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Basilica reopens following quake

■ **Technicians hope to be able to rebuild the church at St. Francis of Assisi.**

ASSISI, Italy (AP) — Worshipers returned to the Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi on Sunday, exactly a month after an earthquake devastated the 13th-century monument to Italy's patron saint.

The church, one of the country's most beloved shrines and tourist attractions, remains closed under the threat of continuing tremors and with major restoration work yet to begin.

Several hundred people packed the crypt in the lower basilica.

"We are starting from the foundations for a journey of spiritual renewal and material reconstruction," said the Rev. Giulio Perrettoni, who celebrated Mass.

He is the custodian of the Franciscan monastery attached to the basilica.

Worshippers entered through a side entrance from the monastery directly into the chapel. The upper basilica, where chunks of ceiling with priceless frescoes fell to the ground during the quake, also is closed. Technicians are seeking to shore up the rest of the ceiling.

Leaders of the Franciscans who run the church say they hope to reopen the basilica in time for Jubilee celebrations at the beginning of 2000.

Four people died in the basilica from the falling ceiling during the second of two sharp quakes Sept. 26. Six other people died that day in other towns hit by the temblors.

Some 40,000 people remain homeless around Assisi and to the east in the regions of Umbria and Marche.

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First lady celebrates 50th birthday at home

WASHINGTON (AP) — Hillary Rodham Clinton spent a quiet 50th birthday Sunday, ensconced at home with her husband and daughter after a surprise party that had her dancing until the wee hours.

The weather in Washington was in the low 50s and damp, which kept the first family firmly indoors. Not a peep came from the White House residence all day.

In true Washington fashion, the first lady's special day was fodder for the Sunday talk shows. ABC-TV's "This Week" offered a video birthday card in which average Americans politely swore that Hillary Clinton looked much too young to be 50.

"Oh, to be 50 again! Just a kid!" said host Sam Donaldson, 63, as he wished the first lady a happy birthday with a quote from poet Robert Browning: "The best is yet to be, the last of life for which the first was made."

Sunday's low-key activity was in stark contrast to what's in store for the first lady beginning today: a public, two-day celebration in her hometown of Chicago that includes a speech, a chat with a historian, a birthday bash at the Chicago Cultural Center and a TV appearance with talk show maven Oprah Winfrey.

But a relaxed birthday seemed in order because the first lady began celebrating in the minutes after midnight by taking a few spins around the dance floor during a surprise party at a posh Washington hotel.

Wearing a red satin evening gown, the first lady got a hint that something

"It was a huge surprise for Mrs. Clinton."

MARSHA BERRY
White House spokeswoman

was up Saturday night when she and President Clinton left the annual black-tie gala of the National Italian-American Foundation and their limousine suddenly detoured from the White House toward the Sheraton Luxury Collection Hotel on embassy-lined Massachusetts Avenue.

Still, aides said, she was genuinely surprised by the party, attended by about 100 friends and daughter Chelsea, who trekked across the country for her mom's birthday. It was Chelsea's first trip home since she began her freshman year at Stanford University a few weeks ago.

The first daughter crept into the White House from the airport about 2 a.m. Saturday. "It was a huge surprise for the first lady," said spokeswoman Marsha Berry.

The surprise party was planned by Washington socialite Buffy Caffritz and Ann Jordan, wife of Clinton's friend and adviser Vernon Jordan.

The first lady also received a cake at the Italian-American dinner — and a "Happy Birthday" serenade from singer Connie Francis.

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