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## The Church of St. John the Baptist in the Vlach Village of Orawka (the 17th century) – an Attempt at Identifications of Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage Assets

*Kościół św. Jana Chrzciciela w wołoskiej wsi Orawka (XVII wiek) – identyfikacja zasobów materialnego i niematerialnego dziedzictwa kulturowego*

### ABSTRACT

The church of St. John the Baptist in Orawka, located close to the present-day Polish-Slovak border, is one of the most valuable monuments of wood architecture. It is considered the oldest wooden monument in Orawa region and a symbol of the region's complicated

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history. Its heritage is a testament to the interacting cultures of different nations and ethnicities, among others: Vlach, Ruthenian, Hungarian, Slovak and Polish. This article's objective is a new attempt at identification of assets of cultural heritage found in the church in Orawka. We present historical objects of art, as well as the iconographic program of the church's interior. We also describe the main rituals and customs linked to the church, practiced by the local population to this day. In our research, we employed qualitative methods – analysis of historic and iconographic sources, as well as open-ended interviews, and participant observation conducted in the years 2015–2019 in the local community of Orawka. In the analysis of the material, we use both the perspectives of ethnography and cultural anthropology, supplemented with an input from other scientific disciplines and sub-disciplines, primarily history, historical anthropology, history of art and theology.

**Key words:** culture heritage, polish-slovak border, Carpathians, wood architecture, church in Orawka, history of places, vlach heritage

#### STRESZCZENIE

Kościół św. Jana Chrzciciela w Orawce, obecnie na pograniczu polsko-słowackim, należy do najcenniejszych zabytków architektury drewnianej. Uznawany jest za najstarszy drewniany zabytek Orawy i symbol skomplikowanych dziejów tego regionu. Znajdujące się w nim dziedzictwo jest świadectwem przenikania kultury religijnej różnych narodów i etnosów, w tym m.in.: wołoskiego, ruskiego, węgierskiego, słowackiego i polskiego. Celem tego artykułu jest nowa identyfikacja zasobów dziedzictwa kulturowego kościoła w Orawce. Prezentujemy tu zabytkowe artefakty sztuki, jak również program ikonograficzny namalowany na jego ścianach wewnętrznych. Ukazujemy też najważniejsze obrzędy i zwyczaje związane z kościołem, praktykowane do dziś przez społeczność lokalną. Do opracowania tematu użyliśmy metod jakościowych – analizy źródeł historycznych i wizualnych, wywiadów swobodnych i obserwacji uczestniczących prowadzonych w latach 2015–2019 wśród społeczności lokalnej Orawki. W analizie materiału wykorzystujemy zarówno perspektywę etnografii i antropologii kulturowej, jak również wspomagamy się wynikami innych dyscyplin i subdyscyplin naukowych, w tym przede wszystkim historii, antropologii historycznej, historii sztuki, religioznawstwa i teologii.

**Słowa kluczowe:** dziedzictwo kulturowe, pogranicze polsko-słowackie, Karpaty, drewniana architektura, kościół w Orawce, historia miejscowości, wołoskie dziedzictwo

#### INTRODUCTION

It is a certain paradox that the cultural heritage of the Orawa (Orava, Árva) region, located on the Polish-Slovak border, still remains to be properly discovered and included in the lists of world cultural heritage. The monuments of material and immaterial culture found in the region – old churches of various denominations with their wall paintings and religious paraphernalia, multi-cultural cemeteries, wooden and brick wayside shrines, shepherds' huts, bustling fairs, wooden bell towers dispelling evil forces, enemies and plague – attract more and more interest due to their beauty and color, especially in a time when both experts and



Photo 1. Church of St. John the Baptist in Orawka, Poland, 2020, photo by E. Kocój

local communities turn their attention towards cultural heritage of regions within Europe. The unique cultural landscape of Orawa was shaped by the coexistence of the area's multiple cultures and religions, sometimes lasting for centuries, sometimes more transient, economic migration, changes of administration and state borders, and general ethnic and religious history. Orawa has always been a cultural and religious borderland, where different ethnicities and denominations overlapped and interacted. The region's folklore thus shows Eastern Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant influences, as well as – to a lesser extent – the ones of Greek Catholicism and Judaism. A distinguishing feature of the region has been its so-called multi-faith, a form of syncretism of beliefs and rituals, which accompanied the tangible cultural heritage. Orawa's cultural landscape includes also spaces of remembrance and non-remembrance: on one hand, stories, persons and symbols often recalled with pride by the region's inhabitants, on the other hand – ones forgotten, suppressed or silently ignored in shame.

One of the remarkable monuments of cultural heritage is the wooden church of Saint John the Baptist in the village of Orawka. The church was probably founded in the years 1650–1659 by Father Jan Szczechowicz (Joannes Scepusiensis), a priest with a long-lasting connection to Spisz (Spiš, Szepes), Orawa and Kraków. The construction, architecture, wall art and furnishings of the church, however, have to be considered in a broader scope of wooden shrines of various denominations, built by different ethnicities in the Carpathian Mountains starting as early as since the

10th century CE. A specific type of wooden sacral architecture has developed in the Carpathians over the centuries, with varying styles and forms depending on the available types of wood, local landscape, and the economic situation of the community. Features of construction and architecture migrated from one place to another throughout the Carpathians. A custom spread through the area was decorating the interior of the churches with polychrome wall paintings depicting theological ideas, as well as persons and events from the story of Salvation, often with added local references. Christian shrines had a symbolic meaning – they were often built on ancient sites of worship of older religions or were, like the latter, placed on hill tops, which made them a visible sign of the new faith spreading. Along with the buildings, Christian rituals, ceremonies and customs propagated among the local population, mixed with older traditions, which are still alive in many parts of the Carpathians. The religiosity of Orawa has been shaped in a similar way, showing influences from diverse traditions and ethnicities.

This article's objective is a new description and analysis of the cultural heritage of the church of St. John the Baptist in Orawka. We will discuss aspects of material culture, such as religious paraphernalia and polychrome wall paintings, read from the hermeneutic perspective, as well as the multi-cultural dimension of the church, related to the coexistence of various ethnicities and denominations in the Orawa region, both in adversarial and complementary manner, resulting in a unique cultural heritage that transcends divisions. We propose that the complicated history of the region with diverse settlement patterns, and influences from different cultures, religious denominations and state authorities resulted in differing narratives regarding the setting up of the church of St. John the Baptist in Orawka. Moreover, certain contexts of the church's iconography and the role it played in the conditions of cultural and religion borderland have not yet been fully explored. The church of St. John the Baptist was built in 17th century, which was an uneasy time in the region's history. Polish historiography views the shrine principally as a symbol of the re-Catholicization of Orawa and the struggle of Polish Catholics to freely practice their faith.<sup>1</sup> The Slovak perspective is that the region was, as previously mentioned, a cultural, linguistic and religious borderland inhabited mainly by so-called *gorals*, an ethnic group defining themselves as „locals” and speaking vernacular Slovak. Upper Orawa's assignment to Poland after World War I caused a gradual suppression of Slovak identity and Polonization of the local populace, often by force (e.g. by means of the re-Catholicization of Orawa and, from 1918 on,

<sup>1</sup> T.M. Trajdos, H. Pieńkowska, *Kościół w Orawce*, Kraków 1999, s. 10.

by the domination of the Polish language in the Catholic liturgy)<sup>2</sup>. The Hungarians view the church as a testament to the former glory of the Kingdom of Hungary, whose northern borders extended up to the vicinity of Orawka. Laszlo Domonkos and Konrad Sutarski, in their essayistic work *Przejęte przez Polskę w opiekę* [Taken Under Poland's Care], even call the church in Orawka „the northernmost monument of Hungarian culture”<sup>3</sup>. The array of Hungarian kings and saints that is part of the interior polychromy of the church is considered by the Hungarians to be an example of the remarkable cultural heritage of their country, which formerly extended northwards several hundred kilometers farther than now. The veneration of these saints contributes to strengthening the Hungarian identity of Catholics living in Orawa<sup>4</sup>. Hence, many Hungarians visit Orawka to this day in order to pray at the images of King Saint Stephen and other saints important to their homeland<sup>5</sup>. Despite conflicting narratives concerning the church in Orawka, which result largely from the ideologies prevailing in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe during the communist era, today the monument serves as a symbol uniting three countries and many ethnicities, as well as an example of the multilayered past of the Polish-Slovak-Hungarian borderland.

## HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

Orawka is a small village near the Polish-Slovak border, located on an old trade route called „the Polish Road”, which linked Kraków via Myślenice and Jordanów to the Orava Castle and Upper Hungary (present-day Slovakia). It was used for transporting salt from Wieliczka, as well as copper and lead from the mines in Olkusz, to Hungary<sup>6</sup>. From 16th century onwards, the area was settled from the south, with small settlements established under Vlach law by members of various ethnic groups. Nomadic Vlach-Ruthenian shepherds coming from the east mixed in with farmers and shepherds (both Slavs and Hungarians) brought from the south by Hungarian landowners. Meanwhile, encouraged by promises of land and personal freedom, a Polish farmer population was fleeing into

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<sup>2</sup> Field research, interviews with the Slovak minority, Orawa 2018–2019.

