

PARISHES OF
ST PIUS X, ALDERLEY EDGE, ST BENEDICT'S, HANDFORTH
AND
SACRED HEART & ST TERESA'S WILMSLOW
WEEKLY REFLECTION

Sunday 3rd May 5th Sunday of Easter
Ravenna & The Holy House of Loreto: Two Sacred Places in Italy
(2) The Holy House of Loreto



In the beautiful but little-known Marche region of Italy, near the Adriatic Coast and about one and a half hour's drive from Assisi, is the small town of Loreto perched on a hill. The magnificent Renaissance Basilica dominates the Piazza della Madonna. In the Basilica under the dome is a rectangular shape, the size of a modest room, the outer walls of which are flamboyantly created in exotic Italian style, which gives the Basilica its name: *The Santuario della Santa Casa*. Inside is the room which pilgrims have visited over the centuries, together with an altar. Here, it is said, is the original tiny house in Nazareth where Our Lady was brought up, where the Annunciation took place and where the Holy Family lived subsequently until Jesus began His missionary work. The house measures some 30 feet x 13 feet and is composed of stones and mortar, hand chiselled in a style consistent with that of the time of Jesus

How and when did the house arrive in Loreto? The first evidence of Loreto being a place of worship goes back to 1294 when, according to tradition, it was brought by angels from the Holy Land as the Saracens attacked. It arrived after a short stay in Dalmatia (Croatia) and landed on the Adriatic coast in a wood of laurels. The Latin for a laurel grove is 'Lauretum' and so, according to tradition, when the house finally came to rest a few miles away and around its simple walls grew a town, it became known as Loreto. According to the Catholic Encyclopaedia, there is evidence that the type of stone and mortar of the walls of the house is unknown in the neighbourhood of Loreto and is the same as those used in 1st century Palestine; also, the house has never had foundations. Thus, there is support for the house dating from the time of Christ and having been transported from the Middle East. However, there is substantial dispute based on the lack of evidence of such a house in the Holy Land prior to the 13th century, and of any sudden appearance of the house in Loreto at that time. One hypothesis in support of the transportation is that it occurred, not miraculously achieved by angels, but by the Angeli family. A recently discovered document shows that Niceforo Angeli gave a dowry to the Prince of Naples including *"the holy stones taken from the Home of our Lady the Virgin Mother of God"*.

Despite the tradition that the holy house arrived in 1294, it was not until 1468 that work began on the basilica and, in 1507, the Church finally approved Loreto as a place of pilgrimage. To what extent the legend is historically accurate is difficult to say, but on entering the house there is a real sense of peace and awe at its simplicity and holiness. In 2019 Pope Francis pronounced a decree that 10th December should be a new optional memorial feast day for the universal church to celebrate Our Lady of Loreto. In the decree the Pope said: *"That sanctuary recalls the mystery of the Incarnation and prompts all those who visit it to consider the fullness of time, when God sent his Son, born of a woman, and to meditate on both the words of the angel in the Gospel and the words of Virgin who answered the divine call.The ... sanctuary... has been able to illustrate in an excellent way, over time, no less than Nazareth in the Holy Land, the evangelical virtues of the Holy Family."*

Stephen S.