

Roman Catholic Cathedral of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Odesa - a history of faith, indifference, and music

The Cathedral of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary is not only a prominent architectural landmark of Odesa, but also a living history of the city, engraved in stone, music, and human memory. Its mosaic of cultures, peoples, and styles is a mirror of Odesa itself. West and East, classics and modernity, faith and culture have converged here. The history of this temple is the history of Odesa and its community in its best manifestation.



History carved in stone

The territory on which modern Odesa is located has an ancient history. The first settlements on these lands were founded by ancient Greek colonists between the 7th century BC and the 3rd century AD. The following centuries were different periods that have their own rich history.

Due to the multinational composition of the population, Odesa was multi-confessional from the very beginning. Among the numerous religious communities, the Roman Catholic community, formed by immigrants from Western Europe - the French, Italians, Germans, Poles, and Czechs - occupied an important place. It was they who laid the foundation for the creation of one of the most

prominent churches in the city - the Cathedral of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary.



Origins: the first steps of the Catholic community

The first chapel of the Roman Catholic community in Odesa was opened in 1795 - a modest wooden house for prayer. In 1796, the Catholic community was officially allocated a part of land with an area of 3602 m² between Richelieuska, Kateryninska, Polizeyska, and Poshtova streets. In 1798, a parish primary school was also opened. In 1805, Governor Armand-Emmanuel du Plessis, Duke of Richelieu, a Catholic by religion, allocated an entire block on what was then Kateryninska Street for the construction of a Catholic church. In the same year, the parish of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary was founded, and the construction of a stone church under an iron roof, with two courtyards and a dome, designed by the Italian architect Francesco Frapolli, began. The church had modest dimensions: 40 arshins in length, 16 in width, and 23 in height. The construction was completed in 1822. Three stone houses were built next to the church. The first abbot was Father Augustin Genari, a Franciscan.



Community Development: The Flourishing of Catholic Life

According to approximate data, in 1823, 4,236 Catholics lived in Odesa. The largest groups were Germans (1,382 people), Italians (1,328), Polish (890), and French (636). At the same time, most of them were temporary residents: the Germans remained the most numerous among the permanent residents, and the French among the temporary residents.

The development of the Catholic community occurred during the governorship of Olexander Langeron (1815 - 1823), who initiated the development of a new project for the temple. It was during his reign that the free port regime was introduced in Odesa, which contributed to economic and cultural growth. The city was turning into a center of trade, engineering, art, and science.

Langeron, who died in St. Petersburg in 1831, bequeathed to be buried in Odesa. At the initiative of grateful citizens, his ash was solemnly reburied in the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Today, a memorial plaque is installed at the burial site in the right nave of the cathedral.



Architecture: "Odesa style" and European aesthetics

The cathedral was expanded twice to accommodate all parishioners. The last reconstruction took place in 1851 - 1853 according to the project of Francesco Morandi, finalized by Felix Gonsirovsky. On August 16, 1853, the renovated church was consecrated by Bishop Ferdinand Kann.

Architecturally, the cathedral is made in the form of a Latin cross. It combines features of the Romanesque and Gothic styles: the pediments and windows of the bell towers are Gothic, while the dome and half columns are Romanesque. A characteristic feature is the use of local stone - "rakushnyak" (sandstone) without plastering, which created the impression of antiquity. This approach went down in history as the "Odesa style". The roof was covered with red tiles. According to the design, the cathedral's bell tower was supposed to be pointed and tall, but in this case, the bell tower of the Roman Catholic church would be taller than the bell tower of the Orthodox Cathedral of Transfiguration. This caused some controversy, so it was not completed and looks a bit unfinished.



Interior: from marble to Dürer

There were three entrances to the cathedral, the walls and floor were decorated with white marble, in the hall, there were six bronze chandeliers and 120 oak benches. Of particular interest was the marble altar, the carved pulpit, and the 24-register wind organ, made in 1888 by the company "W. Sauer", which was located in the choir above the entrance to the church. In the 20th century, the famous Polish singer and actor Mieczysław Świąńczycki played on it. According to various sources, the cathedral was designed for a number of parishioners from 1200 to 2500 people. The interior was striking in its sophistication: white marble floors, Corinthian columns, pilasters, figures of apostles and evangelists, donated by parishioners and artists from different countries. The interior decoration under white marble was designed in the Renaissance style, the floor was laid out with white-gray marble, groups of Corinthian columns and pilasters arranged in two rows divided the temple into three parts, the stone drum of the dome was supported by pylons.