<sup>3</sup> L. Domonkos, K. Sutarski, *Przejęte przez Polskę w opiekę*, Budapeszt 2010, s. 21.

<sup>4</sup> N. Udvarhelyi, *Magyar szentek temploma*, Budapeszt 2013, s. 195.

<sup>5</sup> Field research, Orawka, participant observation 2015–2019.

<sup>6</sup> P. Krzywda, *Charakterystyka geograficzno-historyczna obszaru zamieszkiwanego przez Górali Orawskich*, w: *Kultura ludowa Górali Orawskich*, red. U. Janicka-Krzywda, Kraków 2011, s. 21.





Photo 2. Cemetery around the church in Orawka, 2019, photo by E. Kocój

the region from the north, from the estate of the Komorowski family near Żywiec, as well as from Jordanów and the area around Nowy Targ. This rich tapestry of human types was complemented by criminals seeking shelter and easy money, thus creating Orawa's tradition of brigandry<sup>7</sup>.

The place name Orawka was first attested in 1575, in a description of the village Jabłonka which had been established several decades earlier. According to the tax records of the Orava Castle, the location charter for Orawka was issued in 1585 by the Orava Castle administrator, Jan Abaffa, for the village principal (*sołtys*) Jerzy Wilga and nine Vlach settlers<sup>8</sup>. We know that the term „Vlach” was used in various contexts at the time. It applied to shepherds of various ethnicities leading a nomadic lifestyle and traveling with their families and herds throughout the wider area of the Carpathians, as well as to members of the ethnic group originating in Wallachia and arriving into Orawa from areas such as Ruthenia

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<sup>7</sup> I. Floreková, *Historia miejscowości do roku 1848, w: Orawa bez granic. Północno-wschodnia Orawa*, Dolny Kubin 2016, s. 51; H. Ruciński, *Chrześcijaństwo na Orawie do końca XVIII wieku*, Białystok 2001; P. Jabłoński, *Teksty gwarowe z Orawy, „Ziemia”* 1931, s. 4–10; W. Jostowa, *Pasterstwo na polskiej Orawie*, Zakopane 1972; Z. Holub-Pacewicowa, *Osadnictwo pasterskie i wędrówki w Tatrach i na Podtatrzu*, Kraków 1931.

<sup>8</sup> W. Semkowicz, *Materiały źródłowe do dziejów osadnictwa Górnej Orawy, cz. 1, Dokumenty*, Kraków 1932, s. 15.

or Transylvania, or to the settling of populace, local or otherwise, under the Vlach law with the purpose of establishing a pastoral economy<sup>9</sup>.

According to the aforementioned document, in exchange for their efforts exerted in establishing the new settlement called Orawka, the settlers were granted exemption from all levies, rents and other obligations for a period of sixteen years, which stimulated economic growth. Each of the settlements in this area of the Polish-Hungarian borderland, in the basin of the Czarna Orawka river, was given the same name: Orawka, with an addition of the surname of the first *soltys* – the leader of the settlers. Only after 1848 was the name Orawka used on its own, while the nearby villages took on other names<sup>10</sup>, originating from the surname of their respective *soltys*. From the time of its origin until 1918, the village belonged to the Kingdom of Hungary, which formed a constituent part of Austria-Hungary starting in 1867. From January 1919 to July 1920 Orawka remained under Czechoslovak administration, after which it was incorporated into Poland<sup>11</sup>. It became part of Slovakia for the duration of World War II, and returned to Poland after that. It is worth mentioning that starting from the 11th century the region of Orawa belonged to the archdiocese of Esztergom. It appears that from mid-12th century onwards, the religious center of Orawa was the Orava Castle (in present-day Slovakia)<sup>12</sup>.

The wooden church located on the top of a small hill was probably built in the years 1650–1659 under the direction of Father Jan Szczechowicz (Joannes Scepusiensis), who was born in Ratułów in the Podhale region, received his ordination in Kraków and for many years carried out his ministry in the region of Spisz<sup>13</sup>. The funds for construction came

<sup>9</sup> G. Jawor, *Osady prawa wołoskiego i ich mieszkańcy na Rusi Czerwonej w późnym średniowieczu*, Lublin 2004; idem, *Osadnictwo historyczne od XIV do początków XVII w.*, w: *Bojkowszczyzna Zachodnia – wczoraj, dziś i jutro*, t. 1, Monografie IGiPZ, 17, red. J. Wolski, Warszawa 2016, s. 361–394; idem, *Particularités de «ius Valachicum» dans la Pologne du XVe et XVIe siècles. Question de l'autorité exercée sur les paroisses orthodoxes par les knyazes*, w: *Studia mediaevalia Europaea et Orientalia. Miscellanea in honorem professoris emeriti Victor Spinei oblata*, red. G. Bilavski, D. Aparaschivei, București 2018, s. 529–543; idem, *La colonisation valaque sur les versants nord des Carpates pendant le Petit Âge Glaciaire (aux XVe et XVIe siècles)*, „Balcanica Posnaniensia. Acta et studia” 2018, 25, s. 251–268; idem, *Migracje ludności wiejskiej na pograniczu polsko-mołdawskim w XVI wieku*, „Balcanica Posnaniensia. Acta et studia” 2021, 28, 1, *Ius Valachicum II*, s. 177–190.

<sup>10</sup> A. Kavuljak, *Historický miestopis Oravy*, Bratislava 1955, s. 190.

<sup>11</sup> P. Krzywda, *op. cit.*, s. 18–19.

<sup>12</sup> H. Ruciński, *op. cit.*, s. 23.

<sup>13</sup> M. Grabski, *Architektura sakralna*, w: *Kultura ludowa Górali Orawskich*, red. U. Janicka-Krzywda, Kraków 2011, s. 145–146.

from the local faithful<sup>14</sup> and the builder priest, who most likely obtained his part from the Hungarian bishop of Esztergom (in exile), György Lippay<sup>15</sup>; this manner of financing was often practiced in the time of the Counter-Reformation. The church was eventually dedicated to St. John the Baptist „in desertum” („in the wilderness”), which some Polish historians view as a reflection of the mission of Fr. Szczechowicz carried out in the sparsely populated and heavily wooded borderland. „In desertum” could also mean that the church was one of the first Christian shrines established in the remote, underpopulated and underdeveloped Orawa of the time<sup>16</sup>. The phrase could also refer to the fact that this was the only Catholic church set up in Upper Orawa among Lutheran churches, which were originally built as such or forcibly converted by Hungarian nobility of the Thurz family, the Protestant rulers of the Orava Castle. It is also known that Orawka was at the time inhabited not only by Catholics, but also by Protestants associated with the previously established church in Jabłonka<sup>17</sup>.

The church in Orawka is constructed from timber logs, with the chancel oriented towards the east. The shrine was consecrated in 1715 by the vicar general of the diocese of Syrmia, Lucas Natalis (Lukács Nataly)<sup>18</sup>. The consecration of the walls is attested by so-called *zacheuszki* or apostolic crosses, also known as apostolic candleholders. These, according to the old Roman rite, were placed by the bishop in twelve locations within the church building during consecration. The rite refers to the text of the Bible and is modeled after the consecrations of the tabernacle (Exodus 40) and the temple of Solomon (2 Chronicles 5–7, Psalm 26). All twelve *zacheuszki* have been preserved in Orawka and can still be seen on the church walls<sup>19</sup>.

Construction started in 1651 with erection of the church tower. Earlier, Jan Szczechowicz purchased a third of the Madoń farm from Jan Teslak for the price of twenty imperial thalers<sup>20</sup>. Establishing the parish and setting up the church was possible thanks to the influence of the Hungarian Catholic Church, especially the bishop of Esztergom, György Lippay, and

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<sup>14</sup> Prímási Levéltár [Primate's Archives of Esztergom] [dalej: PL], *Visitatio canonica*, 1697, Liber 10.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>16</sup> Field researches, Orawka, participant observation 2015–2019.

<sup>17</sup> See more: Archiwum Prymasowskie w Ostrzyhomiu, *Filiatis Jablonkas De Ecclesia; Ecclesia Orawka sub Kulich Mater Vitata*, M. Dudáš, *Historické budovy evanjelickej cirkvi a.v. na Slovensku: základná starostlivosť, ochrana a obnova*, Kežmarok 2006; J. Krivošova et. al., *Evanjelicke kostoly na Slovensku*, Liptovský Mikuláš 2001.

<sup>18</sup> PL, *Visitatio canonica*, 1731, Liber 24.

<sup>19</sup> Field research, participant observation, Orawka, 2019.

<sup>20</sup> H. Ruciński, *op. cit.*, s. 91.





Photo 3. Main altar – church of St. John the Baptist in Orawka, 2020, photo by E. Kocój

the protection granted to Fr. Szczechowicz by Emperor Ferdinand III. In 1656, when Fr. Ratułowski visited the parish, the construction of the church was ongoing, and the walls reached the height of approximately 3.5 meters<sup>21</sup>. Until construction was completed, services were held at the consecrated portable altar located under the church tower, in which valuable bells donated by the Habsburgs had already been placed.

