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The Baltimore SunJuly 8, 2006 Saturday  
FINAL EDITION**SECTION:** LOCAL; Pg. 1B**LENGTH:** 648 words**HEADLINE:** 200 years of Catholic tradition commemorated;  
Awaiting basilica's reopening, honoring its role as a symbol**BYLINE:** MATTHEW HAY BROWN, SUN REPORTER**BODY:**

On July 7, 1806, a procession of priests and "junior ecclesiastics" led Bishop John Carroll of Baltimore to the southwestern corner of the hilltop plot that would be the site of America's first Catholic cathedral.

Carroll sprinkled the first foundation stone with "blessed water," according to one account, while the assembled clergy repeated the 127th Psalm: "Unless the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it." They sang "Veni, Creator Spiritus," a hymn invoking the Holy Spirit.

Yesterday, on the 200th anniversary of that historic ceremony, a procession of priests and deacons led Bishop Denis J. Madden, urban vicar of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, to the southwestern corner of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary to rededicate the cornerstone.

Amid the sounds of workers laboring to restore the basilica and the din of passing traffic, Madden - holding the gilt crosier once wielded by Carroll - spoke.

"This is a sacred space, reminding us that this world is sacred," he told the several dozen who gathered at what is now the intersection of Mulberry and Cathedral streets. "It is the work of the hand of God."

The re-enactment yesterday was the latest in a series of events leading to the reopening in November of the basilica, which has been closed since November 2004 for extensive renovations. A trio of musicians in period dress played; the clergy sang the Holy Spirit hymn.

As in the original ceremony, Madden sprinkled holy water on the cornerstone, a block of Aquia Creek sandstone recently rediscovered below the ground-level brick paving at the southwest corner of the basilica.

"It's not just the cornerstone for the Catholic Church in America," said Mark J. Potter, executive director of the Basilica historic trust. "It's the cornerstone for religious freedom."

In a land where Catholicism once had been suppressed, Carroll and U.S. Capitol architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe designed the basilica to be a bold symbol of a new liberty. Yesterday, state archivist Edward C. Papenfuss recalled the Act of Toleration passed by the Maryland legislature in 1649, an inspiration for the First Amendment. He called the Baltimore Basilica "the mother church of religious freedom in America."

"Today we recognize far more than the return of light, glorious light, to a magnificently restored building," he said. "We call attention to Maryland's role in advancing the cause of toleration and freedom of worship."

Reopening festivities for the basilica are to begin Nov. 4 with a ceremony and open house. The altar will be reconsecrated and a Mass celebrated the next day. Also planned during nine days of events are a concert, an interreligious service and tours for the public. On Nov. 12, the nation's Catholic bishops will hold a procession and Mass.

The \$32 million project, funded by private sources, includes both the restoration of the 200-year-old building to Latrobe's original vision and the replacement of aging electrical, plumbing and heating and air-conditioning systems.

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Workers have uncovered and replaced the 24 skylights of the great dome and restored interior walls to their original palette of pale yellow, blue and rose. They have excavated the undercroft to create a lower-level chapel, and opened access to the crypt that holds the remains of Carroll, Cardinal James Gibbons and Archbishop Martin John Spalding. Yesterday, they were completing the marble floor and preparing to install pews.

Addressing the crowd, C. Ford Peatross, the curator of the architecture, design and engineering collections at the Library of Congress, called the basilica "one of our greatest works of architecture."

"This is truly a building that does honor to its purpose and to the human spirit," he said. "It cannot but elevate that spirit as we, and generations to come, continue to gather in this sacred space."

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**GRAPHIC:** Photo(s)

1. Bishop Denis J. Madden, holding John Carroll's crosier, commemorates 200 years since the laying of the basilica's cornerstone. 2. Bishop Denis J. Madden, Baltimore's urban vicar, followed by Deacon Paul Mann, re-enacts a procession first performed by Baltimore's first bishop, John Carroll. 3. Discovered during renovations was the original cornerstone of the basilica; construction of the building, which has been called a symbol of religious freedom, began July 7, 1807.

PHOTOS BY DAVID HOBBY : SUN PHOTOGRAPHER

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