

Church of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary

HISTORY

Zašová, a major place of pilgrimage of the Wallachia region, is renowned for its traditional patron saint's day feast held for centuries on the first Sunday of July. There are also natural habitats of birds, freshwater fauna and protected plants, like the Valley of Stračka with a spring of good drinking water or protected marshlands called Pod Hájem.

A new Baroque church of Zašová, the Pilgrimage Church of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, was built early in the 18th century by the Lords of the Manor of Meziříčí–Rožnov. The single-nave structure with a pentagonal presbytery replaced the nearby wooden church of St. Anne. The 35-meter-long and 16-meter-high building commands the centre of the village and is by far the largest church monument of the district.

The origins of the Zašová pilgrimage and the local patron saint's day feast are connected with numerous legends. First news about gifts brought to the miraculous painting come from 17th century accounts. People turned to the Virgin Mary for protection and healing during times of plague. Inhabitants of neighbouring hamlets even made a written pledge to make annual pilgrimages to the Holy Virgin of Zašová if they should be spared, which is considered the first written evidence of organized pilgrimages in the region.

Legend: The miraculous painting of the Virgin Mary is associated with a legend explaining the origin of the artefact. A Christian knight who had been hiding from Tartar hordes in deep woods for three days and nights prayed fervently to the Holy Virgin and eventually fell asleep, tired to death. In his dream, he saw Mary with the Baby on her elbows. The Virgin was holding a ribbon in her left hand, urging the knight to hold its other end and follow her. When the knight woke up he found out he had been transferred to an unknown countryside. Grateful, he promised to erect a chapel in which the Virgin Mary would be depicted as he had seen her in his dream: with baby Jesus in her arms and a ribbon in her left hand.

DESCRIPTION OF THE CHURCH

The Gothic board painting of the Virgin Mary and Baby Jesus on the Baroque-style high altar is another reputed piece of art. The image is a copy of a miraculous painting of the late-1400s, times of Tartar invasion of Moravia. The original painting kept in the Olomouc Archdiocesan Museum is said to have caused miraculous healings and see to it that prayers to the Virgin were answered. Another unique piece of art is only a few decades younger – the impressive higher-than-life sculpture of Christ's Crucifixion. When examining this unique woodcarving five years ago, experts discovered that the oldest of the five layers of painting is of late Gothic origin – and so must be the sculpture: it must have been made about 1520. It has never been satisfactorily explained how the sculpture actually came to Zašová, because the fire of the church and rectory destroyed the parish archives in the 19th century. Its authorship thus remains obscure, as well as its early history.

The Order of Trinitarians massively contributed to the completion of the church – that is why the high altar was dedicated to the Holy Trinity. A new pipe organ was installed and two tall towers added. Actually, this church is the only one of Wallachia's churches to have two towers.

The interior of the church was redecorated in the 1940s and its furniture restored and conserved: the splendid Baroque pulpit, baptismal font, and two altars dedicated to All Saints and St. Cecilia – the patron saint of spiritual music and musicians, but also of the blind. Professor Bohuslav Slánský, an eminent Czech conservator, restored the miraculous image of the Virgin Mary to its original beauty, having removed later layers of paint. Contemporary conservation and restoration stresses sensitive artistic approach, emphasizing the aesthetic and creative values.

A copy of a remarkable statue of St. Felix of Valois, who co-founded the Trinitarian Order together with St. John of Matha, is placed in a niche in the front façade.

PLACES

If you wish to learn more of the region, visit the Wallachian Open Air Museum in nearby Rožnov pod Radhoštěm. The so-called 'Timber Town' is a set of Wallachian logwood buildings, including St. Anne Church, a belfry, magistrate's house, farmhouses, barns and stables.
