

CATHEDRAL BASILICA OF THE HOLY CROSS

The Cathedral Basilica of the Holy Cross is a dignified witness of the centuries-old history. The church, just like the city, has been experiencing numerous wars, fires and plagues which affected Opole and the Upper Silesia. Its oldest fragments come from the times when Opole was ruled by the Piast dynasty. Today, the Opole Cathedral is the most important temple in the Opole diocese and a recognizable symbol of the city.

The first church according to the tradition was supposed to be built in this place during the reign of the Polish king Bolesław I the Brave in 1002-1005. In 1024, Wrocław Bishop Clemens gave the church an extremely precious item: the Holy Cross relics which have been kept here until today. He received them from Saint Emeric, the son of the Hungarian King Saint Stephan, who brought them to Wrocław. According to another historical version, the relics were brought to Opole from the Crusade by Casimir I of Opole. The same of one who founded Opole in 1217. One thing is sure – the relics got to the Opole temple and they have been stored here for almost 1000 years now. The relics raised the significance of the temple and the Opole borough. They were so important to the city that they had an impact on its coat of arms whose designers combined the Piast eagle with a half of the Holy Cross.

In about 1232, a collegiate church chapter was set up at the Opole church and the church became a collegiate church. As a result, in the middle of XIIIth century, the temple needed to be expanded. The expansion was finished due to generosity of duke Bolesław I in 1295. It was built in a style a late of Roman basilica.

The history of the Opole Cathedral is also full of dramatic events. The fires, which were destroying the city, didn't pass by the church. One of the most tragic fires was the one in 1415 which started on a hot summer day when the church was struck by a thunder. Only few items were saved from the fire, one of them was most certainly the stone font and reliquary with a fragment of the Holy Cross. Another tragic fire took place in 1615, also in the summer, when a strong wind moved the fire from the castle to the city buildings and the collegiate church. There were as many as 100 casualties who died in the fire. The city burned down and the flames were so strong that they melted even the church bells.

The Opole Piast dynasty always supported the collegiate church, however the most generous of them was Jan II the Good. His will was to rest in this temple. His wish was respected and thus he was buried with honors in a collegiate church after his death in 1532. Nowadays, his sarcophagus is in the Piast Chapel.

During the reign of Jan II the Good, the church was renovated and rebuilt in the late gothic style. Two side naves were expanded to the size of the presbytery. There were also two side chapels built on the northern and on the southern sides of the cathedral.

The Opole Cathedral was affected not only by fires but also the wars. In 1634, during the Thirty Years' War, the city and the church were plundered by the Swedish army. The second World War saved the collegiate church apart from the towers and the roof which were damaged during shelling.

The temple has also experienced breakthroughs connected with its renovations. The rebuilding changed its shape and look. Apart from the already mentioned new construction of the collegiate church in the XIIIth century and the redevelopment after the fire in the XVIth century, there was a major renovation of the roof in 1724, when the wooden shingles were replaced with roof tiles. In 1899 -1900, the next investment was made. Two tampering neo-gothic towers, each 73 meter-high, were built. The look of the elevation was also changed by revealing its brick texture.

The next extremely important date in the history of the Opole church was June 1972. It was when according to the papal bull issued by Pope Paul VI, new dioceses were set up in Poland. Opole diocese was one of them. The first Opole bishop was doctor Francis Jop – an incredibly modest and humble man. After his death, he was buried in the underworld of the cathedral. Where? You will learn that inside. Look for the epitaph and you will find his tale. During your visit at the temple, you can also stop at some other epitaphs and listen and explore their stories.

What else do you need to know about the Opole Cathedral? It is worth to mention that it is a three nave temple. It is 60 meters long and 26 meters wide. Once you go inside, pay attention to its beautiful vault, main altar and primeval stone font, the oldest treasure in the temple, and the miraculous painting of Lady of Opole, crowned in 1983 by John Paul II. When you approach it, don't miss its remarkable story.

It is also worth to mention the bronze gate to the temple. They were founded in 1997 to commemorate the 1000th death anniversary of Saint Adelbert from Prague and the 700th anniversary of the parish. You can see there biblical people who created the history of the church, the city and Poland. Among them, there is Noe, the builder of the ark and Moses. There is Saint Adelbert from Prague and Hyacinth of Poland, who was born in nearby Kamień Śląski in 1183. There is John Paul II, the saint; Opole Bishop Alfons Nossol; Lech Wałęsa, the legendary leader of Solidarity and the Solidarity chaplain Jerzy Popiełuszko, who was murdered by the communist Security Service of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. There is also an angel with the Holy Cross relics.

NARRATOR 2: The story of the Opole Cathedral may be told for hours... It is not only the story of the temple, but also architecture, art and people who built and took care of it. It is also a story of the city, which was built around it and became one of the most recognizable in Poland.