilica of St Mary Major, a custom commemorating the story of the miraculous snowfall is still maintained: at the conclusion of the Solemn Mass in the Basilica, a shower of white rose petals is dropped from the dome of the Chapel of Our Lady.

The Church was rebuilt by Pope Sixtus III in 431 to celebrate the proclamation of the Divine Maternity of Our Lady at the Council of Ephesus, and it is the first Church dedicated to Mary, Mother of God. Over the centuries the Basilica has been enlarged, restored, rebuilt and embellished with beautiful frescoes and mosaics. It is called St Mary Major because it is a Patriarchal Basilica and the most important Church dedicated to Our Lady. If you visit Rome, it is a must as a magnificent building but also as a place of Devotion to Mary, especially an icon of Mary (said to have been painted by St Luke) called Salus Populi Romani in the Pauline Chapel on the left hand side towards the High Altar; Pope Francis prays there after each of his Apostolic Visits around the world, and

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most recently following his stay in Hospital. This icon was taken to St Peter's for the Extraordinary Urbi et Orbi Blessing in the Pandemic March 2020.

Dedication of Churches is important in the life of Faith. The ritual for dedicating them is similar to Baptism – in both blessed water and sacred chrism are used. The Buildings represent Christ and ourselves, who as members of His body build up the Church as “living stones” (1 Peter 2:5)

The importance of the 4 Roman Basilicas, whose dedication we celebrate across the world each year, relates to the role they fulfill. In the case of St Mary Major it is the largest Church dedicated to Mary in Rome and one of the most ancient Shrines honoring Mary, Mother of God. The popularity of the title Our Lady of the Snows over the centuries reiterates Mary's status as a beacon of hope for Christians, who on so many occasions turn to her in times of trial, perhaps when it seems a miracle is needed, no less when it looks like all hope is lost. In other words, through Mary's mediation, recourse to God's mercy is sought when some way needs to be made out of what looks like no way – embodied in the miraculous snowfall at the pinnacle of a Roman summer.

The Reading St John 2:1-12 The Wedding at Cana.

The Prayer is the Collect for The Dedication of the Basilica of St Mary Major.

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