

## National Museum of Przemyśl Region

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### ***Axis mundi: roadside shrines and crosses***

**Shrines and crosses are an inseparable part of the Polish landscape. Within culture and traditional religiousness they mark the sacred space. For centuries, these were erected not only in places of miraculous apparitions, but also in places of sudden death, at crossroads, in the public space of cities and villages, and also in front of houses. The genesis of shrines and crosses dates back to pre-Christian times.**

The first missionaries spreading the Christianity on the Polish land were noticing the special attachment of people to sacred places: groves, springs, stones or trees – where they were worshipping their gods at the pagan times. Later the process of displacing the old, pagan beliefs began and the sacred groves displaced by the new signs of faith: crosses and shrines. The source of their creation have been the spiritual needs of people.

Small religious architecture, as shrines and crosses are often referred to, for centuries took on various symbolism and served a thanksgiving function, aimed at collective or individual thanks, penitential and compensatory, as well as a protective function, i.e. protecting against evil spirits, diseases and plagues, hence, for example, choleric crosses appeared. There are also frequent shrines founded for no reason, on which there are inscriptions such as:

“For God's glory, for people's benefit.”

Chapel-shrines are mostly dedicated to the Our Lady – Mother of God, but there are also other – dedicated to Christ and saints. The most popular saints placed on the shrines are: St. John of Nepomuk and St. Florian – patrons responsible for the most dangerous disasters and phenomena related to the folk believes. St. Nepomuk protected against flooding, drowning, being kidnapped by a drowned person or water nymphs, and St. Florian guarded against fire. Therefore, in order for the settlement to be safe, the statue of St. Florian used to be placed in the centre of the village or on its outskirts.

Crosses were placed mostly as a warning - memento mori. As Werner Steinberg observed: "The cross is not a sign that energizes us, but a sign that sobers us up." Crosses commemorate human tragedies. Erected by the roads, they have been also a signpost, a place of rest and temporary reflection.

The crosses and shrines are of religious and historic significance and have been influencing the spiritual formation of the inhabitants of a given town and worked as signposts of the sacred. Not so long ago people used to uncover their heads and bowing in front of crosses and shrines, to show respect, also they used to cross oneself, prayed, knelt down, even the holy masses were celebrated there. Also singing the Litany of Loretto to the Blessed Virgin Mary in May and praying the rosary in October was quite common. People used to meet there and participated in the sacred.

A modern, busy man pays less and less attention to crosses and shrines in his surroundings. He forgets about traditions, customs and intentions related to them.

A reminder of the tradition of prayer meetings at shrines is the photographic exhibition "Axis mundi: roadside shrines and crosses". The author of the works, Krzysztof Ligęza, photographed the disappearing custom of praying at roadside shrines and crosses in Lesser Poland. The exhibition also shows the model of Polish Marian folk religiosity, especially "Majówka" (May gatherings) and beautiful, hilly landscapes in which sacred objects are integrated. For Krzysztof Ligęza, roadside shrines and crosses are the axis mundi – the centre of the world, where time stops and enables contact with both the past and the present.

The exhibition, prepared by Krzysztof Ligęza, will be multimedia. It will contain photographs, 3D panoramas and sound recordings. You can purchase the exhibition catalogue. The event will take place on 22.02.2019 at the Museum of the History of the City – the branch of the National Museum of Przemyśl. The exhibition will be on display until 24.03. 2019.