Of the most valuable decorations of the temple, it is worth highlighting a copy of Raphael's painting "The Assumption of the Virgin" by Carlo Dolci (1518), the icon of St. Francis, "The Sorrowful Mother" by the same Dolci, as well as the icon of the Crucifixion of Christ, created by Albrecht Dürer.

The cathedral was given 12 marble figures of the apostles of Italian work, as well as 4 figures of the evangelists. Pope Pius IX presented the cathedral with a marble baptistery. Artists from Düsseldorf presented 14 paintings of the Stations of the Cross in honor of the consecration of the temple. The cathedral had 120 oak benches and six large bronze chandeliers. To the left of the entrance to the church hung an image of St. Roch, the protector from epidemics, as well as a silver censer with the inscription in French "In memory of the plague of 1812", in which an eternal flame burned. The altars were decorated with figures of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Archangel Michael, and sculptures of the evangelists. The central altar was distinguished by bas-reliefs of a lamb with a cross, and around it were sculptures that harmoniously combined the religious and artistic heritage of Europe. A special and symbolic decoration of the church was the icon of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which was executed by the famous German (Munich) artist Vincenz Fischer.



This is how the interior decoration of the church of those times was written in the book "Odesa and its environs. Guide and Directory" (1892): "The architecture of the church from the outside is not very remarkable at first glance, but inside it is extremely beautiful. The walls and pilasters are decorated with white marble, the floor is marble; especially impressive is the colonnade that extends along both sides, and the altar of artistic works with the icon of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin

Mary, a copy of a painting by Raphael, the work of the artist Fischer (a gift to Countess Olga Naryshkina)”.



In the side aisles later, there were two tombstones made of white marble: Olexander Lanzheron and Father Georgy Razutovych. In the left aisle, the Tiraspol bishop Vikenty Lipsky and canon Franz-Xavier Klimashevsky were buried. Unfortunately, in Soviet times, the burials in the cathedral were removed; now there are only restored memorial plaques.



Soviet times - a history of struggle

After the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the Catholic Cathedral in Odesa was nationalized. It was temporarily transferred to the local religious community, but the rest of the buildings of the temple complex remained under the control of the new authorities. During this period, the temples were requisitioned, priests and parishioners were shot and exiled, and in 1935, the cathedral was finally closed, turning the shrine into a Bulgarian-German club.

Another Catholic church in Odesa - the Cathedral of St. Clement, an outstanding monument of neo-Romanesque architecture, was completely destroyed in 1936. During World War II, in 1941, when Odesa was occupied by Romanian troops, the church temporarily resumed its sacred purpose. The Romanians brought their priests to Odesa, the church was restored by the efforts of the parishioners, a new marble altar was built inside, the floor was tiled, and the images were reinstalled. The artist Mykola Markyn made a new frame for the icon of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The church had a choir, and services were held in German and Polish. However, after the return of Soviet power, the situation changed. In 1949, the cathedral was closed again. The monuments of sacred art were destroyed: four columns on each side were destroyed, the marble floor was dismantled, and the ceiling was replaced with a wooden ceiling. In the space of the former altar, a sports hall with handrails for gymnastics was built, and a balcony and shower rooms were equipped in the basement. The temple was repurposed into a sports complex, completely losing its original appearance. Some shrines were miraculously saved. Before the final closure of the temple, the icon of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary was transferred to the Church of St. Peter on Gavanna Street, 5 - the only continuously operating Catholic church in Odesa during the entire period of Soviet power, which was open to believers from the South and East of Ukraine. Together with the icon, 14 paintings of the Stations of the Cross (donated by artists from Düsseldorf) and a marble baptismal font, which was donated by Pope Pius IX on the occasion of the consecration of the temple, were preserved.



Restoration of the temple: a story of indifference

The temple, which was barbarically vandalized during the Soviet decades, was returned to the Catholic community only in 1991.

On August 9, 1991, Father Prelate Tadeusz Hoppe received the keys to the temple building. Since then, the temple has been restored by the abbots of the cathedral: Fathers Ignacy Ryndzionk, Jan Dombal, and Viktor Szczawinski.

On August 9, 1991, the first Holy Mass was celebrated at the doors of the temple, and on August 15, after the interior was cleaned, the temple feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary took place. The shrine gradually became the spiritual center of Southern Ukraine again.

The repair and restoration of the temple became a multi-year project that required titanic efforts. The initiator of the work was the first abbot of the restored cathedral, Father Ignacy Ryndzionik. Gradually, the temple was rebuilt according to the original design of architect Francesco Morandi. A large team of ministers, parishioners, and just caring people, numbering about 70 people, gathered every day for the restoration work. Over the following years, the abbots who managed the temple devoted their efforts to the project. After many years of hard work, every detail and element of the temple was restored with attention to the original, making it a place of Divine beauty and peace again.



