Cincinnati’s St. Peter in Chains Cathedral granted minor basilica status

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Cincinnati Archbishop Dennis Schnurr announced on Aug. 15 that Pope
Francis granted the title of minor basilica to the Cathedral of St. Peter in Chains, which is in Cincinnati.

The title is given to churches around the world in recognition of their historical or cultural importance, artistic beauty and significance in the life of the Church. The title denotes a closer relationship to the pope. The title of major basilica is reserved for certain churches in Rome. The Cathedral of St. Peter in Chains is now known as the Cathedral Basilica of St. Peter in Chains. It is the 89th basilica in the United States, which includes two in Puerto Rico. It is the sixth basilica in Ohio, but the first in the archdiocese. The announcement came during a Mass on the feast of the Assumption that was livestreamed from the cathedral.

“For all of us who live and worship in our archdiocese, this is a great blessing and honor that has been bestowed on our cathedral church,” said Archbishop Schnurr. “Let us pray on this day, as we honor Our Lady in her Assumption, that the Church of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, her clergy and faithful, along with all the people of this great city, may benefit from this blessing and give thanks for all that the Lord has brought to fruition.”

In 2018, Father Jan Kevin Schmidt -- rector of the Cathedral of St. Peter in Chains since 2017 -- with permission from Archbishop Schnurr, requested that the Vatican’s Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments grant the title of minor basilica to the historic church in Cincinnati. The cathedral, which will celebrate its 175th anniversary in November, is the oldest cathedral that was built as a cathedral that remains in use in the United States.

Its designation of minor basilica -- the first in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati -- is both an honor for the region and a reason for the local faithful to celebrate, said Father Schmidt. “It’s the quality of the cathedral’s structure,
the absolute beauty of its architecture, the biblical symbolism throughout, the quality and prayerfulness of its liturgy and ecclesiastical significance as a cathedral that make it very important and very special for the archdiocese and in the American Catholic scene," he added.

St. Peter in Chains was designed by Henry Walter, architect of the Ohio capitol building in Columbus. The cathedral’s cornerstone was laid on May 20, 1841. It was formally dedicated on Nov. 2, 1845.

Its single spire, constructed of pure white limestone and soaring 220 feet above street level, was the tallest manmade structure in Cincinnati for many decades. The cathedral’s interior is dominated by a large mosaic portraying three Scriptural events from the life of St. Peter. Its eclectic design style also incorporates artistic inspiration from diverse sources, including Art Deco, Ancient Greek, Eastern Christian and early Roman Christian basilica architecture. A significant renovation of the structure, overseen by renowned Cincinnati architect Edward Schulte, was completed in 1957.

In attendance at the Aug. 15 Mass to hear the historic announcement were Cincinnati Mayor John Cranley and his family.

"The Catholic Church and the large number of Catholics in our region have helped make the Greater Cincinnati area the great place it is to live, work, play and pray," said Mayor Cranley. "From starting the major hospitals that have cared for the sick, to feeding the hungry and helping the poor, to educating generations of Catholics who have risen out of poverty and to the heights of civic and business leadership, the Catholic Church has provided a living testament to its core beliefs, and this basilica has served as beautiful physical embodiment -- a sort of Statue of Liberty -- of these good works and serves as an ever-present reminder to Catholic Cincinnatians that they have a proud spiritual home," he added.
In addition, Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine offered words of congratulations to mark the occasion. “Fran and I are delighted that Pope Francis has bestowed this honor upon St. Peter in Chains Cathedral and the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. The cathedral is one of the oldest operating Roman Catholic cathedrals in the United States, and it is a historic place special to Cincinnati and to Ohio. I congratulate Archbishop Schnurr, Father Schmidt, and the entire archdiocese. Having St. Peter in Chains Cathedral named as a basilica by the Pope is an honor that the Catholic faithful across Ohio should celebrate,” the governor added.

The Cathedral Basilica of St. Peter in Chains has a rich liturgical life. Prior to the decreased Mass schedule amid the current pandemic, the cathedral celebrated more than 1,000 Masses a year, including the archdiocesan liturgies. It serves as a pilgrimage site for many local Catholics. In addition to liturgies, the cathedral is available for tours.

A special Mass of thanksgiving will be celebrated – and livestreamed -- on Nov. 7 at the cathedral basilica to mark the 175th anniversary of its dedication. During the Mass, the symbols granted in virtue of the church’s designation as a minor basilica – the ombrellino and tintinnabulum -- will be processed in and will be enshrined.

The ombrellino, “little umbrella,” is in basilicas worldwide, signifying the structures’ close ties with the Holy See. The silk canopy is designed with stripes of red and gold, which are the traditional papal colors. During the Middle Ages, the ombrellino was carried above the pope during processions. Once placed in the cathedral’s sanctuary, it will remain partially opened. The ombrellino would only be opened fully in the event of a visit from the Holy Father.

The tintinnabulum is essentially a bell -- or the in the case of a cathedral,
three bells -- mounted on a pole to signify the church’s link to the pope. It was used during the Middle Ages and Renaissance to alert the people of Rome of the arrival of the pope during papal processions. The tintinnabulum also will be placed in the sanctuary, and can be used during other celebrations.