Apparition of the Virgin Mary in Rome

ITALY, August 4-5, 352

The Basilica of Saint Mary Major, situated at the top of the Esquiline Hill, is one of the four patriarchal basilicas of Rome and it is the only one that has retained its pala-Christian structures. One noted tradition says that it was the Virgin who indicated and inspired the construction of her abode on the Esquiline Hill, appearing simultaneously in dreams to the Patrician John and his wife who nurtured in their hearts a desire, not being able to have children, to transfer their means for the construction of a temple in honor of the Virgin Mary and Pope Liberius in the location that Mary had miraculously indicated. The morning of August 5, the Esquiline Hill appeared covered by a blanket of snow in spite of the hot weather. The Pope then traced out the perimeter of the new church and John provided the finances. There is nothing left of this church except a passage from the Liber Pontificalis (The Book of the Popes), where Pope Liberius confirms “Ponest basilicam nominem sancta Mariae Liberii”. The bell tower is built in Roman Renaissance style and stands 75 meters tall, making it the tallest one in Rome. It was built by Gregory XI upon his return to Rome from Aragon and it contains five bells at the summit. One of them is called “the last one” and it rings every evening at nine o’clock, with a distinctive sound, a call to prayer for all the faithful. Upon entering the porch, to the right stands a statue of Philip IV from Spain, the benefactor of the basilica. The scale model of the work, completed by Giotto di Bondone in the XIII century is by Gian Lorenzo Bernini.