Labor of Love: St. Nicholas Croatian Catholic Church
KERRY CRAWFORD

Just minutes from downtown Pittsburgh, St. Nicholas Croatian Catholic Parish reminds visitors of a time when the “men of steel” did not play football at Heinz Field on Sunday afternoons. They labored, instead, in the mills along the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers that together form the Ohio, as well as in the region’s coal mines.

As Pittsburgh celebrates its 250th anniversary this year, St. Nicholas witnesses to the contributions of the tens of thousands of Croatians who left their homeland at the turn of the 20th century to come to the city. The Croatian immigrants brought with them their reputation as strong, hard workers, their commitment to the family, and above all, their faith.

The first church built on the site in the Millvale section was erected in 1900 and destroyed by fire in 1921. One year later, the second and current church was dedicated.

Today, the Romanesque yellow brick church is surrounded by houses in a working-class neighborhood.

In 1937, pastor Franciscan Father Albert Zagar commissioned artist Maxo Vanka (1890-1963) to bring the white walls of the church to life. Vanka, like Father Zagar, hailed from Zagreb, Croatia.

Working day and night, Vanka created 11 tempera murals in just eight weeks. Father Zagar blessed the paintings on June 11, 1937. Vanka’s keystone mural rises above the white altarpiece that houses the tabernacle and, above that, a statue of St. Nicholas. The crowned Mother and Child gaze outward. The Mother of God wears the traditional Croatian colors of red, blue and white. She is not the slender Mary so often depicted on Christmas cards. She is large and strong. Her hands firmly anchor and support her son. The Child Jesus grasps in one hand a sheaf of wheat and in the other a cluster of grapes. Written on the arch above are Croatian words which translate as “Mary, Queen of Croatians, pray for us.”

Directly below this mural, and on either side of the altarpiece, visitors see Vanka’s paintings depicting the Croatian faith in the homeland and in America. In the mural on the left, a peasant family prays the Angelus in the fields of the old country. To the right, Father Zagar kneels, and behind him stand the weary men of the parish. No longer farmers, they dress in industrial work clothes, carry lunch pails and hold the picks and shovels needed in the mills seen in the far background. One of the men cradles in his hands a miniature St. Nicholas church, which he offers to Our Lady. Four separate murals herald the evangelists.

The image of the Sorrowful Mother links the remaining four paintings. In “The Crucifixion,” the mural above the left side altar, a weeping Mary stands in the foreground as her son hangs on the cross. “The Pietà,” above the right side altar, shows Mary holding her lifeless son. Seven daggers surround her, representing the sorrows foretold by Simeon. The opposite walls in the back of the church echo the sorrow of the grieving mother, but in contemporary settings. In “The Croatian Mother Raises Her Son for War,” women weep over the coffin of a young soldier. In “The Immigrant Mother Raises Her Sons for Industry,” Vanka re-creates a tragic coal mining accident in western Pennsylvania. Bereft mothers bend over the body of a young man; he and his three brothers were among the miners killed.
Vanka returned in 1941 to paint 11 more murals. Reaching high to the ceiling on the north and south walls, images from the Old and New Testaments unfold. The ceiling crowns the church. Against starry skies, Vanka painted Jesus descending into hell and ascending into heaven. 

A number of the newer murals reflect Vanka’s heightened sense of injustice and his sadness about war. The Nazis had slaughtered many in his homeland. His native country was splintered. He increasingly saw the hardships that many of the Croatian immigrants faced on the job and in establishing their new way of life.

The ceiling under the choir loft, for example, expresses the futility of war. These murals show Jesus and the Blessed Mother, in separate scenes, placing themselves between armed soldiers.

The contrast between two other murals found on the lower south wall, “Justice” and “Injustice,” startles visitors. While the first figure depicts divine justice, the second personifies justice corrupted. Wearing a gas mask, and holding a bloodied sword, “Injustice” of the 20th century carries scales in which gold outweighs bread.

In “The Capitalist,” located on the side panel under the choir, Vanka appears to recast the story of the rich man and Lazarus. A business executive reads a 1941 stock report, while a sumptuous meal sits before him. Waited on by a servant, the “capitalist” ignores the extended hand of a beggar in the foreground. Vanka contrasts this extreme with “Croatian Family.” In that painting, an immigrant family gives thanks for soup and bread in the presence of Jesus Christ.

Upon completion of the murals, Vanka, who had become a U.S. citizen, said they were his “gift to America” — a gift which has culminated in the church being registered as a National Historic Landmark. This present to his new country and, in particular, to the people of St. Nicholas captures a historic moment in time. More than that, the murals express faith amid struggle.

The church also ministers to the immigrant community who arrived as refugees from Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina following the regions’ wars in the 1990s. However, all are welcome, according to the parish’s website, to “come see our murals, and then stay with us for Mass.”
HELPFUL INFORMATION:
St. Nicholas Croatian Catholic Parish
24 Maryland Ave.
Pittsburgh, PA 15209
Visitor Information:
(412) 821-3438
www.stnicholascroatian.com

The Society to Preserve the Millvale Murals of Maxo Vanka
Guided tour information:
(724) 845-2907
www.vankamurals.org

Planning Your Visit:
St. Nicholas is minutes from downtown Pittsburgh, just off the Millvale exit of Route 28.
Sunday Mass is celebrated at noon, with a Mass in Croatian on the second Sunday of each month.
The 6 p.m. Saturday Mass is also offered in English.

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