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NEWS LOCAL NEWS

## St. Mary's Basilica prepares to celebrate centennial year

By **Gina Keating** - Dec 13, 2013



*St. Mary's Basilica, circa 1970. In a symbolic gesture to unfurl its centennial year the Porta Sancta, or "Holy Door," to St. Mary's Basilica was opened to the delight of hundreds gathered outside on a chilly, winter evening.*

The Dec. 9 celebration heightened as the bell tower rang throughout downtown to welcome religious, priests, parishioners, guests and community and civic leaders.

"Open wide the door of this holy temple, and let us also open wide the door to our hearts, to the King of Glory," said Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted.

The basilica was the first Catholic church Angie McDonald attended when she arrived in the United States from the Philippines in 1976.

"This is my home, and I wanted to be part of the celebration because it's historic," she said.

McDonald has shared her life with the Franciscan friars, religious and parish community for nearly four decades.

Her daughter received her sacraments within its mission revival-style walls, and last year she had a funeral Mass for her husband, David.

Dressed in a gray winter coat, hat and gloves, McDonald spoke gently to a homeless woman who, with her bags in hand, was among those who waited to walk up the steps and through the blessed door.

St. Mary's Basilica, officially named the Church of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, celebrated Mass on the feast day of its patroness.

"Today we celebrate the goodness and beauty of Mary, which is reflected in the beauty of this basilica, in the beauty of the Sacred Liturgy, and in the beauty of holiness found in those who have worshipped in this parish church, over the past century, and have found in Jesus the grace to live in loving communion with God," Bishop Olmsted said in his homily.

Music Director Gordon Stevenson captured the wonder and awe of the liturgy, and people responded with gratitude and joy.

"We were humbled to hear how we touched people, and made them cry," Stevenson said. "We worked hard to keep a historical aspect, and bring all the musical elements to light."

Margaret Gabaldon, who was baptized in 1937

and received all her sacraments at the basilica, said, "This was an amazing and beautiful night. I love the Franciscans, and how they are so friendly to all walks of life. It has been wonderful seeing people who had been here come back."

As a little girl, Mary Figueroa remembers riding the bus with her Aunt Andrea to attend Mass at the basilica.

"When I come to Mass here I always feel my aunt," she said. "It brings back sweet memories."

Founded in 1881 and staffed by the Franciscan Friars since 1895, St. Mary's Basilica is the oldest Catholic Church in Phoenix, and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It is also one of the 33 Phoenix Points of Pride.

The church was elevated to a minor basilica in 1987 by Pope John Paul II.

McDonald, a member of the Secular Franciscan Order since 1999, barely had words to describe seeing the pope on the basilica's balcony during his historic visit.

"It was overwhelming," she said. "Like a beautiful dream."

St. Mary's Basilica has, for 100 years, been a beacon of faith, hope and love in the heart of downtown Phoenix.

In addition to the friars, the basilica has had the guidance of both the Sisters of Mercy and the Sisters of the Precious Blood.

Fr. John Hardin, OFM, provincial minister, Franciscan Province of Santa Barbara, reminded the faithful at the closing of Mass that the founders of St. Mary's were true pioneers.

"Some of the friars look like they came with the church, but they didn't," he said. "They came when only 20,000 people were here, and they spread the Good News."

Referring to Pope Francis, Fr. Hardin said the Jesuit Archbishop of Buenos Aires with a Franciscan name is prayed for daily because, "he has revitalized our Church. The greatest thing he said was, 'I'm a sinner,' and so am I, and so are you, but by the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, we have been redeemed."

Sr. Rosalina Baldonado, IHM, a former Catholic principal in Flagstaff and sister to Fr. Louis Baldonado, OFM, said parishioners and visitors alike enjoy St. Mary's Basilica because of its unique spirit of hospitality.

"It's a very holy place," Sr. Baldonado said. "People are drawn to the basilica because the Franciscans are inviting and welcome everyone."

The year-long centennial celebration, scheduled to conclude Feb. 15, 2015, will include events like a mission pilgrimage to California in March, a special Easter performance in April, a diocesan choral concert in May and a centennial cultural event in June.