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Baltimore restores light to basilica, America's first cathedral

\$32 million restoration cost all came from private donations

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TFC PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER GUNTY

BALTIMORE — When Hal Bruce of Baltimore became a Catholic 10 years ago, he chose as his parish the Basilica of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. He explained his choice to the priest who had been preparing him for entrance into the church and Archbishop William D. Borders, retired archbishop of Baltimore: "Where else but Mother?"

He refers to the church dedicated to the Blessed Mother, which is the mother church, not just of Baltimore but the mother cathedral for the whole country. At one time, the bishop of Baltimore, who called the cathedral the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary home, was responsible for the faithful in an area now covered by 36 states of the union.

Although not the first Catholic church in the country — that honor is claimed by the basilica in St. Augustine — Baltimore was the first diocese established in the United States and Assumption of the Blessed Virgin

The National Shrine of the Basilica of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Baltimore, America's first cathedral, is illuminated by lasers and projections during a light show Nov. 11 as part of a week of festive events marking the cathedral's 200th anniversary.

Baltimore cathedral.

Bruce stood in the upper balcony at the back of the basilica Nov. 12 at the end of a week of events commemorating the 200th anniversary of the basilica and its \$32 million restoration. "This was the balcony that was uncovered after 140 years (during the restoration)," he said. "This was where the slaves used to sit. They had the best seats in the house."

Reflecting before the Nov. 12 Mass for the bishops of the United States on the renovations to his parish church — one that belongs in a sense to all of Americans — Bruce gushed that the changes were "awesome, just awesome."

"I couldn't imagine what the final was going to look like" as the two-year project was under way, he said. "This is just unbelievable — to think that we're here to see this 200 years later."

Archbishop John C. Favalora of Miami (center right), processes out of the National Shrine of the Basilica of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary after a Mass Nov. 12 for the bishops of the United States and other invited guests. The Mass in Baltimore was the culmination of a week of special events marking the

Mary was established as the first cathedral. Provincial councils and later plenary councils — meetings of all the bishops in the country to discuss major issues of faith — that were held in Baltimore, held their opening and closing Masses in this

The heritage of the basilica dates back to the early 19th century when Bishop John Carroll, the country's first bishop and later archbishop of Baltimore, and cousin of one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, joined with Benjamin Henry Latrobe, an architect of the U.S. Capitol building and father of American architecture, to design the cathedral.

The basilica's large dome is a major source of light, but for the last several decades, that light was obscured and the basilica was much darker inside. To provide light for the whole building, 24 skylights encircle the outer dome. Light filters indirectly through the oculus of the inner dome, creating what the French call "*lumière mystérieuse*" according to information from the archdiocese of Baltimore.

However, in 1904, the exterior dome was covered in gold leaf, which lasted 20



dedication of the restoration and the 200th anniversary of the basilica, America's first cathedral.

years, and was later replaced by copper. By 1943, the deteriorating window frames and heavy glass of the outer dome were replaced and the openings closed. Latrobe's unique lighting system, including the skylights and windows, has now been restored in accord with his original design. In the recent restoration, the skylights were reopened to let the "mysterious light" fill the cathedral. Translucent replicas of the original windows were installed as well.

Also, as part of the dedication week ceremonies, the exterior of the basilica was permanently illuminated for the first time in its history. After a Nov. 11 youth Mass, the faithful were invited outside for a special laser and light-projection show, with fireworks. The "light tribute to freedom of religion" commemorated the heritage of the cathedral basilica and the efforts by Cardinal William H. Keeler, archbishop of Baltimore, to restore the church to its former beauty.

The illumination was a response to a recent civic initiative to light Baltimore's historic and high-rise buildings at night and helps the church stand as a beacon on a hill in the center of the city. The

church was lit briefly more than 130 years ago, as part of the silver jubilee for Pope Pius IX in June 1871, but the gas jets attached for the lighting to the portico columns damaged the cathedral exterior.

The spectacular illumination show combined laser-enhanced effects with projections of photographs and architectural drawings, along with spotlights. The display ended with fireworks that lit up the side yard of the basilica, drawing gasps from the crowd gathered in the street.

The \$32 million cost to restore the basilica all comes from private donations. Among those is a donation of \$50,000 from the Diocese of Orlando and Bishop Thomas Wenski, who presented a check Oct. 29 to Cardinal Keeler.

Bishop Wenski explained his support for

Cardinal Keeler's efforts to revitalize the basilica by saying, "The restoration of our nation's first cathedral church is a reason for some holy pride — not only for the Archdiocese of Baltimore but for Catholics throughout the United States. Designed by the same architect who gave us the building used by the U.S. Congress, the Baltimore basilica witnesses to the fact that the church and the Gospel has found a 'home' in our nation — and that our Catholic faith has contributed to this nation from its very beginnings.

"The Diocese of Orlando is happy to support the work of renovation given that Florida has some historical connections with the Archdiocese of Baltimore — two of Baltimore's archbishops had previously served in Florida: Michael Curley, a former bishop of St. Augustine; and William Borders, the founding bishop of Orlando," Bishop Wenski added.



Bishop Thomas Wenski of Orlando processes into the National Shrine of the Basilica of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary for a Mass Nov. 12 for the bishops of the United States and other invited guests.

The Nov. 12 Mass for the bishops was steeped in tradition and history. Cardinal Keeler wore a pectoral cross worn by Archbishop John Carroll. The chalice used for the consecration of the precious blood was a gift from Pope Pius VII and was used by Pope John Paul II for a Mass at Oriole Park at Camden Yards in Baltimore. And the bishop's staff used by Cardinal J. Francis Stafford as celebrant of the Mass had belonged to Archbishop Ambrose Marechal, Society of St. Sulpice, archbishop of Baltimore from 1817-28.

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