According to written records from the 17th century and iconographic sources from the beginning of the 20th century, the original shape of the building was different from the present one. At first, it comprised two parts – the nave and the chancel. It was expanded in the beginning of the 18th century: the brick chapel of Our Lady of Sorrows was added along the eastern side of the building, its construction completed – according to the later chronogram in Latin on the northern wall of the chapel – in 1728<sup>22</sup>. At that time, the memory of the *kuruc* uprisings and troops marauding through Orawa was still fresh, hence the chapel was probably originally designed for protection. The walls are over a meter thick. According to the local tradition, a spring inside the chapel provided water

<sup>21</sup> T.M. Trajdos, *Wizytacja Ks. Jana Ratułowskiego na Orawie w r. 1656*, „Podhalanka” 1992, 1–2, s. 52.

<sup>22</sup> *Conscriptio e Comitatu Districtusque Arvensi*, 1761, Liber 60, 1761, s. 76.

to the villagers seeking shelter in times of danger. Some of the locals considered water from the spring to be miraculous. The spring was ultimately filled in at the end of the 20th century<sup>23</sup>. A small room adjoins the chapel on its north side; it was formerly used as sacristy and treasury.

At the beginning of the 20th century, and subsequently in the 1920s and 1930s, the somewhat decrepit church building was renovated and partly remodeled. The tower was joined to the nave, its onion-shaped dome replaced by a spire with turrets. Additionally, a separate dome roof was placed over the chapel; this was later reverted to a single-ridge roof with a ridge turret, which exists to this day<sup>24</sup>.

A cemetery surrounds the church on three sides. Originally it was placed only on the west side, according to the old Christian custom of burying the dead towards the west, symbolizing earthly death as the sunset of human life. The cemetery was later expanded until it eventually spread along three sides of the church building. Old tombstones from the beginning of the 20th century can be found also on the north side<sup>25</sup>. As for the southern side of the church, there is a stone column statue between the church wall and the road. It was founded in 1754 by Fr. Jan Grotowski and erected in 1758 by Fr. Adam Wilczek, the parish priest in Orawka<sup>26</sup>. The statue depicts the Mother of God with the Christ Child in her arms. She is presented as a full-frontal figure. The main sculpture is flanked from two sides by St. Donatus of Arezzo (the fourth century) and St. Florian (the third/fourth century). Both saints assumed an apotropaic function in Polish-Slovak-Hungarian folklore: they protected against natural disasters, interceded during thunderstorms and assisted in extinguishing fires<sup>27</sup>.

On the front of the column, at its base, there is a relief depicting a penitent half-bare Mary Magdalene, kneeling and prostrating in front of the cross, with her right hand over her heart. She holds a penitential scourge in her left hand and has a crown of thorns on her head. At the foot of the cross, on its right side, the skull of Adam can be seen, and on the left side there is a vessel holding perfume used by Mary to anoint Jesus' feet. Mary Magdalene is the patron saint of sincere penitents and of those led astray, her name was also invoked in many regions at the

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<sup>23</sup> Field research, interview, Women, 80-year-old, Orawka; Men, 65-year-old, Orawka, August 2019.

<sup>24</sup> M. Bukowski, *Drewniany kościół parafialny w Orawce i jego polichromia*, Kraków 1935, s. 5.

<sup>25</sup> Field research, Orawka, June 2020.

<sup>26</sup> *Conscriptio e Comitatu Districtusque Arvensi*, s. 75.

<sup>27</sup> J. Bystron, *Księga imion w Polsce używanych*, Warszawa 1938, s. 157, 183.

times of plague or adverse weather. She was especially venerated during the Counter-Reformation, when she was considered the very symbol of conversion<sup>28</sup>. On the reverse of the column, there is a figure of St. Rosalie of Sicily, a virgin hermit living in the 12th century on Monte Pellegrino near Palermo<sup>29</sup>. She is considered to be a protector against plague. The entire column, bearing depictions of the Mother of God and the saints vanquishing evil, took on, starting from the 18th century, the function of a plague column. Similar objects were erected in many places in the Carpathians (including Orawa and Spisz) as a sign of gratitude for sparing the residents of villages and towns from the plague or in commemoration of its victims. Contemporary accounts from local inhabitants also convey the notion that the column in Orawka is an apotropaic plague column of thanksgiving, erected at the site of a former cholera cemetery<sup>30</sup>.

#### TANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE CHURCH OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST IN ORAWKA

An outstanding element of the cultural heritage of the church in Orawka is its interior and the artifacts therein. The latter come from various times and reflect the changing jurisdictions over the shrine throughout the centuries.

The central point of any church is the altar, which in the Christian tradition represents the presence of God and the symbolic center of the world. The reredos (altarpiece) in Orawka probably dates back to the turn of the 17th and 18th century. It is made of polychrome wood in the Baroque style and has three axes and two levels. The altar's antependium features an allegorical depiction of a pelican feeding its young, produced by the artist Jan Bukowski in 1924<sup>31</sup>. The scene symbolizes the sacrifice of Christ and his utmost dedication to humanity. The main element of the

<sup>28</sup> *Święta Maria Magdalena w wierze, pobożności, teologii i sztuce – dawniej i dziś. Perspektywa uniwersalna i regionalna*, red. J. Jeziński, K. Parzych-Blakiewicz, P. Rabczyński, Olsztyn 2015.

<sup>29</sup> H. Fros, F. Sowa, *Twoje imię. Przewodnik onomastyczno-hagiograficzny*, Kraków 1982, s. 471.

<sup>30</sup> Field research, interview, Women, 80 years, Orawka, June 2018; Women, 89 years, August 2019.

<sup>31</sup> T.M. Trajdos, H. Pieńkowska, *op. cit.*, s. 70; M. Sieramska, Pelikan, <https://www.jhi.pl/psj/pelikan> [dostęp: 2.10.2020]; *Fizjologi i Aviariusum. Średniowieczne traktaty o symbolice zwierząt*, przeł. i oprac. St. Kobielius, Kraków 2005, s. 123–124; J.C. Cooper, *Zwierzęta symboliczne i mityczne*, przeł. A. Kozłowska-Ryś, L. Ryś, Poznań 1998, s. 201–202.

altar is currently a sculpture of the Pietà – Mother of God on a throne, holding the horizontal body of Jesus removed from the cross. The sculpture dates back to the turn of the 17th and 18th century<sup>32</sup>. During the month of June, a painting depicting St. John the Baptist is placed in front of it, as June 24th is the saint's feast day according to the Catholic liturgical calendar. The Pietà is flanked on both sides by figures of saints associated with Poland as well as Hungary: St. Stanislaus and St. Adalbert, who according to tradition spread the faith in both countries. The saints also symbolize the two baptized nations. Next to the figures of the holy martyrs, there are the depictions of two eminent kings of Hungary, both from the Árpád dynasty: King Saint Stephen who united the Hungarian kingdom and brought forth its Christianization, establishing the local structures of the Catholic Church, and Saint Ladislaus, who continued this endeavor. The person of St. Ladislaus connects the countries of Poland and Hungary. He was born in Krakow and died in Nyitra in Upper Hungary (present-day Nitra in Slovakia)<sup>33</sup>. Later paintings depicting the apostles Peter and Paul can be seen in the altar gates underneath.

The upper level of the altar includes a Baroque painting of the Mother of God with the Child, surrounded by angels and St. John the Baptist holding a lamb. The animal is a symbol of the fulfilment of the prophecy through the birth of Jesus Christ and a foreshadowing of his suffering, death and redemption of the world<sup>34</sup>. The painting is flanked by depictions of St. Catherine of Alexandria and St. Barbara, two martyrs exemplifying the ultimate sacrifice for the faith – giving one's own life for Christianity. Two further figures possibly represent St. Emeric of Hungary, the son of King Saint Stephen, and St. Casimir, a Polish-Lithuanian prince, the son of King Casimir IV Jagiellon, one of the patron saints of the Kingdom of Poland and the main patron saint of Lithuania. According to another interpretation, these are depictions of women: St. Margaret of Scotland and St. Elizabeth. At the top of the altar, another small figure of the Mother of God with the Child is located, standing on a crescent, which according to scholars represents the Church as the community of the faithful<sup>35</sup>.

Another element of the cultural heritage in the church in Orawka is the nave with its two side altars. At the north side of the church (on the left), we can find an altar featuring three scenes from the life of the Mother of God. These include a painting of the Annunciation in the predella, a representation of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary in the

<sup>32</sup> T.M. Trajdos, H. Pieńkowska, *op. cit.*, s. 73.

<sup>33</sup> G. Hevenesi, *Régi magyar szentség*, Budapest 1998.

<sup>34</sup> J.C. Cooper, *op. cit.*, s. 22.

<sup>35</sup> D. Forstner, *Świat symboliki chrześcijańskiej*, Warszawa 1990, s. 100.





Photo 4. Figure of the Pensive Christ, church of St. John the Baptist in Orawka, 2020, photo by E. Kocój



Photo 5. Chapel of Our Lady of Sorrows – church of St. John the Baptist in Orawka, 2020, photo by E. Kocój

central part of the altar, dating back to the turn of the 17th and 18th century, and a depiction of the Holy Family in the medallion. The other side altar, referred to as the altar of the Crucifixion, is located on the south side near the entrance to the nave. Local residents traditionally call it the altar of the Holy Cross, which could constitute a trace of another altar that previously occupied the same place, and was mentioned by Fr. Ratułowski in his visitation reports<sup>36</sup>. The predella contains a painting of the Entombment with the figure of the body of Christ lying on a white shroud. The altarpiece features a copy of the painting *Christ on the Cross*<sup>37</sup> by Peter Paul Rubens and the figures of the apostles St. James the Less and St. Philip. In the uppermost part, i.e. the medallion, there is a painting of Our Lady of Sorrows surrounded by angels holding the instruments of the Passion (Arma Christi). The altar is topped by a statue of the Risen

<sup>36</sup> T.M. Trajdos, *Wizytacja*, s. 52.

