

November 20, 2009



Bishop Thaddeus Peplowski of the Polish National Catholic Church admires the latest sculpture by the Rev. Walter Madej, the last piece of a 15-year project at Holy Mother of the Rosary Cathedral in Lancaster.

15 years on a labor of love

Woodcarving Polish priest attributes his ecclesiastical art to the hands of God



The Rev. Walter Madej has carved out quite a legacy in Lancaster.

It began with a statue of Saul, struck blind on his way to Damascus, and includes the Stations of the Cross, an ornate main altar, a lectern, a 26-foot-long balustered railing and an ambry for holy oils, among other furnishings.

Now, after 15 years of sculpting a stunning array of ecclesiastical art inside Holy Mother of the Rosary Cathedral on Broadway in Lancaster, Madej has completed his final and most complex installment — a shrine depicting the 20 mysteries of the rosary.

“The cathedral is complete now,” said Madej, a priest commissioned by Holy Mother of the Rosary parish to fill the cathedral with original art.

The collection of Madej’s work is unlike anything else in Western New York.

While many of the area's glorious older churches boast plenty of beautiful ecclesiastical art, newly built sanctuaries rarely contain commissioned pieces.

In that respect, Holy Mother of the Rosary, constructed in 1996, is an anomaly. The congregation and the Polish National Catholic Church have focused heavily on adorning the space in a manner befitting a cathedral.

"I know you don't find many new churches with this kind of elaborate artwork," said Bishop Thaddeus Peplowski, leader of the parish and of the Buffalo-Pittsburgh Diocese of the Polish National Catholic Church. "We said, 'Let's do something unique.'"

The congregation also chose to decorate primarily in wood, as a reflection of its Polish heritage.

Churches throughout Poland typically are built with beautiful woodwork, as opposed to stone or marble, said Peplowski, and the faces depicted in Madej's work have Slavic features.

The parish soon will begin promoting the cathedral as a pilgrimage site, and it is producing a book explaining all of the artwork.

The congregation is grateful that Madej, who lives in New York Mills, near Utica, NY was able to devote so much time to their church.

Parishioner Christina Giczkowski, of South Buffalo, said Madej's art was something the church would be able to show to future generations.

"Anybody can go out and buy statues that are manufactured, and those are beautiful, too," she said.

But with a sculpture by Madej, she added, "we know it's an original, and it's ours."

Madej, a native of Poland who has been carving for more than 40 years, was equally thankful for the opportunity to be a Michelangelo of sorts for the cathedral.

"They were blessed years. I'm really grateful I was able to accomplish that. I was grateful to the Lord that he chose me to do it," said Madej, who is 67.

Madej crafted the carvings out of various species of wood: oak, cherry, basswood, white sugar pine, maple and walnut to name a few.

He uses hundreds of chisels and a variety of power tools, including chain saws, in a studio in Sauquoit, outside Utica.

The carvings were done during his free time. Madej also is full-time pastor of two Polish National Catholic parishes, one in New York Mills and another in Syracuse, NY.

Madej spent four years on the final installment, a moving portrayal of the 20 mysteries of the rosary that includes biblical scenes such as the Nativity and Jesus dying on the cross.

It is a fitting last piece, considering the cathedral's name.

"I wanted to express the profoundness of the mystery of the rosary," Madej said. "I would say it's like a finale for that church. If we want to understand Jesus and his message and his Gospel, the best understanding is to go through his mother, Mary."

The shrine is 20 feet across and 10 feet tall and is set off from other pieces by its colorfulness.

Normally, Madej prefers to let the color of the wood speak for itself, but in this instance, "It's almost like I heard a voice saying I need to express in color."

The hues are used to highlight the range of emotions associated with the four kinds of mysteries: joyful, luminous, sorrowful and glorious.

Madej, who has created sculptures for other churches in New York and Poland, said he would get up in the middle of the night at times to jot down ideas and drawings for the cathedral sculptures.

And always, the work was accompanied by prayer.