

Largest Catholic Church in North America Is Now 'Complete'

In the News

After a Century, the Largest Catholic Church in North America Is Complete. The Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, located in Washington, D.C, had been begun in 1920, opened unfinished in 1959, and has been in continuous daily operation ever since. The largest Catholic church in North America. It is also one of the 10 largest churches in the world and the tallest habitable building in our nation's capital.

The completion of which the headline speaks is the finishing of the "Trinity Dome," a part of the basilica so impressive that it has its own website. The dome, which was officially blessed and dedicated in a two-hour ceremony on December 8, features one of the largest mosaic installations of its kind in the world. It is composed of more than 14 million pieces of Venetian glass that together weigh 24 tons.

The Mosaic depicts the Holy Trinity, the Virgin Mary, angels, the four gospel writers, the Nicene Creed and saints who have an association with the United States or the National Shrine itself. These include Juan Diego (the first canonized Native American), Kateri Tekakwitha (the first canonized female Native American), Teresa of Calcutta (an honorary American citizen), Francis Cabrini (the first U.S. citizen to be canonized), John Paul II (the first pope to visit the National Shrine) and Junípero Serra (declared a saint by Pope Francis at the National Shrine in 2015 for the first canonization ever to take place on American soil).

The basilica does not have its own parish community, but serves the adjacent Catholic University of America and nearly a million visitors each year. It offers six masses and five hours of confession daily.

The basilica's website states that the structure is "Dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, under her title of the Immaculate Conception," making it "the nation's preeminent Marian shrine."

"With over 70 chapels and oratories that relate to the peoples, cultures and traditions that are the tapestry of the Catholic faith and the mosaic of our great nation, the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception is indeed America's Catholic church," the website says.

The church describes its mission as being "a place of worship, pilgrimage, evangelization and reconciliation" that "offers visitors the occasion for a deepening conversion, a step forward in the journey to God" It also says,

"Mary's Shrine invites people from across the country and beyond into the saving moment of faith, hope and charity, so that they may be reconciled and transformed into living symbols of Christ's presence in the world. It is here that the faithful gather to worship God, give honor to Mary, and are sent to spread God's word wherever they go."

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Ephesians 2:19-22

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. (For context, read 2:11-22.)

Here the apostle Paul is addressing Gentile believers who, from the Jewish perspective, were once "strangers and aliens" to God. But now, says Paul, "you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (v. 13). He goes on to explain that followers of Jesus are members of "the household of God" (that is, the church). The apostles and prophets are the foundation of the household, but Jesus himself is the cornerstone, in whom "the whole structure is joined together"

In other words, Jesus is the founder of the church, and the way to become part of it is to be "brought near by the blood of Christ." Thus, it follows that all whom God has brought near are truly part of the household of God. In fact, in writing to the Corinthians, Paul says exactly that: "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with *all those who in every place* call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:2, italics added).

Questions: What are the implications of these verses about practicing Christianity without being part of a Christian community? If you were to describe your fellowship as a "building," what part of the building would you be? Why?

1 Peter 2:4-6

Come to [Jesus], a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a

stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." (For context, read 2:4-10.)

Here Peter uses the metaphor of a building to explain what the church is -- a "spiritual house" constructed of "living stones," those who have "come to him" (that is, those who are following Jesus). Peter, like Paul in the Ephesians 2 verses above, also describes Christ as the cornerstone of that spiritual house.

Question: What does the idea of being a "living stone" in the house of God imply about your participation in the church?

Hebrews 10:24-25

And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another ... (For context, read 10:19-25.)

These two verses are the closest biblical reference we have to a command to attend Christian worship. Notice that the writer of Hebrews says that one reason for doing so is to encourage one another. And he was right. Church isn't like school where you attend for a while until you receive your "B.A. Christian" degree (Get it?) and then you graduate. The church has no alumni association. We need to continue to be part of a faith community both for what we receive and for what we contribute.

Questions: Besides upping the attendance statistics, what does your regular attendance in church contribute to the faith of others who also attend those worship services and help to complete your church? What do you do for others that they would miss out on if you weren't part of a Christian fellowship? What do others do for you that you could not find anywhere else?

Romans 12:4-5

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. (For context, read 12:3-8.)

Paul uses the human body as a metaphor for the church in several of his letters. In Colossians 1:18, he speaks of Christ as the head of the body, but here in Romans his focus is on the rest of the body, its members. His point is not that all members should be identical, but that they should work together for the good of the body and be "individually ... members one of another." Paul understands that each member is given a gift to build up the whole body.

Every part should work together. And every part is essential for a complete body.

Questions: How does this "one body" idea express itself in your church? Who in your church are the eyes, seeing what others would miss? Who are the ears, hearing where there is need or purpose? Who are the legs, who help the fellowship get where it needs to go? Who are the hands of Christ, serving the world in mission and service? Who function as the mouth, speaking God's word? Whose vitality is necessary for everyone's spiritual health? What links all the parts of the body together?

Prayer for the Mission of the Church (BCP p.816)

Everliving God, whose will it is that all should come to you through your Son Jesus Christ: Inspire our witness to him, that all may know the power of his forgiveness and the hope of his resurrection; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*