



## The Abbey Church at Žďár nad Sázavou

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*Top, the interior of the basilica: the circular painting of Christ near the top of the altar and the choirstalls, photograph below, were conserved with the help of The Friends; left, part of the organ within its setting by Jan Santini-Aichel*



## The Rebirth of the Abbey Church at Žďár nad Sázavou

*With a Helping Hand from The Friends*  
by Zbyněk Vintř



When I met Barbara Peacock for the first time almost 11 years ago, we were at the beginning of what seemed to be a Sisyphus-like task at that time. Our parish wanted to restore the Abbey Church of Our Lady in Žďár nad Sázavou, the second largest in Moravia, but we had very limited funds and had only started to liaise with the local and State authorities to find grants suitable for the project. Every single penny was extremely welcome. It was an unexpected blessing that there appeared an Englishwoman who came with an offer of help. We could not believe it at first and considered it almost a joke. We know now that The Friends have a good sense of English humour and their offers are always real and well-intended. The Friends organised a charity concert at the Czech Embassy in London and the proceedings (£2,000, an incredible sum of money for us at that time) went towards the conservation of one of four Baroque confessionals that were infested with woodworm. It became the first step on a long road of cooperation - I always proudly show the confessional to visitors and pilgrims and mention the unusual history of a great friendship and support that started with this project.

The Cistercian abbey in Žďár nad Sázavou was founded in 1252 by members of important noble families of the era and played an important role in the cultivation and development of areas along the Bohemian-Moravian border. It survived a turbulent history of glory and devastation, starting with fast growth followed by issues within the monastic community, destruction during the Hussite wars, renewed existence, disputes with the Bishops of Olomouc, a short-but-prosperous Baroque period with the splendour of architectural and religious achievements stopped by the abbey's final dissolution by the Emperor Joseph II and conversion into a château. During the forty years of communist rule between 1948-1989, the church and the whole monastery complex suffered overall degradation. The abbey church was returned to the parish after the Velvet Revolution, but it seemed

unlikely that the parish would ever be able to renovate it due to its size and the lack of funds. When a young priest, Father Vladimír Záleský, was appointed to the parish in 2002, he decided to start a long-term renovation project with substantial help from many volunteers.

The abbey church contains many precious works of art. The original Gothic church with its three-aisled nave was redesigned in the Baroque style by the world-famous architect Jan Santini-Aichel. Santini's concept of the Baroque high altar includes a large original painting of the Assumption of Virgin Mary by the Silesian painter Michael Willmann surrounded by statues of Řehoř Thény, a sculptor who came to Žďár from Southern Tyrol. The monumental altar is completed by a smaller painting at the top, which depicts Christ welcoming his mother to heaven, leading her to the open arms of God the Father, whose statue rises at the very top of the whole structure. The upper part of the altar, including the smaller painting of Christ, the statue of God the Father and dozens of smaller and larger statues of angels were badly affected by moisture, rot and woodworm, and needed immediate conservation treatment. In 2009, Barbara Peacock and The Friends reached out to the Headley Trust on our behalf and secured a substantial grant of £20,000 that resulted in a year-long conservation project, which allowed us to save the top of the altar. At the time, it was the largest project of The Friends completed in the Czech Republic.

The Friends helped us further by funding the conservation of the Baroque choir stalls, the precious Baroque organ by Johann David Sieber and other smaller projects. However, it was not only the money that gave us the support we needed. The whole renovation of the abbey church has continued for years and there were times when we got exhausted, tired of the never-ending work, struggling to secure resources to continue in the journey we had started. Father Vladimír Záleský and Mr František Laštovička, the main persons responsible for all the works, mentioned multiple times how encouraging it always was to remember there were people who cared about their work hundreds of miles away.

On May 1st 2009, the first stage of the renovation was finished and the abbey church received local as well as international attention when it was raised to the status of a Minor Basilica by Pope Benedict

XVI. The parish started to flourish, it became a place of diocesan pilgrimage, an annual synod and a national meeting for families and youth groups. However, most of the Czech and foreign visitors know Žďár nad Sázavou much better for another unique architectural masterpiece - the pilgrimage church of Saint John of Nepomuk at Zelená Hora, one of twelve Czech landmarks on the UNESCO World Heritage list. Its history and significance would be enough for a stand-alone article: it was built in 1722 based on the plans of the architect Jan Santini-Aichel and the ideological concept of the abbot Václav Vejmluva. The church is supposed to be a reliquary of Saint John, a star between the stars in the heaven among saints and angels. It is full of symbols, it has a unique ambience of light and shades, its walls are aligned on concentric circles and its Baroque-Gothic design is considered a masterpiece in the Czech history of architecture.

The iconic pilgrimage church building was begun in 1719 - legends say that the abbot Vejmluva had a dream in which he saw a star descending from heaven. He interpreted the dream as a sign from the martyr John of Nepomuk, the vicar general of the Archdiocese of Prague, murdered by the King of Bohemia Wenceslas IV in 1393 and thrown from the Charles Bridge into the Vltava River – his dead body was found thanks to five stars that appeared above it. Vejmluva wanted to celebrate the blessed John because he was born in Nepomuk and also the abbey of Žďár nad Sázavou was founded from the same place – monks referred to Nepomuk as their mother and considered themselves siblings with the blessed John. The abbot Vejmluva was completely absorbed in the project, it is said that he carried along a set of small sticks everywhere and constantly tried to assemble a star-shaped floor plan with them. His efforts climaxed when he shared his ideas with the architect Santini, who proposed to build the pilgrimage church on concentric circles with convex and concave walls forming the star.

The pilgrimage church became an outstanding masterpiece blending Gothic and Baroque architectural principles but the peak time of Baroque pilgrimages lasted for only a few decades. In fact, the church got almost demolished after the dissolution of the abbey and only the relocation of the municipal graveyard saved it as a temporary cemetery church. Its unique style finally became fully recognised only 300 years later by its inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage list. In 2014, the

pilgrimage church was returned to the parish as part of the Czech restitutions, a process when the properties confiscated by the communist regime were returned to their respective private owners. This opened a parallel track of renovations and conservation on a much larger scale - the works have been co-funded by the European Union and local authorities, however, the technical requirements and demands became much higher. All this took place with thousands of tourists and pilgrims coming every year and multiple events taking place in the pilgrimage church, leading up to the 300th anniversary of its blessing on September 27th, 2022.

Among the many groups of tourists we welcomed two interesting groups in 2016 and 2018. Six English and six Czech volunteers worked together for a week on what was euphemistically called a 'working holiday'. Both parties were triggered by one of The Friends, London architect Peter Jamieson, who has become a keen advocate of volunteer work in the Czech Republic. In 2016, we worked on a small plague cemetery that was also built by Santini and Vejmluva. The working party resulted in the successful opening of the place for visitors during the summer months, which received a lot of publicity and a visit from the then British Ambassador H.E. Ms Jan Thompson. And this year in June we worked on the cleaning of an old mill that will hopefully be converted into a small museum and a retreat centre for groups of pilgrims and tourists. The working parties taught us another important lesson: the support of The Friends is not only from a distance, it has also become very personal and human. Many friendships, lots of fun and close relationships started there; the days we worked together and the evenings we tried to improve our English after the dinners brought us closer. The work was hard, but we believe that all participants have pleasant memories of their 'holidays' in Žďár nad Sázavou.

Looking into the history of the monastery, our work is only a small drop. But when the Cistercian monks arrived more than 750 years ago, they first dug a well with water for the community. The well has stayed there ever since and became one of the key places of the abbey. It still produces water. Every small drop gives life to the abbey, the people and the region where we live.

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