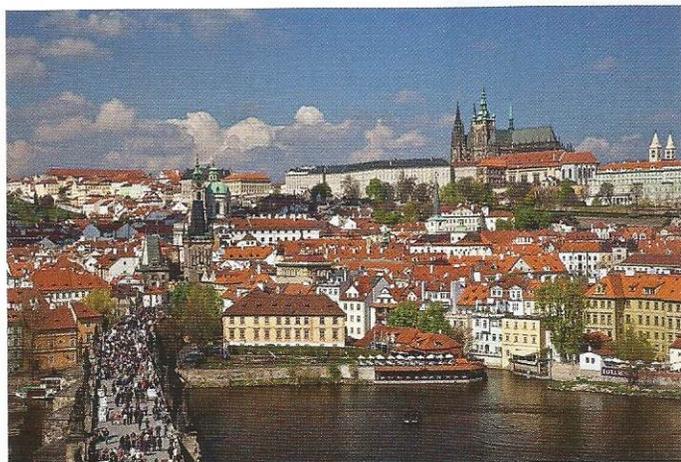


Of Shrines and Sacred Places

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

SACRED PLACES IN AND AROUND PRAGUE'S CASTLE



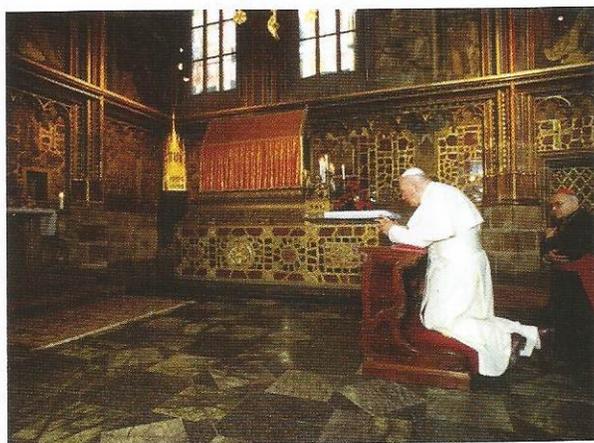
View of Prague's castle with the Cathedral of St. Vitus and Charles Bridge and, right, the Cathedral of St. Vitus (Photos Czech Tourism).
Below, Pope John Paul II praying in the St. Wenceslaus Chapel (Photo Grzegorz Galazka)

The history of Prague begins with its castle, founded by Prince Bořivoj in 870 AD and still the world's largest. Less than a decade earlier, in 863 AD, two brothers, St. Cyril and St. Methodius, originally Greeks from Salonika, brought Christianity to Moravia. They baptized Bořivoj and his wife Ludmilla, but their baptisms were by no means an example followed by their subjects. Many, especially the most powerful nobles, believing that it would threaten their privileges, opposed the introduction of Christianity.

The son of Prince Bořivoj and Ludmilla, Prince Vratislav, married a nominally Christian woman, Drahomira, the daughter of a religious pagan tribal chief. Vratislav and Drahomira had four children. Wenceslaus, the oldest, was born in 907 AD, followed by two daughters and another son, Boleslav.

When Vratislav, who ruled from 915 to 921 AD, was killed in battle, Drahomira took advantage of the ensuing political and religious confusion to garner the support of the powerful pagan nobility while Wenceslaus awaited his majority.

A year before his death, Vratislav had founded within the castle walls the Basilica of St. George, the oldest and best-preserved Romanesque church in Prague, where he is buried. His simple tomb of painted wood stands on the right-hand side of the nave. His mother Ludmilla, who'd always remained a faithful Christian, is buried here too. Strangled by Drahomira as she knelt in prayer, Ludmilla became Bohemia's first female Christian martyr.



