

# THE MAIN ALTAR

Under the high starry vault; in the centre of the main nave; in the twilight of history; among monumental walls; there is the heart of the cathedral which draws everybody's attention: a humongous and tapering main altar from the late baroque.

It was built in 1773 – 1774, during a capital renovation of the cathedral. Originally, it was thought to be made by Italian craftsmen but, due to research, we know that the altar was created by a Moravian sculptor Wenzel Johann Böhm using stucco technique. However, the dominating scene in the centre of the altar with Jesus' crucifixion in Golgotha and an enormous crucifix with Jesus' harassed body was made one hundred years later, in Mayer's workshop in Munich.

Dying Jesus Christ is accompanied by his Mother Mary kneeling by his side together with Magdalena and Saint John. At both sides of the main scene, on the columns, there is Saint Peter with keys in his hand and Saint Paul holding a book. Above, at the altar's vault, there is the Holy Trinity surrounded by angels.

The angels, characteristic for the baroque period, surround the tabernacle, where the Paschal Lamb symbolizing Jesus rests. The motif refers to the fifth chapter of the Book of Revelation where the victorious lamb opens a sealed book devoted to the fate of the world.

The main altar of the Opole cathedral has also a beautiful surrounding. On both sides, there are two stucco side altars where figures of saints are placed: on the right side there is Saint Joseph, and on the left side - Saint Urban. Tapering stain-glass windows in the presbytery dated back to 1882 depict Passion and add mysticism to the whole. In 1965, the great renovation of the chapel took place, the stain-glass windows at the altar were extended and scenes from the Old Testament were placed in their lowest parts.

There are eight modern windows filled with stain-glass in the side naves. They were designed by an artist Stanisław Szmuc in the 60's of the XXth century. If you look carefully, you will see that three pieces of the stain-glass in the northern nave illustrate Christ surrounded by apostles, the scene of Resurrection and Pentecost. The stain-glass windows in the southern nave include colorful images depicting the birth of Jesus and Candelas. The next ones show the stories from the life of Virgin Mary.

The composition and the surrounding of the main altar indicate that the relics of the Holy Cross have not only historical but mainly spiritual value in the cathedral. These are small pieces of the Holy Tree on which the Son of God died. The Opole cathedral owes the relics its name and the city - its coat of arms.

How did the relics get to Opole? The historians still argue and will probably continue to argue for some time. One of the versions say that they come from Emeric, a Hungarian successor and a Catholic Church Saint. According to the sources, in 1024, Emeric made a pilgrimage to the grave of Saint Adalbert from Prague in Gniezno. On his way, he visited Wrocław bishop Clemense, whom he left the relics of the Holy Cross. Bishop Clemens, though, gave these precious relics to the church in Opole which was under construction at that time.

According to the second version, Casmir I of Opole was the one who brought the relics over to his home town. The Piast ruler, responsible for the town foundation in 1217, was a participant of the Vth Crusade. During it, he gained the precious relics but also a Bulgarian duchess Viola whom he met on the way and later, married.

Today, the remains of the Holy Cross are placed in a golden, gemmed with precious baroque stones reliquary, normally stored in a church treasury. They are in the centre of the golden cross, behind the glass, On the other side of the reliquary, on the same level there is the Passion Cross dated back to 1380. The whole reliquary, made of gold, mountain crystal and precious stones, was created in 1631, thanks to founders whose coats of arms and ciphers were placed on its base encrusted with flowers and leaves.

The Holy Cross parish church in Opole regularly allows its followers to enshrine the holy relics which have been kept in Opole for almost 1000 years. Every Friday during the morning mass the reliquary is displayed on the altar, similarly, on every Friday of the Lent, during the Way of the Cross and Lenten Psalms. This way the parish allows the relics to be close to the followers in order to strengthen and build their faith in Christ.