

The Shrine of Our Lady of Loreto in Italy

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The main bell of Loreto -- almost two meters in diameter and weighing more than 7,000 kilograms -- invites people to one of the most famous basilicas in Europe. This basilica is unlike any other: it is the first international shrine dedicated to the Virgin Mary, where, according to tradition, one finds her original house, after it was miraculously transferred to Italy from the Holy Land.

The shrine of Loreto can be found in the Italian province of Ancona, in the Marche. The beginning of the construction of the shrine -- built in the late Gothic style -- dates back to the 15th century, though it was not completed until the end of the 16th century. The city of Loreto, which currently has 11,000 inhabitants, was built around the basilica.

Yet the shrine's history began back in the 13th century -- on December 10th, 1294, to be exact. On that day, according to a longstanding tradition, the house of Mary of Nazareth was flown by angels to its current location. Recent research, however, indicates that the house was brought by boat by the Angelis family in order to protect this priceless relic from Saracen raids after the defeat of the Crusades.

The impressive Loreto basilica was constructed around Mary's house. Placed on the altar of the Blessed Mother's home is a small statue of Our Lady of Loreto. Commissioned by Pope Pius XI, the wooden statue was sculpted out of Lebanon cedar from the Vatican Gardens and is cloaked in a golden mantle. It was crowned in the Vatican in 1922 and then solemnly placed in Loreto.

Until the end of the 16th century, pilgrims making their way to the Holy House of Loreto used to sing Marian litanies, which are called "The Litanies of Loreto". The shrine soon became one of the most important pilgrimage sites for believers from around the world, as well as for many saints and popes. Pope John Paul II visited several times during his pontificate, including unforgettable encounters with young people in 1995 and 2004.

In September of 2007, Pope Benedict XVI came to the basilica on the occasion of the Agora gathering of Italian youth. During his visit, he explained that the house originally had but three walls, not four; thus it is a house open to everyone. In fact, upon entering the basilica, one is struck by its openness to all people and the feeling of being at home. The crosses that are found depicted on the stones of the Holy House are the same type of crosses that were used in Nazareth in the second century.

The story of the Holy House that was moved by angles has become a familiar hallmark for aviators, who see the Virgin of Loreto as a worthy protector. And the prayer to Our Lady of Loreto, who was, as a matter of fact, proclaimed the Universal Patroness of Aviators, highlights Mary's profound maternal nature:

Prayer:

Our Lady of Loreto, Our Glorious Mother, we confidently turn to you; receive our humble prayer.
Humanity is

troubled by great evils,
which it wishes to overcome on its own,
and is in need of peace, justice, truth and love,
yet thinks it can find these divine realities away from your Son.

O Mother! You, who carried the Divine Saviour in your immaculate womb and lived with Him
in the Holy House

that we venerate on the Loreto Hill,
grant us the grace to seek Him and imitate His example,
He who leads us to salvation.
Amen.