

A few words from author Krzysztof Ligęza

A wayside shrine is usually a small statue or shelter for religious images, erected at the crossroads for various purposes: votive, thanksgiving or memorial. Sometimes these objects are built as a result of personal experience: dream or vision. Their look depends on the local history and style. It can be a simple wooden box with a picture or a sculpture of Jesus, Our Lady and Saints, suspended on a tree or pole. In more extensive versions it is a small architectural form – a statue or a chapel. The tradition of prayers at the small religious architecture has its source both in the Christianity and pre-Christian beliefs (e.g. sacred groves, poles, stones, monuments, ancient household shrines). The custom, in the form we know currently, was widespread during the Counter-Reformation period. In the nineteenth century it became popular across the whole Europe. A significant increase in the number of chapels and crosses in this period in Poland was related to, among others, with the enfranchisement of peasants and abolition of feudal burdens.

The small religious architecture is present in most European countries. In many of them, however, these do not serve as objects for religious purposes anymore. In Southern Poland the prayer at roadside shrines & crosses is quite widely cultivated by local communities and it has remained unchanged for generations. The objects survived the turbulent times of partitions of Poland (eighteen century), both world wars, as well as communism – so hostile to manifestations of religiosity. Often their owners were persecuted. This is evidenced by the voice recordings that I made during numerous conversations. Each of these photographed sites has its own history, worth a wider presentation.

The local edition of this custom is very integrative. The meetings are held by families and their neighbours every day in May and sometimes in October. All the gathered people pray and sing religious songs for several minutes. An important element of the rituals, especially for rural communities, are also Cross Days (in some parts of Europe called Rogation Days). These are processions to crosses located near the area of farmlands. They are organized before the feast of the Ascension of the Lord. During the next three days, the faithful raise their prayers of thanksgiving, plead for harvest, and prayers for blessing the farmers.

The idea of the centre, the cosmic axis – *axis mundi* comes from the famous religious scholar Mircea Eliade. In his reflections on the essence of religion, he drew attention to the manifold forms of the manifestation of sacred, analysing it in a broad anthropological context (archetypes, myths and symbols). He perceived religious experience as a kind of self-awareness, ahead of reflection on the world. Religiosity in the anthropology of Eliade is a factor inextricably constituting the structure of human life (*homo religiosus*). However, it is not a form of instinct. Eliade stressed the openness to the divine reality and the personal nature of such contact.

What the „centre of the world” is? This is the sphere where the chaos transforms into cosmos – ordered reality. The sphere of extraordinary communication, where the heavens connects with the earth, the material dimension permeates itself with the spiritual, the local with the universal and the temporal with eternity. Symbolic „centres of the world” reveal its sanctity and at the same time serve to restore eternal values.

Eliade has repeatedly emphasized that the human longing for the „fullness of being” is related to the space of a sacred dimension. This longing has been evident in many cultures and religions always. The most complete expression of this is found in the archetype of paradise: the mythical centre, the place of the unity of all creatures, primal in its harmony, the holy and marked by God’s presence. Traces of the “longing for paradise” topos can be found already in the beliefs of people from the Mesolithic age (8,000 years BC). Also, Christianity is filled with nostalgia for the lost paradise. Its’ gates are reopened again by Christ himself through death on the cross, which became the tree of life.

For me, an inhabitant of Małopolska (Lesser Poland), the May devotions are something ordinary and obvious. I participated in these as a child and a young man. A chapel or a cross specifies the landmark on the axis of the small towns „microcosm”. I admit, however, that my „photographic eye” opened up on the topic many years later. My experience of emigration was also a reason for this. Sometimes seemingly obvious things are seen only from a far distance or through the perspective of absence. What was so intriguing? It was, above all, an extraordinary space-time of places, objects and people associated with this tradition. Small *imago mundi* filled with audible and inaudible music of the spheres. Also, my longing for the lost paradise.

Krzysztof Ligęza

Born in 1979. Graduate of Polish studies and journalism, photographer by choice. Since early age interested in fact that the human sees the space in a manner perhaps not available to other beings. This special ability relates to noticing the symbolic dimension of reality. Subjectively, the flirtation of light and mind has always intrigued him the most, as well as the relation of man-nature-sacred. Mostly focused on landscape (as the most open physical and semantic field) but does not avoid any other -scapes. He photographs using intuition, imagination and hope. Additional equipment is important to him only if it works. Reading the famous phrase “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy” is pleased that in the 21st century there are still plenty of them.

Author and participant of solo & group exhibitions shown in Poland & abroad. Recipient of annual scholarship of the Polish Ministry of Culture & National Heritage (2018). His images were noticed and commended also at *International Photography Awards*, Los Angeles, USA (2013, 2012 & 2011), *Prix de la Photographie*, Paris (2012), *Landscape Photographer of the Year* (London, 2010); *Wanderlust Travel Photo of the Year* (London, 2010).

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