<sup>37</sup> T.M. Trajdos, H. Pieńkowska, *op. cit.*, s. 72.



Christ. Completely obstructed by the altar is a polychrome wall painting of St. Christopher, who is depicted as a giant carrying Jesus on his shoulder, covering almost the entire wall. This saint was customarily depicted in wall paintings of Christian churches of various denominations throughout the Carpathians, especially in Wallachia, Moldavia, Transylvania and the Ukraine; he is also frequently shown in icons from these mountainous regions<sup>38</sup>.

The oldest artifact in the church in Orawka is a figure of the Pensive Christ, probably dating back to the turn of the 15th and 16th century. Its history and origin are unknown. It is not connected to the history of Orawa, but serves as a perfect example of the sometimes convoluted manner in which the furnishings of a church can be collected. The figure was brought in the 1950s from the castle in Karpniki (Fischbach) in Lower Silesia, where works of art plundered by Germans were stored during World War II. It was transported by train from Jelenia Góra to Kraków, and then to Orawka on the roof of a bus. This feat was accomplished by Stanisław Grela, the nephew of the parish priest of the church at that time, Fr. Józef Kocańda, who oversaw the journey from Krakow to Orawka. The sculpture was first placed in a wayside shrine on the land of Płócienkówka farm, from where it was transferred to the church chapel<sup>39</sup>, then to the sacristy, and eventually to the altar of the Crucifixion in the church in Orawka. Local women provided the figure with a wig made from human hair, a crown of thorns, and a red coat decorated with beads and fastened with a metal buckle. On the third Friday of every month a special service of thanksgiving and supplication takes place in front of the figure, with the intention that sins be forgiven and all prayers be heard.

Placed between the nave and the chancel is a wooden rood beam with a group depiction of the Crucifixion. The beam, also known as the rainbow arch or the rainbow, in a symbolic way divides the earthly church (the nave) from the heavenly church (the chancel). It has been considered for centuries to be a sign of God's presence and His covenant with people. Below the cross on the beam there is a text of Lenten lamentation in Polish, by an unknown author. It consists of a conversation between the suffering Christ and a sinner, in four stanzas inscribed in cartouches. The lamentation cannot be read in its entirety due to damage, and the research conducted by Tadeusz M. Trajdos since the 1990s and by Ewa Kocój since 2017 has not brought conclusions regarding its authorship

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<sup>38</sup> E. Kocój, *Pamięć starych wieków. Symbolika czasu w rumuńskim kalendarzu prawosławnym*, Kraków 2013, s. 76.

<sup>39</sup> Field research, interview with S. Grela, Orawka 2013.

or origin<sup>40</sup>. Until 1994, the text was obstructed by boards covered with paintings of the instruments of the Passion, referring both to the Biblical canon and to certain Byzantine-Slavic apocrypha. It has been assumed that in the late 18th century, after the demise of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the inscriptions in Polish were intentionally covered; this could be related to taking over of the parish by priests of Slovak and Hungarian origin or with the state-sponsored attempts at Magyarization of the parishioners of Orawka.

Until the Second Vatican Council, the lay faithful were confined to the nave and the choir. It can be surmised that prior to the remodeling of the church this also included the space under the tower, which served as the church porch or vestibule (sometimes also called the women's gallery). The nave in Orawka, a place symbolically dedicated to the lay faithful, showed the way towards salvation and served as a reminder of sins and their consequences. According to the old rite of the Mass, the faithful watched the priest praying at the main altar from a distance defined by the length of the chancel. The situation was different during sermons given from the pulpit. The preacher was then located close to the faithful, looking at them from above and delivering to them the word of God. A dove placed under the pulpit's canopy, signifying the Holy Spirit, was a symbol of the preacher's inspiration. The importance of sermons was also emphasized by wooden figures of four Evangelists with their respective attributes: for Matthew, a man (or an angel), symbolizing God who became man; for Mark, a lion, the symbol of resurrection; for Luke, an ox, symbolizing sacrificial death, and for John, an eagle, symbolizing Christ's ascension into heaven<sup>41</sup>.

One of the most valuable monuments in the church, reflecting its significance, is the 17th-century organ. It is one of the oldest musical instruments still in existence in Poland – the date marked on the casing is 1620. The original wind system and bellows have been preserved in their entirety. According to local tradition, the organ was a gift from Emperor Ferdinand III of Austria (1608–1657). The top of the façade is adorned with a two-headed eagle, but rather than the Emperor's coat of arms, there is a monogram on its breast, reading: AB PO. It has been assumed that the monogram stands for Adalbertus Benkowicz, who became the parish priest in Orawka in 1672<sup>42</sup>. According to our new hypothesis, the letters AB may stand for *Ausburgischen Bekenntnisses*, or „of the Augsburg

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<sup>40</sup> T.M. Trajdos, *Inskrypcja z kościoła w Orawce – pokłosie kwerendy*, „Orawa” 1996, 8, 34, s. 67–70; idem, *Inskrypcja z kościoła w Orawce*, „Orawa” 1996, 8, 34, s. 64–67.

<sup>41</sup> D. Forstner, *op. cit.*, s. 324–326.

<sup>42</sup> T.M. Trajdos, H. Pieńkowska, *op. cit.*, s. 72.



Photo 6. Scenes from the life of John the Baptist, interior polychrome of the church in Orawka, 2021, photo by E. Kocój

Confession”, referring to a group of Lutheran churches in the Habsburg monarchy. The abbreviation OP may, in turn, stand for *Pfarrerkerche Orgel* – „the organ of the parish church”. The organ in Orawka originally had three axes and was expanded to five axes around 1670. The ornamentation of the façade is typical for the third quarter of the 17th century. The instrument features percussion (drums) and 450 pipes, grouped in nine ranks. The organ is located on a small side gallery, which was built along the northern wall probably after the completion of the main choir loft<sup>43</sup>.

Adjacent to the nave is the brick chapel of Our Lady of Sorrows – it is practically a self-contained church building with a separate entrance from the south, a small choir and another organ. It even has its own sacristy, at present converted into a storage room. Since its completion in 1728, the chapel must have played an important role in the religious life of Orawka. There are multiple accounts from different times mentioning poor technical condition of the wooden church, a leaking roof, stains and other damage to the wall paintings as well as numerous

<sup>43</sup> PL, *Visitatio canonica*, 1697, Liber 10.

substantial alterations of the building's main structure<sup>44</sup>. At such times, the chapel apparently served as the main place of religious services, it also substituted for the church in winter time<sup>45</sup>. The most valuable among the chapel's furnishings is the splendid two-level wooden Baroque altar. It has been preserved to this day almost in its entirety; its centerpiece, the sculpture of the Pietà, was however moved to the main altar of the wooden church. A large ornate tabernacle, originally belonging to the main church, has been placed below the altar. The inside of the chapel altar features the scene at Golgotha. At its center, there is a figure of Christ on a wooden cross. It is flanked on both sides by the depictions of the Sun and the Moon, referring to Biblical and apocryphal texts mentioning a solar eclipse at the moment of Christ's death<sup>46</sup>. The chapel also contains fourteen large oil paintings depicting the Stations of the Cross. They were painted in 1857 by Szczepan Sitarski, an artist from Zembrzyce. The cross is surrounded by figures of angels holding the instruments of the Passion. The altar recess is flanked by a pair of Corinthian columns. The upper level of the altar comprises a radial design (denoting divine glory) with a symbol of the Holy Spirit and, above it, a bust of God the Father in clouds and sun rays, surrounded by floating or perching little angels (putti). Standing on the ledges protruding from the side columns are statues of St. Mary Magdalene with a skull and a cross and St. Veronica with her veil. Above the altar recess, there is the Immaculate Heart of Mary pierced by swords, the seven swords symbolizing the seven sorrows of Mary. Standing at the sides of the recess are John and Luke the Evangelists. Sculptures of Melchizedek (the prefiguration of Christ) and Isaiah or Jeremiah (the prefigurations of John the Baptist) are placed above the altar gates. The gates are surrounded on both sides by large figures of angels with the instruments of the Passion.

#### THE HEAVENLY CHURCH AND THE EARTHLY CHURCH – THE ICONOGRAPHIC PROGRAM OF THE CHURCH IN ORAWKA

The most prominent element of the cultural heritage of the church in Orawka is the iconographic program featured on its interior walls. It can be found in the oldest parts of the building – the nave and the chancel. The exact dates when the paintings were created are unknown.

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<sup>44</sup> *Dzienniki konserwatorskie Bogdana Tretera 1931–1944*, oprac. O. Dyba, M. Kornecki, R. Marciniak, „Teki Krakowskie” 2000, 9, s. 88–92.

<sup>45</sup> Field research, interview with the inhabitants of Orawka, June 2020.

