

The Black Madonna of Loreto

Part of what made the Madonna of Loreto world famous is the house she came in. It is a dark, little brick house called the Holy House of Mary, because it is believed to literally be the house where the Virgin Mary lived in Nazareth. Luke says, the Angel Gabriel was sent to her town and "came in unto her, and said, Hail..." (1:28). That is to say, he went into her house and through his prophecy and her consent, "the Word became flesh." It is presumed that at the time men still moved into the houses of their wives, so that Jesus and Joseph would have lived in this same House of Mary. It was honoured as a sacred place of pilgrimage from the first days of Christianity. In the 4th century Emperor Constantine built a basilica over it, with Mary's Holy House forming its crypt. Muslim forces destroyed many Christian shrines when they first invaded the Holy Land and again later, during the Crusades. The basilica over Mary's House was reduced to ruins twice, but each time the crypt containing the home of the Holy Family remained untouched. By 1291, the Crusaders had definitely lost the war and it seemed only a matter of time until Mary's house would be demolished. At that point, it suddenly disappeared from Palestine and re-appeared in Europe, containing, as one report says, a black statue of the Virgin. Some say Christians took the house down brick by brick and rebuilt it in Europe. But there is a much more beautiful tradition that says angels carried it on their wings to safety. Finding a place where the building and the pilgrims who wanted to visit it proved a difficult task, even for angels! For three years the house blessed Tarssetto, in modern Croatia, with its presence, until the Muslim invasions reached that place also. Then the house tried its luck in Italy, but even on such Christian soil it took a while to find a truly safe harbour. First bandits disturbed the peace, then a pair of fighting brothers on whose land it had settled. But on the fourth try, on December 10th 1294 it finally found its resting place in Loreto, where it remains to this day.