Wenceslaus, having been brought up by his grandmother Ludmilla and thus a faithful Christian himself, was to meet a similar fate soon after his first son was born in 935 AD. His jealous younger brother murdered him. Boleslav resented losing his opportunity for succession to the throne, Wenceslaus' strong Christian faith, his friendship with Christian King Henry I "The Fowler," of Germany, and especially Wenceslaus' conviction that Henry was the rightful heir to Charlemagne. According to

legend, King Henry had so admired Prince Wenceslaus' devotion to the Church that he offered him whatever devotional object the prince wanted. Wenceslaus requested a relic of St. Vitus, and, upon receiving it — an arm — built a small round church to protect it. (Possibly Wenceslaus, wanting to convert his subjects to Christianity, chose a saint whose name sounded like that of the Slavic solar deity "Svantevit.") Over the centuries, Prague's majestic Gothic cathedral, dedicated to St. Vitus, grew from this long-incorporated rotunda. On the right-hand side of the cathedral's nave near the 14th-century Golden Portal, bejeweled, gilded and frescoed during the Renaissance with scenes from the Bible and the life of the saint, this rotunda/St. Wenceslaus Chapel had become a place of pilgrimage immediately after the saint's murder.

Only a short walk from the cathedral, just outside the castle walls and before reaching the famous Strahov Monastery (see my "Prague's Strahov Monastery and Library: Eastern

Europe's Oldest Cultural Center," published in *Inside the Vatican*, November 2006) is Prague's Loreto. Ever since its construction began on June 3, 1626, it's been the castle district's most important pilgrimage destination, comparable only to that of the wonder-working statue of the Baby Jesus in the Church of Our Lady Victorious, the subject of my "Of Shrines and Sacred Places" to be published next month.

The Loreto's grandiose design and miraculous stories were part of Emperor Ferdinand II's campaign to re-Catholicize the Czechs after his victory over the Protestants in the 1620's Battle of White Mountain and thus an important "weapon" of the Counter-Reformation. Commissioned by Baroness Benigna Kateřina of Lobkowitz, a devout Catholic Czech aristocrat keen to promote the legend of the Holy House of Loreto, the heart of this magnificent Baroque complex is a copy of the house believed to be the Virgin Mary's. Prague's Archbishop Cardinal Ernst Adalbert Count von Harrach consecrated its chapel on March 25, 1631.

The Capuchins, who first arrived in a group of 12 monks in 1599 in Prague, have looked after Prague's Loreto from its very beginnings to the present day; their activity was forcefully interrupted only during World War II and under the Communists. According to the guide on sale at the shop near the treasury one flight up, "the link between the order and the spiritual management of the Loreto isn't... unique in the Bohemian lands. Outside of Prague, the Capuchins also managed Loretos in Chrudim (from 1657), Rumburk (1703), in Milulov in Moravia (1625), and Fulnek (1680)."

According to tradition, the original house, said to be where the Archangel Gabriel told Mary about the future birth of Jesus, where the Holy Family stayed after its return from exile in Egypt, and where the Virgin Mary lived until the death of Christ, is in the small Italian town of Loreto in the Marches near Ancona. Angels are said to have transported it there from Nazareth in 1278 following threats by infidels. After the Protestants' defeat in the Battle of White Mountain, Catholics promoted this story, and some 50 replicas of the Loreto were built in Bohemia and Moravia. This one in Prague isn't the oldest in these parts; in 1584, Kateřina's uncle, Christoph Popel the Younger Von Lobkowitz, had built the first Loreto in Bohemia in Horšovský Týn, after making a pilgrimage to Italy's Loreto. This was followed in 1621 by a Loreto in Jilové near Prague and in Hájek in 1623.

Nevertheless, Prague's Loreto is the grandest and became the most important in Bohemia; it's always been a pilgrimage destination. Like Altoetting (see my article, "The Benediktweg and Altoetting: The Bavarian National Shrine," published here in October 2011), Prague's Holy House and the whole Loreto is a Marian shrine.

Prague's Loreto gradually grew in size over the course of the 1600s and 1700s to accommodate the growing number of pilgrims. For example, to protect pilgrims from the elements, the Holy House was enclosed by cloisters in 1661.