<sup>46</sup> Field research, participant observation, May 2020.

It is assumed, however, that the work started in the late 1650s and was completed by 1711<sup>47</sup>. The scenes depicted refer to various aspects of Christian theology, with teachings conveyed by symbolic representations, as well to the actual situation in the Polish-Hungarian borderland, with the emphasis on the ties between the two kingdoms, including common history and religion.

Wall paintings inside the church are divided into zones, along the lines of the philosophy of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite adapted to the constraints of the building's architecture. The main theme is the existence of two realms: one visible (earthly) and the other invisible (heavenly), each with its own order, where every creature has its place according to their proximity to perfection<sup>48</sup>. Applied to Christian iconography, this philosophy results in a zonal composition, showing prominent theological figures, as well as real-life saints, in hierarchical order. In the case of Orawka, the theological content is also ordered horizontally: the depictions in the chancel refer to the lives of clergymen, whereas the ones in the nave – to the laity.

The paintings are divided into several distinct thematic cycles. These include:

1. A fragment of the family tree of Christ and the Apostles, placed on the upper part of the walls of the chancel, as well as on the upper regions of the walls of the nave starting from the northern wall, partially obstructed by the side altar. This depiction begins with the branches of the tree, among which Christ is shown as the Savior (*Salvator Mundi*) – a young man resting his left hand on the Earth's orb and blessing the world with his right hand. His head is encircled by a luminous halo. The next figure shown is St. Peter, holding the keys of heaven, followed by the other Apostles, the last of whom, depicted on the reverse of the rood beam, is connected back to Christ by the tree's branches, thus closing the sacred circle. In the nave, rather than Christ and the Apostles, the circle is formed from depictions of angels entangled in the branches of the tree<sup>49</sup>.

2. Scenes from the life of the prophet John the Baptist, the patron saint of the church, depicted in 14 paintings and covering the center of the building's ceiling. This cycle begins in the uppermost zone of the wall paintings – on the ceiling, in the eastern part, i.e. the holiest area of the church, and is continued on the upper parts of the walls throughout the

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<sup>47</sup> M. Kornecki, *Wooden churches of southern Little Poland*, Warszawa 2000, s. 43.

<sup>48</sup> Pseudo-Dionizy Areopagita, *Pisma teologiczne (Hierarchia niebiańska, Hierarchia kościelna, Imiona Boskie, Teologia mistyczna, Listy)*, tłum. M. Dzielska, Kraków 2000.

<sup>49</sup> Field research, participant observation, Orawka, 2015–2019.





Photo 7. Images of saints of the Christian church, interior polychrome of the church in Orawka, 2021, photo by E. Kocój

chancel and into the front part of the nave. It comprises the following scenes: the annunciation to Zechariah, the visitation of St. Elizabeth, the Nativity of John the Baptist, John the Baptist in the wilderness, John the Baptist converting the sinners, the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, recognizing of Jesus as the Lamb of God, the Baptism of Jesus, the admonition of king Herod Antipas, the imprisonment of John the Baptist, the Feast of Herod, the beheading of John the Baptist, Salome presenting

the head of John the Baptist to her mother Herodias, the burial of John the Baptist. These paintings are probably among the oldest in the church.

The cycle has a soteriological dimension – it refers to God’s plan for saving mankind. John the Baptist is considered to be the last prophet of the Old Testament, who takes Elijah’s place and announces the coming of the Messiah. He connects the Old Testament to the New Testament, or the histories of Judaism and Christianity<sup>50</sup>. The story of the prophet also foretells the story of Christ the Savior, who will come to build the Church on earth and show to the people a way of transforming their sinful lives. It is worth mentioning that certain scenes from the story of John the Baptist have been featured in the local setting. The pointy mountain peaks in the scene of the annunciation to St. Elizabeth resemble the Tatra Mountains adjoining Orawa; a high stone house with a turret in the same painting – the medieval Orava Castle; the clothes of the revelers in the painting of the Beheading of John the Baptist are similar to the fashions of Polish and Hungarian nobility of the 17th century.

3. The Earthly Church – the depictions of saints (mainly Hungarian ones), living between the 10th and 17th centuries. Their appearance has been based on the treatise *Ungaricae Sanctitatis Indicia. Sive brevis quinquaginta Sanctorum & Beatorum memoria Iconibus expressa, qui vel a Sede Apostolica, vel ab immortalibus temporis communi populi consensu, vel Scriptorum probatorum autoritate. A Divi Stephani Primi Regis tempore, in Ungaria viventes in Divorum census venerunt. Quibus accessit Appendix, in qua ordine Alphabetico plusquam ducenti alij Sancti & Beati in Ungariam vel nativitate, vel commoratione spectantes recensentur* by Fr. Gabriel Hevenesi, a Jesuit, which was originally published in Latin in 1692. As indicated by the title, the work presents the religious lives of saints born and/or active in Hungary (often based on legends) and their significance for the Christian community of the Holy Roman Empire<sup>51</sup>. The cycle in Orawka comprises 49 depictions, arranged hierarchically.

Closest to the altar, we can find the images of the eight saints from royal families. They are, among others: on the left, King Saint Stephen, St. Emeric and St. Ladislaus; on the right, Solomon of Hungary, St. Casimir Jagiellon, and St. David of Scotland. Bordering the nave, there is a depiction of St. Gunther, who was the spiritual mentor of King St. Stephen and prepared him for baptism. The images of ten holy bishops associated with introducing and spreading Christianity in Hungary have been painted on the backs of the choir stalls in the chancel. These include: St.

<sup>50</sup> J. Szprutta, *Jan Chrzciciel jako Anioł Pustyni w malarstwie ikonowym*, „Studia Teologiczne” 2011, 29, s. 393–402.

<sup>51</sup> G. Hevenesi, *op. cit.*



Photo 8. St. Urszula, internal polychrome of the church in Orawka, 2021, photo by E. Kocój

Adalbert, St. Gerard, St. Radim Gaudentius, St. Pilgrim (all on the left). Their depictions reinforced an identity based on association with the long-established and well-respected Hungarian Church.

Sixteen images depicting canonized or beatified women can be seen on the underside of lengthwise ceiling beams in the nave. All of them were from royal or princely families, and most of them had connections to the house of Árpád through birth or marriage – they were the wives, mothers, daughters or granddaughters of kings and princes. They came not only from Hungary, but also from other European countries, such as Bohemia, Bavaria, Silesia and Poland. Among them are Salomea of Poland, St. Hedwig of Silesia and her daughter Gertrude, St. Kinga, St. Elizabeth of Thuringia, Gisele of Hungary. An exception within the group, in the sense that she is not mentioned in the treatise by Hevenesi, is St. Ursula, who was killed in Germany by Attila's Huns invading from the future Hungary<sup>52</sup>.

<sup>52</sup> T.M. Trajdos, H. Pieńkowska, *op. cit.*, s. 54.

This cycle is completed by nineteen depictions of holy missionaries, martyrs and ascetics, both clergymen and laymen, placed on the northern and western walls of the choir loft and the space underneath. These saints were active in various areas, mainly within the Kingdom of Hungary, such as Transylvania (in present-day Romania), Lower and Upper Hungary, Croatia, Dalmatia or Bosnia; they include St. Andrew Zorard, St. John of Capistrano, St. James of the Marches, Sadok of Sandomierz, St. Peter Thomas and St. Paul of Hungary.

The iconography of the church in Orawka also includes single images of saints important to the local community. The depictions of St. John of Nepomuk and St. Lawrence have been placed, respectively, to the left and to the right of the church's main entrance, although the two saints were not included in Hevenesi's work. The cult of St. John of Nepomuk is highly popular in Orawa. The saint is believed to protect against the floods, rains and droughts that alternately afflict the region. The inscription S. (Sancti) on his image may prove that the painting was made later than the date given on the rood beam, as John of Nepomuk was only canonized in 1729. As for St. Lawrence, he is the patron saint of the poor and a martyr killed on a hot grate, which he carries as his attribute in iconography. He is also believed to protect against fires. His cult was especially strong in Silesia and Poland. In Orawa, he was regarded as a so-called neighbor saint, the guardian of the impoverished. The painting is intertwined with floral ornaments, which are assumed to be the backs of old stalls, originally placed in the church porch by the tower<sup>53</sup>. A large painting of St. Anne has been placed at the side entrance to the church, on the southern wall. St. Anne, called the Righteous, was the mother of Virgin Mary, Mother of God, and is a model of an ideal wife and the patron saint of, among others, married couples, mothers and widows. Next to the painting, at present behind the altar of the Holy Cross, there is an image of St. Christopher as „God's giant” carrying Jesus on his shoulder, a symbol of Christians always carrying Christ in their hearts. Located below these two paintings is a baptismal font made of stone with a copper lid and a bowl inside, formerly painted<sup>54</sup>, in which the infants of Orawa used to be baptized. The eastern wall of the church features an image of Mary Magdalene (currently behind the main altar), depicted as a recluse convert in a cave, doing penance for her sins. According to Christian tradition, after being healed and delivered from seven demons by Jesus, she became the patron saint of healing the mentally ill and

<sup>53</sup> A. Günterová-Mayerová, *Dejiny a Súpis Výtvarných Pamiatok Oravy*, Martin 1944, s. 53.

