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TRIBUTE OF FLOWERS.

A fire engine is an unusual sight at a religious festival - but it's a traditional and necessary part of this particular one. Every year on December the 8th, Immaculate Conception Day, the people of Rome pay homage to the Madonna by garlanding her statue, on its tall column in the Piazza di Spagna, with an offering of flowers.

One fireman has the honour of placing the garland, while his colleagues watch from below. But this is only the beginning of the day's programme of devotion and celebration. Civic and church leaders gather in the Piazza as worshippers of all ages bring their own flowers to lay at the base of the column.

One procession consists of crippled children - some on feet and some in wheelchairs - from the Don Carlo Gnocchi Institute, who come with their teachers to offer a special prayer.

All day long the people of Rome lay their offerings at the feet of Mary, the Mother of Jesus.