

Mosaic of Mary, "Mater Ecclesiae"

In an article published in "L'Osservatore Romano," Javier Cotelo recounts how the mosaic dedicated to Mary, "Mother of the Church," came to be placed in St. Peter's square, in December 1981.

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The following is an article by the architect Javier Cotelo published in *L'Osservatore Romano* on June 14, 2011:

One of the most recent architectural features in St. Peter's square is the mosaic dedicated to Mary *Mater Ecclesiae*, inscribed with the words *Totus Tuus*, a sign of Blessed John Paul II's immense affection for our Lady.

I had the privilege of knowing something about the origin of the decision to put up this mosaic, a reflection of Blessed John Paul II's special relationship with young people and his deep sense of gratitude.

During Holy Week in 1980, Pope John Paul II received in audience several thousand young people who came to Rome for the UNIV Conference, an international meeting of university students who take part in activities at centers of Opus Dei throughout the world. This yearly event, which began in 1968, combines the desire to spend the Holy Week Triduum in

Rome, the city of Peter, with activities of cultural enrichment for the students.

At the end of the audience, one of the young people there, Julio Nieto, told the Holy Father that among all the statues in St. Peter's square, he couldn't find any image of our Lady, and that therefore the square was incomplete. "Good, very good! We have to put the finishing touch on the square," John Paul II replied.

This conversation reached the ears of Msgr. Alvaro del Portillo, St. Josemaria's successor as head of Opus Dei. Msgr. Del Portillo, moved by the desire to put into effect without delay what he considered a wish of the Holy Father, asked me to start thinking about a suitable place for an image of our Lady in the square, adding that it could be dedicated to Mary *Mater Ecclesiae*. At the time I was working as an

architect in Rome and had the good fortune of living close to the Prelate of Opus Dei in Viale Bruno Buozzi.

After several weeks and a number of visits to the square to find a suitable site, I suggested to Msgr. Del Portillo a possible solution, supplying photo-montages and sketches. My suggestion was that a window on the corner of the building between the courtyard of St. Damasus and the square might be replaced by a mosaic of our Lady.

On June 27, 1980, the proposal was sent to the Holy Father, with texts, drawings and photographs, and the sketches of elevations and cross-sections that are reproduced on this page. After several months went by without receiving a reply, another copy of the material was sent to the Holy Father through his then-secretary Msgr. Stanislaw Dziwisz.

A few months later, John Paul II was shot in St. Peter's square and, as he himself said, his life was preserved thanks to Mary's protection. As a sign of gratitude, he wanted to put an image of our Lady in St. Peter's square. The Roman Pontiff's desire resulted in the proposal of Msgr. Del Portillo being looked at closely by the competent authorities in the Vatican, and the site suggested there was chosen as the location for the image of Mary *Mater Ecclesiae*.

The mosaic (inspired by the *Madonna della colonna* from the Constantinian basilica) was installed on December 7, 1981 and, on the following day, after praying the Angelus, John Paul II blessed it. He expressed his desire "that all who come to St. Peter's square may raise their eyes to Mary, to greet her with filial trust and prayer."

I have often thought of this event as another example of John Paul II's special relationship with young people. I still find it amazing that the Pope's words, "we have to put the finishing touch on the square," addressed to a university student a year and a half earlier, had now become a reality.

Three days later, on December 11, the Pope invited Msgr. Del Portillo to concelebrate Mass in his private chapel and to have breakfast. He wanted to let him know his great joy on blessing the image in the square and to thank him for providing the idea for its location.

A few days later, the Holy Father thoughtfully sent him the drawing of the mosaic, in black and white, which was used to guide the placement of the colored pieces. This drawing, shown in the photograph, is

now in the central offices of the Prelature of Opus Dei.

It was Pope Paul VI who, in November 1964, announced his wish to end the sessions of the Second Vatican Council “with the joy of honoring our Lady with the title Mother of the Church, *Mater Ecclesiae*.” And Paul VI added: “This title will help us to honor Mary Most Holy, loving Queen of the world, source of unity as our Mother, and tender hope of our salvation.” This image, so closely united to the memory of Popes Paul VI and John Paul II, is a good reminder for all Christians, upon seeing it, to ask her to protect all her children in the Church.

Javier Cotelo // L'Osservatore Romano

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