<sup>54</sup> PL, *Visitatio canonica*, 1695, Liber 9.





Photo 9. Scenes of the Decalogue, interior polychrome of the church in Orawka, 2021, photo by E. Kocój

rehabilitating prostitutes. She was also considered „equal to the Apostles”, hence her image in the zone dedicated to the holy figures of the heavenly church. It serves as reminder that the souls of the faithful may be saved through prayer and penance. The church in Orawka has as many as six depictions of St. Mary Magdalene: the painting on the eastern wall behind the altar, a sculpture in the Crucifixion group on the rood beam, an image on a Lenten curtain, a sculpture in the chapel altar, where the saint holds the severed head of St. John the Baptist, in a Station of the Cross, and as a relief on the base of the plague column beside the church.

Two coats of arms can be seen below the ceiling, on the arch dividing the chancel from the nave. They commemorate the powerful protectors of the church, without whom its establishment would not have been possible at the time when Orawa was ruled by Protestants. The figures in question were the Primate of Hungary and Bishop of Esztergom, György Lippay (the coat of arms on the right side), and Emperor Ferdinand III of the Holy Roman Empire (the coat of arms on the left side). They joined forces in fighting the Reformation, and thus protected the tiny church hidden in the woods against danger. It can be assumed their gifts (the bells, the organ) and coats of arms were not only valuable assets, but also a kind of safety guarantee against the rulers of the Orava Castle.



There is an inscription on the rood beam dating the church's wall paintings to 1711. Some researchers believe that the oldest part of the paintings was completed in the time of the founder of the church, Fr. Jan Szczechowicz (who died in 1659) and they were subsequently expanded in the times of later parish priests, to be personally completed by one of them, Fr. Gabriel Barna<sup>55</sup>. Among the earliest works are most probably the depictions of Christ and the Apostles, the cherubs, as well as the cycle devoted to St. John the Baptist. The image of St. John of Nepomuk might have been added only after the dedication of the church in 1715. The original stalls in the church porch probably had floral ornaments, which have been preserved in the lower part of the western wall of the church. Many of the present paintings may have been also painted over their older versions. The poor condition of the church, as well as numerous remodelings and floods, prompted attempts at renovation, which due to lack of funds necessary for employing appropriately skilled artists might have caused distortions of the original artistic expression of the works. The value of the paintings as cultural heritage exceeds their purely artistic value, as they are above all a priceless testament to the history of the region and its inhabitants. The varied collection of wall art can elicit different interpretations, which is evident from vivid reactions of the numerous present-day pilgrims and tourists, visiting the church primarily from Poland, Hungary and Slovakia.

4. The Earthly Church – eschatological scenes. Before literacy became widespread, depicting elements of Christian theology inside churches of various denominations, often using local color and details, was common practice. The wall art in the church in Orawka includes references to moral principles relevant to the faithful on their earthly journey toward salvation. They can be seen primarily in the nave or in the lowermost iconographic zone in other parts of the church. Their purpose is to be a reminder of eschatology – the physical death of the human body and the further destiny of the soul, the end of time and end of the world. They also represent the Christian understanding of afterlife and serve as a warning and admonition for those who do not follow the path of religious principles and precepts. In the case of Orawka, these include, among others, the scene of Adam's pact, the Ten Commandments, angels playing various musical instruments, King David playing the lute, St. Cecilia, and the depictions of purgatory (alternatively: hell?) and hell (the Last Judgment?).

The Ten Commandments are shown on the western wall, below the railing of the choir loft. The artist represented the Decalogue as scenes

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<sup>55</sup> M. Bukowski, *op. cit.*, s. 11.



Photo 10. Scenes of the Decalogue, interior polychrome of the church in Orawka, 2021, photo by E. Kocój

of sins – transgressions of the respective commandments, employing local details and showing all social classes of Orawa’s population. We can see peasants practicing witchcraft, making a false accusation and stealing livestock; highlanders blaspheming, playing cards and killing a peasant; the family of a village administrator breaching the prohibition of Sunday work; petty nobility in a scene devoted to honoring one’s parents; the nobles and their retinue at the Orava Castle: a female aristocrat committing adultery, a soldier with a devil on his shoulder seducing a woman and court officials listening to a false oath. Opinions differ concerning the dating of the cycle – some researchers believe it was completed at the turn of the 17th and 18th century, others put the date of its creation even a century later, in the 19th century<sup>56</sup>. It is worth mentioning, however, that the practice of adapting the Decalogue and other church commandments to local imagination was widespread in the Carpathians in churches of different denominations from the 16th century all the way to the 20th century. Examples can be found throughout Spisz, Liptów (Liptov, Liptó) and Orawa, where scenes of eschatology „in folk costume” can be found, among others, in the church of St. James in Levoča, the articular church of the Holy Trinity in Kežmarok, the

<sup>56</sup> T.M. Trajdos, H. Pieńkowska, *op. cit.*, s. 66.

articular church in Leštiny, the church of St. Martin in Grywałd, the church of St. Elizabeth of Hungary in Trybsz and the church of the Apostles Simon and Jude in Białka Tatrzańska<sup>57</sup>.

The side wall of the choir loft in Orawka is decorated with a cycle of thirteen paintings of angels playing various instruments and singing hymns. Eight of the paintings refer to the Old Testament hymn of praise, Psalm 47 (46): „Sing praises to God, sing praises! Sing praises to our King, sing praises! For God is the King of all the earth; sing to him a psalm of praise!“. The numerous musical instruments shown, namely: shawms, drums, a cornett, a trumpet, a viol, a harp, a horn, a violin and a lute, were selected according to the text of Psalm 150: „Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre, praise him with timbrel and dancing, praise him with the strings and pipe“. Missing are the cymbals, mentioned in the next verse of the psalm. Perhaps there was not enough space in the choir loft, or maybe the paintings were moved from another church together with the organ as a set and did not fit in their entirety. Two additional paintings related to the musical setting of services can be seen at the front of the small gallery holding the organ and the organist's bench. On the left, an image of King David from the Old Testament playing the lute, and on the right, a depiction of St. Cecilia, the patron saint of church music and of the people associated with it: choir singers, musicians, organists and luthiers. They symbolically show to the audience that church music is based on a certain mystical, heavenly order. The two paintings might have belonged to a set together with the organ gifted to the church and the images of angels. Alternatively, the angels might be raising the souls of the dead at the Last Judgment, which is depicted on the southern and western walls of the church, next to the main entrance and along the staircase leading to the choir loft. Such imagery can be found in wooden churches of various denominations throughout the Carpathians, reminding the faithful about the end time. The decorations on the southern wall of the nave along the stairs to the choir loft were meant to frighten the parishioners and remind them of the Judgment: the Leviathan with its mouth wide open devours the damned, who suffer eternal torment in the hellfire fueled by a fire-breathing basilisk. The damnation scene resembles a tavern from hell, where a ghastly feast takes place among unquenchable flames, with backing music provided by a band of devils standing on the monster's nostrils. One of the devils is shown as he throws a man in clerical robes, holding a golden cup, probably a liturgical chalice, into the flames. This symbolizes heresy, especially

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<sup>57</sup> Field research, Christian temples of Spiš, Orava, Liptov and Eastern Slovakia, 2015–2019.

as the chalice resembles the chalice drawn on the pennant of the devil playing the trumpet. A golden vessel, a wineskin and a chalice, signifying respectively greed, drunkenness and heresy, can be seen next to the musical devils. The depiction of the damned reflects the main sins of the region's residents: the aforementioned drunkenness and greed, as well as debauchery and gambling. Drinking must have been a real affliction of the local population, as the sinners in the picture cling to their wine cups even in the flames of hell. These images, as mentioned before, have been placed along the stairs leading to the choir loft, to which traditionally only men had access. A depiction of the burial of St. John the Baptist can be seen above the image of hell; it is worth remembering that he is the patron saint of teetotalers<sup>58</sup>.

Depictions of purgatory are rare in church iconography. We can find one in Orawka, on the wall of the nave underneath the pulpit. Neither Eastern Orthodoxy nor Protestantism recognizes purgatory as a part of the doctrine, so its depiction directly under the place dedicated to spreading God's word can be related to the movement of Counter-Reformation. The painting served as another warning to the illiterate faithful against breaching God's law. As opposed to the image of hell, most of the characters shown here are women. Those who suffer in the fires of purgatory are given hope by an angel stretching out his arms towards them, and above all by Jesus Christ, whose monogram (IHS) can be seen at the top of the scene. It is also possible that this scene is an illustration of the Byzantine-Slavic apocrypha known as the Descent of the Virgin Mary into Hell, in which the Mother of God ventures into the abyss together with Archangel Michael to witness the suffering of the damned. The date of creation of this painting is unknown, and the iconographic issues mentioned above require further research.

Two interconnected paintings related to the devil cycle are located behind the altar, close above the floor. This placement is unexpected, as it is within the sacred space, typically reserved for the images of saints. It may be a reflection of an archaic cosmogony, where the lower regions are the domain of the devil. To the right, there is an image of Satan drawing up a contract. It can be interpreted as a reflection of the Old Testament apocrypha „The Tale of Adam and Eve” and „Of the Tiberias Sea”, associated with the influence of Bogomils. They tell the story of Adam making a pact with the devil: the father of mankind, after being expelled from Eden, agreed to give all his sons (or in a broader sense, all his descendants) to the Devil, and in return be given the Earth to use. On the left side, there is an image of a soldier in Vlach headdress, probably a *kuruc*, i.e.