Thanks to the generosity of Czech Tourism in New York, during a mid-August press trip to Prague and Bohemia I visited the Loreto (open 9 AM-12 PM and 1 PM to 4:30 PM, Tuesday-Sunday; closed Monday, entrance fee 130 CZK or about US \$2.60; tel. 011-420-220516740; e-mail: loreta@kapucini.cz. Holy Mass is held only in Czech in the Holy House, every Saturday at 7:30 PM and in the Church of the Nativity, again only in Czech, every Sunday at 6 PM).

It's easily reached from the bottom of the hill via the no. 22 tram whose last stop, Pohorelec, is directly in front of the Strahov Monastery. I highly recommend the self-audio guide in English; it lasts about 30 minutes, comes with a numbered map of the Loreto and costs 150 CZK or about US \$3.00. The permit to take photographs is an additional 100 CZK or about US \$2.00.

The audio tour begins in the cloister's arcades with explanations of its 36 "wonder-working" lunette and ceiling frescoes, all dedicated to the Virgin Mary and known as the "Marian Atlas," and of its several chapels dedicated to St. Anne, to St. Francis, to the Holy Family, to the Holy Rood, to St. Anthony of Padua, and to Our Lady of Sorrows, the oldest (1686), where a side altar is dedicated to St. Wilgefortis, the patron saint of unhappily married women. In its central niche there's a wooden sculpture (1680) of this crucified saint. "She" is dressed in real clothes with a wig and beard made of real hair. According to legend, after taking a vow of virginity her pagan father forced this maiden to marry the king of Sicily, so she prayed to God for this bizarre masculine appearance, which made her undesirable.

The Holy House, a close copy of the one in Italy, stands at the center of the cloister with two Baroque fountains: "The Resurrection of Our Lord" and "The Assumption of Our Lady" on either side, although the Italian Holy House is incorporated



The "Holy House" and the fountain of "The Assumption of Our Lady" in the cloister of Prague's Loreto (Photos Lucy Gordan)



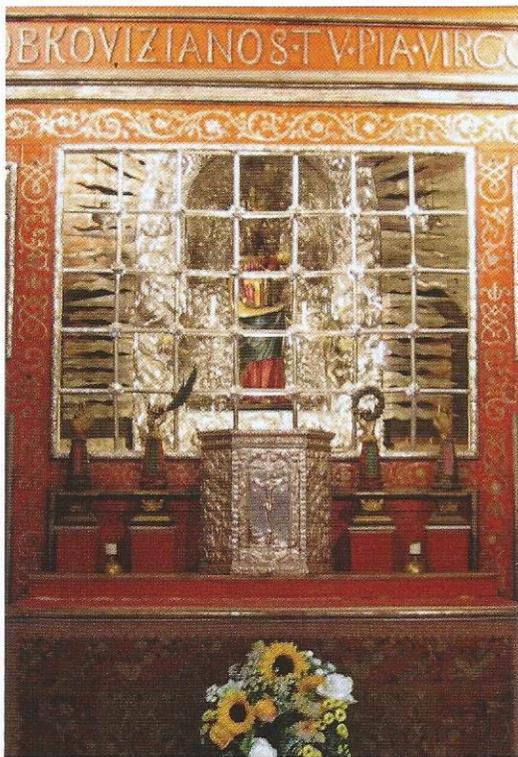
Of Shrines and Sacred Places

inside the pilgrimage church. In Prague, its outer walls, originally decorated with paintings, since the 1670s have been covered with sculpted reliefs (like those in Italy) from the life of the Virgin Mary, with an emphasis on the childhood of Jesus. The cycle, which begins on the north wall and continues counter-clockwise, starts with the birth of the Virgin, her Betrothal; west wall: the Annunciation, her visit to Elizabeth, and the Holy Family at the Registry in Bethlehem; south wall: the Nativity, the adoration of the shepherds and of the Magi; east wall: the death of the Virgin and the Translation of the Holy House. The reliefs are separated by niches with sculptures of seated Old Testament prophets in the lower story, and in the upper story, standing pagan sibyls who foretold the births of the Virgin Mary and of Christ.