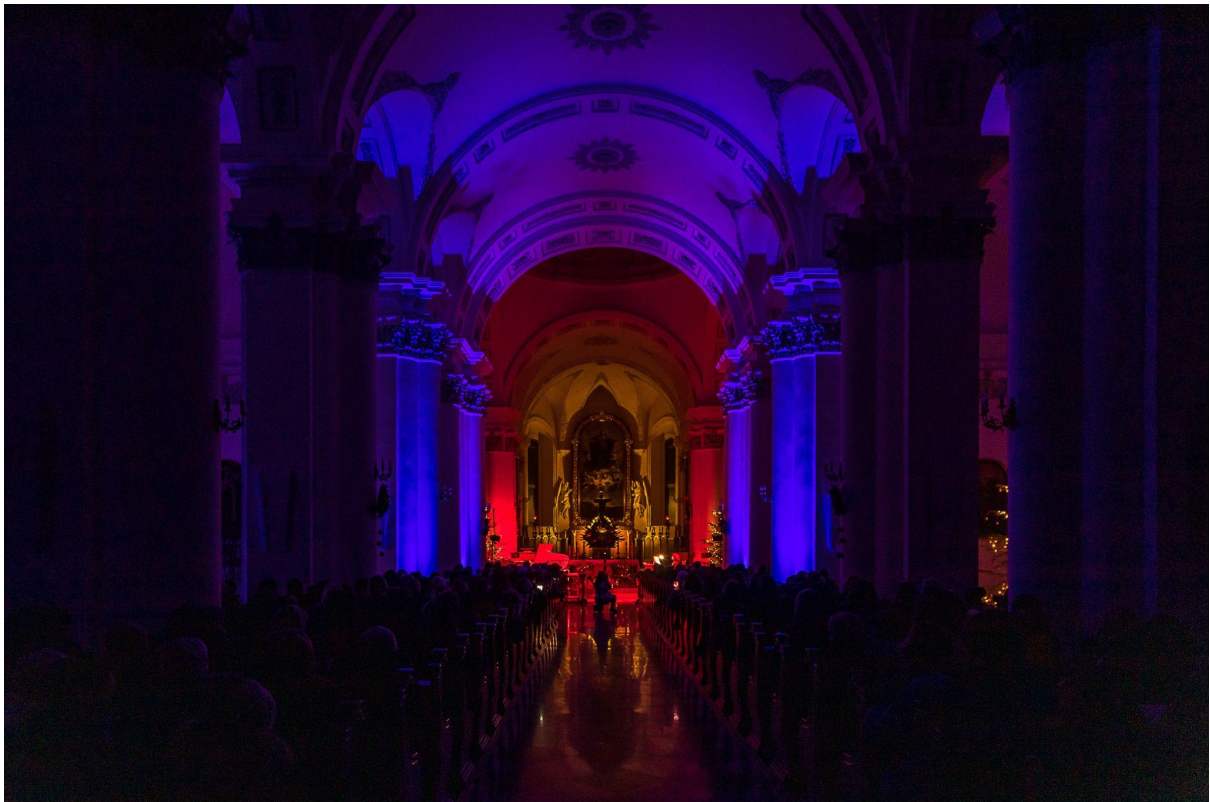
Memorial plaques at the burial sites of O. Lanzheron and V. Lipsky were restored. In 2003, the icon of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the image of the Stations of the Cross, and the baptismal font were returned from the Church of St. Peter.

Remembering the spiritual significance of the icon of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, believers presented her with jewelry and jewels. From them, a crown

was made, which now adorns the image, a golden rose, and other symbolic gifts. The coronation process was initiated by Bishop Bernadsky and completed by Bishop Stanislav Shyrokoradiuk. Pope Francis personally blessed the crown during a general audience in the Vatican on August 3, 2022. The solemn coronation of the icon took place on August 15, 2022, in the Cathedral of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, led by the Apostolic Nuncio to Ukraine, Archbishop Visvaldas Kulbokas.

Today, the cathedral is the center of Catholic spiritual life in Southern Ukraine, a symbol of the invincibility of faith and historical memory.

The cathedral also regularly hosts concerts by various musical groups in Odesa: the National Odesa Philharmonic Orchestra under the direction of conductor Hobart Earle, the “Spirit of Music” group, artists of the Odesa National Academic Opera and Ballet Theater, students of the Odesa National Music Academy, artists of the Odesa Academic Theater of Musical Comedy, etc.



