

The Basilica della Santa Casa (Basilica of the Holy House) is a Marian shrine in Loreto, Italy. The Basilica is known for enshrining the house in which the Blessed Virgin Mary is believed to have lived. Pious legends claim the same house was flown over by angelic beings from Nazareth to Tersatto then to Recanati, before arriving at the current site. The main attraction of Loreto is the Holy House itself.

It has been a Catholic pilgrimage destination since at least the 14th century and a popular tourist destination for non-Catholics as well. The "house" itself consists of three stone walls. It is a plain stone structure, with a door on the north side and a window on the west. The "house" contains the "Altar of the Apostles", venerated as the authentic one built by St Peter and the Apostles. A niche contains a 33 inches high black image of the Virgin and Child, a statue made of Lebanon cedar, richly adorned with jewels, placed above the altar. A legend attributes the statue to Saint Luke, described in the Bible as a physician, with a later tradition adding painting to his skills, and here given also the attribute of a sculptor.

The "Black Madonna", known as Our Lady of Loreto, owes its dark color to centuries of lamp smoke. Much like the Holy House, it is associated with miracles. The statue was commissioned after a fire in the Santa Casa in 1921 destroyed the original Madonna, and it was granted a Canonical Coronation in 1922 by Pope Pius XI. In October 2019 Pope Francis restored the feast of Our Lady of Loreto, commemorated on December 10, to the universal Roman calendar. Over time, different traditions developed suggesting that this was the house in which the Holy Family (Mary, Joseph and Jesus) had lived while in Judea at the start of the first century AD, and which supposedly, was miraculously flown over to Europe by four angels just before the final expulsion of the Christian Crusaders from the Holy Land, in order to protect it from Muslim soldiers. According to this narrative, this is the Nazareth house in which Mary had been born and brought up, received the Annunciation, conceived Jesus through the Holy Spirit, and had lived during the childhood of Christ. The tradition holds that after Jesus' Ascension, the house was converted into a church where the Apostles placed an altar, at which Saint Peter, considered by Catholics to be the first Pope, celebrated the first Eucharist after the Resurrection, the "Altar of the Apostles" inside the "house" being venerated as the authentic one. In 336, Empress Helena made a pilgrimage to Nazareth and allegedly directed that a basilica be erected over it. The narrative continues that, threatened with destruction by Muslim soldiers, the house was miraculously carried by angels through the air from Nazareth in May 1291 to a hill at Tersatto where an appearance of the Virgin and numerous miraculous cures attested to its sanctity. It remained here for over three years. In 1294, angels again carried it across the Adriatic Sea to the woods near Recanati; after eight months to a hill a mile away, Monte Prodo, near Loreto, where local counts petition the Pope for ownership of the pilgrimage site; and finally, at the end of 1296, to the current position on the road then connecting Recanati to Porto Recanati, on public ground free of property claims.

The miraculous translation of the house is said to have been confirmed by investigations made at Nazareth. It is this house that gave rise to the title *Our Lady of Loreto*. The miracle is occasionally represented in religious art wherein the house is borne by an angelic host. Analysis by Italian archaeologists and architects reached the conclusion that:

- ❖ the Holy House is built of two types of limestone found in Nazareth, but not in Loreto and Marche.
- ❖ the mortar between the stones is typical for 1st century Palestine, but not for Italy.
- ❖ the graffiti on the walls are similar and contemporary to those discovered at the Grotto of the Annunciation in Nazareth
- ❖ the "house" has no foundations, stands directly on dusty ground not cleared in any way and containing snail shells, acorns and a dried walnut, and even stands atop a thorny bush
- ❖ the three-wall "house" fits exactly the measurements of the foundations excavated in front of the Grotto in Nazareth, and those of the "missing" wall fit the Grotto, therefore:
- ❖ the Holy House and the Grotto were originally part of the same dwelling.
- ❖ the Holy House is placed partly on a public road connecting Recanati with Porto Recanati, its apparition forcing the magistrates of Recanati to build a diversion of the road - this makes an intentional construction at such a location look improbable
- ❖ the survival of the three-wall structure lacking foundations and placed partly on a road, partly over a ditch, defies the laws of physics.

Due to Our Lady of Loreto being the patroness of aviators, Charles Lindbergh took a Loreto statuette with him on his flight across the Atlantic, and Apollo 9 carried a Loreto medallion on its flight to the moon. All in all, whether accurate or inaccurate, the traditions attested to this sacred place sure make it an interesting read.