Like the outer reliefs, the Holy House's interior and the almost exact copy of the Italian statue of Our Lady of Loreto were commissioned and donated by Countess Elizabeth Apollonia Kolowrat. During the 17th century grateful pilgrims donated the silver tabernacle, the expensive textiles in which the wonder-working statue is wrapped, the sets of her crowns and those of the Infant Jesus, and all the other decorations.

The two differences between Italy and Prague are: the Italian Lady of Loreto was made of cedar wood, Prague's of linden; and the unplastered masonry of Prague's Holy House with a large crack in its southern wall. According to legend, the crack was caused when a sinner who blasphemed in front of Our Lady was struck by lightning. Another legend recounts that an earthquake destroyed most of Prague's interior. Allegedly, the frescoes were preserved only in the places where the Virgin Mary had been depicted. In spite of these two known differences, the interior of Prague's Holy House was valuable in rebuilding the one in Italy destroyed by fire in 1921.

The tour's next stop is the Baroque and Rococo Church of the Nativity, financed by the Countess Maria Margarethe Waldstein and built by the Dientzenhofers, an important family of architects. It was consecrated on June 7, 1737, but work on its elaborate interior continued until the end of 1738. Of special importance is its very expensive second organ, made by the masters from Králíky, Franz Katzer and Kaspar Weltzer, between 1734-8, for by the second half of the 17th century Prague's Loreto had become an important musical center.



The altar and a surviving fresco of the Madonna and Child in the chapel of the "Holy House"
(Photos Lucy Gordan)



On the floor above the entrance is the Loreto's treasury. The votive gifts on exhibition, that is, the artifacts donated by pilgrims and patrons, represent only a small portion of the original treasury badly violated during the Napoleonic Wars and under Communism. Its most famous work of art is the gilded silver Diamond Monstrance, set in Vienna between 1696-99 with 6,222 stones removed from the wedding dress of the Loreto's third benefactress, Countess Ludmilla Eva Frances Kolowrat. The last time this treasure was used during Mass was in 1999 to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the Capuchins' arrival here. Other highlights include several other monstrances, a unique late medieval gilded silver chalice, and an ebony, silver and ivory domestic altar made in Augsburg between 1618-25, probably for the Loreto's first benefactress, Baroness Benigna Katařina Lobkovicz.

A treasure of the Loreto not in the Treasury is the clock tower's carillon.

Given to the Loreto by a rich merchant of the Lesser Town, Eberhard von Glauchau, at the time it was put in operation on August 15, 1695, it was a true rarity in Bohemia. "According to legend," the guide tells us, "the motive behind the gift was the miraculous recovery of his daughter through the intercession of Our Lady of Loreto. When the daughter awoke from a fever, she told her father about a dream in which she'd seen the Loreto tower surrounded by angels ringing bells. The merchant, who had business connections in Hol-

land and hence was familiar with the carillon, decided to order this musical instrument for the Prague pilgrimage site as a sign of gratitude."

Shortly after its inauguration, the Prague clockmaker Peter Neumann attached the carillon to the clock mechanism in the bell tower. The Prague carillon's very complicated mechanism, similar to others in Amsterdam, Delft, Bruges, and Berlin, today has 27 bells with a span of two and a half octaves and a keyboard of atypical proportions; a row of pedals controls the bottom octave. It has two separate playing systems — one controlled by the player so it can play various tunes, the other a clock machine with a cylinder that is programmed to play every hour on the hour the hymn "Virgin of the Incarnation./A thousand times we hail Thee/A thousand times we praise Thee./For the joy when God was incarnated in Thee./Because Thou art so powerful/A Virgin and Mother of God,/Grant what we ask of Thee for the love of God."○