

**“The Lord your God is in your midst.”**

***Zeph 3:17***

Last Tuesday, 10<sup>th</sup> December, was the feast of the Translation of the Holy House in Loreto. At the time of the crusades in the thirteenth century, when the Holy Land places were being overrun, the Holy House in which the Blessed Virgin Mary lived in Nazareth was miraculously carried to safety by angels and moved, first to a place of safety in Croatia, and then, on 10<sup>th</sup> December 1294, from Croatia to the hill top town of Loreto just south of Ancona in north east Italy.

The house itself is just a brick structure of four walls and a roof, just a single room in fact. But it was in that house that Our Lady was living, in Nazareth, when the Archangel Gabriel visited her and greeted her with the words, Hail! Full of grace!’ (Lk 1:28). And it was in that very building that Our Lady conceived in her womb the Incarnate Son of God.

Whenever we say the prayer, the Angelus, we repeat this story, and we acknowledge, to use the words from St John’s Gospel, that ‘the Word was made flesh’ (Jn 1:14). In Latin, *Verbum caro factum est*. Now here’s the thing: if you visit the Holy House in Loreto, and look at the altar, you will see these words in Latin: *Verbum caro factum est*. But an extra word has been added: *Hic* Verbum caro factum est. *Here*, the Word was made flesh.

In that very place, the Only-Begotten Son of God, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, was made flesh, and began to dwell among us.

Why is this significant?

We are very used to the idea that we can pray to God anywhere, and that God is present everywhere. And indeed that is the case. Even so, there are some places on earth which the hand of God has reached down and touched with His holiness. The Holy House in

Loreto is one such place, as are the sites where Our Lord turned water into wine (Jn 2), the hill where He preached the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7), the shore of the Lake Galilee where He walked (Mt 4:18) and breakfasted (Jn 21), the place where He stood on the hill overlooking



*The Holy House in Loreto, Italy. On the altar, behind the six candles, you can see the words, Hic Verbum caro factum est: Here, the Word was made flesh.*

Jerusalem and wept (Lk 19:41), as well as the sites of His arrest, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection, and many more places besides. At each of these sites, the hand of God has reached down from heaven and touched the earth with His holiness, and these sites are now holy, sacred, touched by the Divine.

On Christmas Eve, our Holy Father will open the Holy Door in St Peter's Basilica in Rome and inaugurate the Holy Year of 2025, as popes have done every 25 years since the year 1300 when Pope Boniface VIII began the custom of celebrating Holy Years. The point of a Holy Year is to draw God's faithful people to Rome, to the Eternal City, to the centre and hub of the Catholic world that all may 'draw from the treasures of sanctification' and enrich their souls, as Pope Pius XI said when he opened the Holy Year one hundred years ago in 1925. In a Holy Year, we are all called to go on pilgrimage to Holy Places, to places where God's hand has reached down and touched the earth with His holiness, so that we, too, may be touched by God's holiness and 'be made partakers of the divine nature,' as St Peter says elsewhere (2 Pt 1:4).

One of the features of a Holy Year is to pass through a Holy Door, symbolizing Christ Himself who said, 'I am the door. By me, if any man enter in, he shall be saved' (Jn 10:9). There will be a Holy Door in 2025 at each of the four Major Basilicas in Rome: St Peter's, St Paul Outside the Walls, St Mary Major's, and St John Lateran's.

But for those who cannot get to Rome, there will be officially designated 'sacred places' which will serve as pilgrimage sites for the Holy Year, and the Holy House in Loreto as well as the sacred sites in the Holy Land, and a number of other places besides, will be among them. Here, in our own diocese of East Anglia, the Cathedral of St John the Baptist in Norwich and the Shrine of Our Lady in Walsingham will be two such sacred places where we can go on pilgrimage to attain the Holy Year indulgence.

More will be said about the indulgence by and by, and we shall be producing a Holy Year handbook for the parish too, God willing.

But for now, please be aware that the Holy Year of 2025 will be inaugurated in Rome by the Pope at Christmas, and that we will all have God-given opportunities to do very real and practical things to help us grow in holiness throughout this year, as God pours down upon His church a superabundance of graces and blessings.

It is not only foreign places that are holy, of course. Every altar where the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is offered has been touched by the hand of God's holiness, as has every sanctuary which encloses our altars, and indeed every Catholic church where the profane is held at bay, and God's holiness enters in. This Advent, this Christmas, this Holy Year, I ask you, will you allow the hand of God's holiness to touch your souls also?