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<sup>58</sup> Field research, participant observation, Orawka 2017–2019.

a participant in one of the Protestant uprisings against the Habsburgs<sup>59</sup>. The soldier might also symbolize Adam or one of his descendants banished from Paradise, or a heretic banished from the Catholic Church. The one-horned Satan is shown using a scythe (a symbol of death and the Devil's domain over the Earth) to force him into signing the contract. This pact was nullified only through the suffering and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The date when the painting was made has not been determined.

The choir loft on the west side of the church is crowned by a depiction of the Holy Trinity and the Mother of God with the Child, partially covered by a vertical beam supporting the wall. It is accompanied on both sides by the coat of arms Wilczek (Polish: „Little Wolf”), bestowed by the Habsburgs on three families of village leaders from Orawa for their merit in fighting the *kuruc* uprisings. The coats of arms authorized by the Holy Roman Empire, although indistinct and faded, as well as the last name Moniak inscribed on one of outer edges, clearly show the church's significance in establishing the identity and self-identification of the local population. Its defining elements include the powerful protectors in the form of the empire's highest authorities, as well the „familiar” nobles, the Moniak family from nearby Zubrzyca. The latter were apparently the benefactors of the church for centuries and in a way counterbalanced the „foreign” power of the lords and officials from the Orava Castle. The residents of Orawka are to this day strongly attached to their church and proud of it.

#### THE CHURCH IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY – FEASTS, CUSTOMS, ATTRIBUTES – INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

The church of St. John the Baptist takes a unique place in the local community. The residents of Orawka regard it as their most precious space and consider it one of the main monuments of the entire Orawa. It is a special place where the sacred manifests itself and the essential elements of Christian theology are represented in symbolic form. The church plays a key role throughout the ritual year – this is the place where the people of Orawa come for their most important celebrations, both religious and those related to family life. Each of those, especially the religious ones, marks on a symbolic level the end of old time and the beginning of the new, and constitutes a rite of passage into a new phase

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<sup>59</sup> Cf. I. Ivanov, *Bogomilski knigi i legendi*, Sofia 1925 [1970]; A.E. Naumow, *Apokryfy w systemie literatury cerkiewnosłowiańskiej*, Wrocław 1976, s. 78–105; E. Kocój, *op. cit.*, s. 120–124; M. Skowronek, *Cały świat ma Cię za obrońcę. Michał Archanioł w kulturze Słowian prawosławnych na Bałkanach*, Łódź 2008, s. 16.





Photo 11. Angels playing musical instruments, interior polychrome of the church in Orawka, 2021, photo by E. Kocój

of life. All celebrations involve preparing the church in a particular way. Inside it and in its surroundings, a hierotopy is created – a „decoration of the sacred space” comprising diverse elements and religious „devices”: architecture, light, images, colors, plants (flowers, herbs), candles and their glow, singing, religious rites and folk rituals.

The liturgical year begins in Orawka, as in other Catholic parishes, with Advent in late November and early December. This is the time when the residents of Orawka prepare lanterns and attend Rorate Masses. It also means counting down the days to Christmas, considered one of the most important events in the liturgical calendar. Mid-December marks the beginning of cleaning houses and decorating them for the holiday, which also applies to the interior of the church. The latter is adorned with real-life fir trees, decorations and lights provided by the villagers. A Nativity scene is set up in front of the altar of the Mother of God. It is a collection of 20th-century sculptures of the Holy Family, Three Magi, shepherds and animals, arranged in a simple shed made of planks with three walls and a roof. It is worth mentioning that another Nativity set has been preserved, dating back to the turn of the 18th and 19th century. It is made of water-color paintings glued to wooden boards, which used to be placed, as late as a hundred years ago, in front of a large vista of Bethlehem or Jerusalem, together with depictions of shepherds in folk attire of Orawa highlanders<sup>60</sup>.

<sup>60</sup> T.M. Trajdos, H. Pieńkowska, *op. cit.*, s. 75.

The time of Lent marks the preparations for another major holiday – Easter. It includes the services of the Stations of the Cross and the Lenten Laments, commemorating the sufferings of Christ and the Mother of God. This is a reminder of Christ's sacrifice and a call to repent and transform one's life. This period of the liturgical year is dominated by themes of conversion, prayer, penance and forgiveness. The residents of Orawka observe some form of fasting at that time – many of them abstain from eating meat or sweets; some avoid alcohol<sup>61</sup>. During Holy Week, it is customary to clean the church before Easter Sunday. According to custom in Orawka, this is done mainly by men. They come to the church from each of Orawka's hamlets on the morning of Holy Saturday and do the necessary work under the supervision of the nun who is the caretaker of the church. The men clean the church and its surroundings, beat the carpets, sweep the floors, weed the lawn and cut the grass. This is also the day when the blessing of Easter foods takes place; they are brought to the church in baskets and customarily comprise bread, cured meats, decorated eggs, salt, an Easter lamb made of sugar or dough, and cakes.

Unique to the cultural heritage of the church in Orawka are the Lenten curtains, also known as hunger curtains, Lenten veils, cloths, hangings or *epitaphia*. The custom of hanging up the curtains has its origins in the Jewish tradition of veiling the Ark of the Covenant while it was carried through the desert. Later, a multi-colored curtain hung in the sanctuary of Solomon's Temple, separating the holy place accessible to priests from the Holy of Holies, where only the High Priest could enter once a year in order to perform the blood sacrifice. The tradition continued in the diaspora, where a curtain called *parochet* was hung in synagogues around the world. This custom of veiling the most sacred place in a temple was later adopted in Christianity, first in Byzantium, where curtains were placed as part of the sliding door covering the empty space above and below the icons separating the nave from the altar. After the Great Schism, the tradition was continued in both Eastern and Western branches of Christianity, and is carried out to this day in some churches, during various holidays. Four Lenten curtains in the form of cotton cloth painted with tempera created between the 17th and 19th century have been preserved in Orawka. They are of different sizes and shapes (square or rectangular) and are covered with scenes referring to the symbols of Christ's Passion. The largest and oldest of the curtains shows depictions of the Descent from the Cross and the Lamentation of Christ, and dates back to the 17th century. The scenes are accompanied with the instruments of the Passion, i.e. the implements used to torture Jesus. These are also known

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<sup>61</sup> Field research, interviews with the inhabitants of Orawka, June 2019.

as *arma passionis* or Arma Christi, the latter name referring to them also as the insignia of Christ's divine power and weapons for defeating death and Satan. We can see thirteen of them on the curtain, namely: the cross on which Jesus was crucified; the crown of thorns that was put on his head; the *perizoma* – the loincloth worn by Jesus on the cross; the Titulus Crucis – a sign put on top of the cross by order of Pilate, explaining the reason for the crucifixion in the form of the inscription INRI (Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews); the ladder used for the removal of Jesus' body from the cross; the lance with which his side was pierced; the sponge on a reed used to offer a drink of vinegar and gall to Jesus; the nails used to nail his body to the cross; the pillar where Jesus was whipped the night before his trial; the scourge, made of short leather straps with lead balls on the ends; the rope used to tie Jesus' hands; the glove belonging to the officer of Annas, used to slap Jesus' face during trial; the rooster that crowed after Peter's third denial of Jesus. The suffering of Jesus is also shown on another of the curtains in Orawka – „The Flagellation of Christ”, dating back to the beginning of the 19th century. It shows two Roman soldiers surrounding Jesus and scourging him with a whip. The remaining two curtains bear paintings of two other scenes referring to the Crucifixion and Redemption: „Mater Dolorosa”, or Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows (who is considered the patron saint of three countries: Hungary, Slovakia and Poland), dating back to the beginning of the 19th century, and „The Lamenting Mary Magdalene”, dated to the same period and echoing the depiction shown on the eastern wall of the chancel behind the altar. According to the centuries-long tradition, the Lenten curtains used to be hung in Orawka from the fifth Sunday of Lent to Holy Saturday (recently this was changed to the period from the eve of the fifth Sunday to Palm Sunday). The curtains served as a reminder of Christ's death and resurrection, and the faithful visited the church in order to take part in these events on a symbolic level and to commemorate the physical suffering of Jesus leading to salvation of mankind. The curtains were compatible with folk religiosity and provided a space to reflect on the theological themes in the „here and now”<sup>62</sup>.

In late April or early May, a tall pole called *moj*, *maj* or *mojka* made from a hewn tree trunk and adorned at the top with colorful ribbons is erected in Orawka. The pole is prepared by the village boys and dedicated to all the girls of the village. The *moj* towers over the village until the day of Pentecost, when it is ritually cut down and burned in a fire. Formerly this was part of courtship ritual: a *moj* was erected in front

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<sup>62</sup> E. Kocój, M. Borczuch-Białkowska, L. Borczuch, *Sacrum na płótnie malowane. Zasłony wielkopostne kościoła św. Jana Chrzciciela w Orawce*, Kraków 2021.