Voice of the Temple: Keys and Pipes

The first organ for the church was made in 1888 by the German company "W. Sauer", had 24 stops, and was located in the choir above the central entrance. During the Soviet regime and the closure of the church in 1949, the historical organ was destroyed. Unfortunately, photos, information about the instrument, and the disposition of the organ have not been preserved: during the war of 1941-1945, the archive with the documentation was lost.

For a long time, a digital organ of the Dutch company "Johannus", manufactured in 1972, was used for services and concerts. Unfortunately, this instrument was partially damaged during the restoration of the church, when a bucket of paint fell on it from the ceiling and damaged the pedal keyboard and the right part of the upper manual. The keyboard of the upper manual was restored, and a new pedal keyboard was made (because of this, it is non-standard and has slightly wider indentations than the original). The organ is still actively used in services and concerts.

Odesa, Roman Catholic Cathedral of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary
Digital organ "Johannus", opus 220, 1972, II/33 reg.



SP HULP

Koppel II/I

Koppel I/P

Koppel II/P

Tremulant I

Tremulant II

Echo

Zep. Zwel

PEDAAL

Contrabas 16'

Subbass 16'

Prestant 8'
Gedekt 8'
Quint 5 1\2'
Octaaf 4'
Mixtuur 3st
Bazuin 16'
Trompet 8'
Klaroen 4'

I MANUAL

Prestant 8'
Gamba 8'
Holpijp 8'
Octaaf 4'
Open Fluit 4'
Quint 2 2\3'
Octaaf 2'
Superquint 1 1\3'
Octaaf 1'
Mixtuur 5st
Trompet 8'
Klaroen 4'

II MANUAL

Quintadeen 16'
Prestant 8'
Salicional 8'
Roerfluit 8'
Octaaf 4'
Koppelfluit 4'
Quintfluit 2 2/3'
Fluit 2'
Sesquialter 2st
Fagot 16'
Dulciaan 8'

COMBINATIONS

PP
P
MF
F
FF

T
HR
TA (Zungen ab)

Crescendo

The idea to return the organ to the church belonged to the Bishop-Ordinary of the Odesa-Simferopol Diocese, Bronislaw Bernardski. The new organ was gifted in 2019 by the parish of the Church of St. Andrew Bobola, where it had been located since its construction in 1978, and was brought from Poland by Canon Father Ryszard Puczilowski with the assistance of Bishop Bronislaw Bernardski and Father Daniel Kulakowski. The instrument, the work of the Polish organist and organ master Tadeusz Rajkowski from the city of Włocławek, was built in 1978 and was located in the Church of St. Andrew Bobola in the city of Białystok, Podlaskie Voivodeship. The organ has 28 (27) stops in two manuals and pedals, 1922 pipes; the playing and stop`s mechanisms are pneumatic, the windchests are membrane-type, and the playing table is mobile. The installation and tuning of the organ in the Odesa church was carried out by organ master Tomasz Klymchuk (Poland). At the moment, the wind organ is only partially functioning and needs major repairs, but it can be heard at services and concerts held in the cathedral.

*Odesa, Roman Catholic Cathedral of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary
Pipe organ by Polish master Tadeusz Rajkowski, opus 1978, II/28 (27) reg.*



PEDAL

Subbass 16'

Oktavbas 8'

Fletbas 8'

Choral 2x
Acuta 2x
Fagot 8'
Bombard 8'
Copula I/P
Copula II/P

I MANUAL

Kryty 8'
Pryncypal 8'
Suavial 8'
Oktawa 4'
Kwinta 2 2\3'
Pryncypal 2'
Sesquialtera 2x
Korona 4-5x
Mixture 3x
Trompet 8'
Copula II/I

II MANUAL

Kwintadena 8'
Rurflet 8'
Prestant 4'
Flute (?) 2'
Gemshorn 2 2/3'
Rog Nocny 2'
Siflet 1'
Harmonica 3x
Scharf 3x
Krumhorn 8'
?

Supermixtur

+

2 free combinations

Preset combinations

P

F

T

Crescendo

Echo

Sources used:

1. Cathedral of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Odessa: History and Modernity / Oleksandr Doroer, Anelya Yemelyanenko, Iryna Shepelska — Odesa, 2016
2. Organs: From Kyivan Rus to Ukraine / Sergiy Kaliberda — Lviv, 2016
3. Organs of Ukraine - encyclopedia of organs — <https://www.organy.lviv.ua/> (electronic resource)

Archive photos:

Archives of the Odessa-Simferopol Diocese of the Roman Catholic Church

Modern photos of the church:

Mykolay Vdovenko

Olexandr Gimarov

Anastasia Kiktenko

Artem Kiktenko

Volodymyr Ekimbashyan

Sofia Yevska

Yuriy Litvinenko

Yulia Yurchak