Photo 12. Representations of Hell, internal polychrome of the church in Orawka, 2021, photo by E. Kocój

of the house of an eligible girl by the boy seeking her hand in marriage. Nowadays it is predominantly seen as a playful sign of preserving tradition. Another traditional custom in Orawka is observing May devotions to the Blessed Virgin Mary. The services are held throughout the month of May, both in church and at the wayside shrines, crosses and columns. It is customary at that time to recite or sing the Litany of Loreto, which lists the numerous virtues of the Mother of God and requests her intercession on behalf of the praying faithful. Also sung is the 19th-century song *Chwalcie łąki umajone* („Praise the Meadows of May”), which combines theological and naturalist themes – it is a hymn to the victory of life over the death, associated with winter. The month of May is linked by the people of Orawka with flowering and awakening of nature after the long winter months, and the prayers to the Mother of God are meant to support that process. Part of the same symbolism are also the prayers for good harvest, held in mid-May. During the days of the „Ice Saints” (May 12th–14th), also known in Orawka as „the days of the Cross”, priests visit wayside columns located in the fields of the hamlets and, together with local residents, recites special prayers for bountiful crops and protection of fields from pests<sup>63</sup>.

Fifty days after Easter, the villagers of Orawka celebrate Pentecost, commemorating the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles gathered

<sup>63</sup> Field research, interviews with the inhabitants of Orawka, August 2019.





Photo 13. Representations of Hell, internal polychrome of the church in Orawka, 2021, photo by E. Kocój

in the Cenacle, when the gifts of the Spirit were bestowed on them. The feast is known in Orawka as *Świontki* and is solemnly celebrated – the residents gather in the church for service, many of them coming in folk costume. In the evening a bonfire is lit on a hill, nowadays usually under the cross that overlooks the village. This custom was formerly called „burning the spirit”; the smoke from the fire was believed to prevent hailstorms, and the ashes and coals from the fires spread over the fields were supposed to ensure a good harvest. Nowadays the bonfire is an opportunity for singing and socializing, some of the residents also play musical instruments<sup>64</sup>.

The next major event in the liturgical year celebrated in Orawka is the feast of Corpus Christi. Traditionally on that day, a service is held in the church, followed by a procession to four altars. The location of the altars is different every year; they are placed either in the hamlets on the village’s perimeter or on church grounds. The altars are commonly owned by all the residents of the village, and are customarily stored during the year in the home of a volunteer. The altars are made of wood, some of them are decorated with reliefs, or alternatively paintings with religious motifs

<sup>64</sup> Field research, interviews with the inhabitants of Orawka, June 2020.



are hung on them, such as the face of Christ or the Mother of God. During Pentecost, the altars are additionally adorned with flowers – they used to be wild flowers in the past and nowadays they are brought from home gardens or store-bought. A prominent feature of the procession are portable altars, figures or religious images, called *feretron* (from Latin *feretrum* – litter, bier). This tradition of Christianity dates back to the Middle Ages, where most knightly units as well as professional or artisanal guilds owned *feretrons* or religious banners. These bore depictions of Christ, the Mother of God, saints with a strong regional cult, patron saints of parishes or professions (i.e. firefighters or railroad workers) or even marital statuses, and were placed on platforms, carrying poles, hearses, even attached to pack animals (donkeys), and paraded in processions around churches or in the streets of the town or village. A *feretron* is carried by *obraźnicy* („imagers”), who march in pairs, two of them in front of their load, and two behind it. They may be whole groups of men or women of different ages. *Feretrons* are usually stored in the church during the year and brought out for important holidays. The statues are often dressed in decorative robes with gold or silver threads and adorned with flowers or festoons.

Nowadays in Orawka, four figures (the Christ Child, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Virgin Orans, and Our Lady of Lourdes) and one painting (the Black Madonna of Częstochowa) are usually carried on the shoulders of highlanders who hold high social status within the community. The processions also include members of the volunteer fire brigade in uniform, carrying standards and banners, as well as young girls throwing flowers and boys ringing bells<sup>65</sup>.

The village feast in Orawka is held yearly on June 24th, on the day of St. John the Baptist in the liturgical calendar; it is also known as „Shepherds’ Feast” or „The Great Fair”. The name reflects the occupation of Orawka’s original settlers, i.e. herding sheep and cattle. St. John the Baptist was especially venerated by shepherds, as his feast marked the time of year when they started earning money for themselves (prior to that day, they worked to repay the debt taken out to cover the year’s expenses). On the day of the feast, the shepherds used to set up huts on church grounds and offer refreshments to the villagers. This was often accompanied by live music. The night before the feast of St. John the Baptist was considered a time of heightened activity of supernatural powers. Herbs picked during that night were believed to protect against evil and ensure good health<sup>66</sup>. Nowadays, the celebration of the feast in-

<sup>65</sup> Field research, interviews with the inhabitants of Orawka, June 2019 and June 2020.

<sup>66</sup> U. Janicka-Krzywda, *Obrzędy doroczne*, w: *Kultura ludowa Górali Orawskich*, red. U. Janicka-Krzywda, Kraków 2011, s. 298.



Photo 14. Representations of hajduk, internal polychrome of the church in Orawka, 2021, photo by E. Kocój



Photo 15. Feletrons during Corpus Christi in the church in Orawka, 2020, photo by E. Kocój

cludes a ceremonial service, followed by procession around the church. The local folk ensemble plays and sings songs, among them an old song about St. John the Baptist, which is passed down through generations.

August 15th marks the major feast of the Assumption of Mary, also known in Poland as the feast of Our Lady of the Herbs. On the eve of that day, the villagers go to the nearby meadows to gather herbs and wild

flowers, which are then arranged in large bouquets and brought to the church to be blessed by the priest. The bouquets customarily comprise medicinal plants, such as ribwort, periwinkle, cornflower, St. John's wort, poppy, sage, mint and sorrel. The inhabitants of Orawka add to this also tree branches (larch and fir), grain stalks, or even flowers growing in their home gardens. The bouquets, after blessing in the church, are placed above the door frames, under the main ceiling beam, on the doors of the farm buildings or on the fences around the fields. It is believed to this day that these herbs protect the home against dangers such as fire or lightning and ward off sickness<sup>67</sup>.

On September 15th, the other of the two yearly village feasts takes place – the feast of Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows. It refers to the cult of the Mother of God suffering together with Christ, which was reflected in prayers, iconography and dedication of churches, all dating back to the late Middle Ages. Further development of this cult was endorsed by Pope Benedict XIII, who established the Feast of the Seven Sorrows of the Blessed Virgin Mary in 1727. This prompted the establishment of many new places of worship devoted to this aspect of the Mother of God throughout Hungary, Slovakia and Poland, which subsequently influenced local communities of different regions. The Seven Sorrows of Mary include: the prophecy of Simeon, the flight to Egypt, the loss of the Child Jesus in the Temple of Jerusalem, meeting Jesus on the Via Dolorosa, the crucifixion and death of Jesus, taking Jesus down from the cross, and the burial of Jesus<sup>68</sup>. At the turn of the 19th and 20th century, Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows was confirmed as the patron saint of Orawa. The feast has a very solemn character in Orawka. A procession is held around the church, with the Blessed Sacrament brought outside in a monstrance. The residents of Orawka believe that this ritual „dispels bad times” that may have occurred in their lives, and brings health, good luck, prosperity and renewed strength.

The beginning of November marks the Feast of All Hallows, called *Śyćkie Śwyinta* in the local dialect. This is the day when the inhabitants of Orawa visit the graves of their relatives in the cemetery surrounding the church. It was believed that at this time the souls of the dead come back to the place of their burial and attend a Mass celebrated by a deceased priest. Food – bread, salt and water – would be laid out in homes, so the wandering souls could take a meal during the night. This belief has all but disappeared by now. At present, it is customary for the villagers to visit the cemetery before or after church service. They decorate the graves with wreaths of conifers and flowers – real-life or paper ones,

<sup>67</sup> *Ibidem*, s. 299.

<sup>68</sup> J. Moricová, *Matka Boża Siedmiobolesna – patronka Słowacji. Teologia i kult*, Lublin 2002.



Photo 16. Removing Christ from the Cross and His Lamentatio, altar curtains during Lent in the church in Orawka, 2020, photo by E. Kocój

as well as with real flowers in pots. They also bring grave candles, ensuring that the graves are illuminated for the duration of the feast days. Increasingly, the inhabitants of Orawka are buried in family graves: the dead are interred in the place where their relatives had already been buried, sometimes for generations. The burial is an opportunity to renovate the tombstones, and sometimes change family names to Polish spelling from the Hungarian or Slovak one. The feast of All Hallows is an occasion for family reunions over the graves – usually all family members make an effort to attend, even the ones that had long since moved away to other places in Poland or abroad.

Religious holidays present the inhabitants of Orawka with an opportunity for observing rites and rituals in the church, as well as meeting with one another, socializing, sharing meals and exchanging gifts. These are the times where the space of the church assumes a special symbolic meaning, revealing a world of imagination surrounding the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of this borderland. The old traditions, passed down from one generation to another, are enriched with new practices, related to global culture encountered by the inhabitants during their worldwide migrations, or in traditional and new media.





Photo 17. Lamenting Mary Magdalene, altar curtains during Lent in the church in Orawka, 2020, photo by E. Kocój

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