

The Catholic Provost Church of St. John Bremen



A Franciscan church dating from the 14th century

Setting up the Franciscan monastery

In about 1225 – i.e. when Saint Francis lived († 3rd October 1226) – a group of Franciscans came to Bremen and asked the council of the town and the Archbishop of Bremen, Gerhard II for a piece of land to set up a monastery. They were granted their wish and were given land just beside the "Domdüne". Unfortunately it was situated between the two rivers, Balge and Weser, and therefore it flooded regularly in spring time. Nevertheless the monks managed to build their first monastery with a wooden pile foundation to prevent the building from subsiding. Being Franciscans they refused to have material goods for themselves as well as for the monastery. They lived a simple life just by donations and alms. They stood up for the poor and the sick, ran a soup kitchen for needy people, as well as caring for the sick and performing funerals.

Expanding the monastery

Upon the foundation of the first monastery the Franciscans built a church in about 1350 and expanded the buildings of the monastery, which was only possible because of the incomes due to the Black Death in Europe when about 7,000 people from Bremen died. The inhabitants that remained tried to do good for the well-being of the souls of their dead relatives and gave freely, especially to the monastery. The prayers from the monks were thought to be more powerful than prayers from "normal" clerics. The result: Enough money was gathered to build a vaulted church. According to the rules of the order a Franciscan church mustn't be luxuriant and as a sign of simplicity shouldn't have a tower either. Therefore, the Church of St. John only has a ridge turret with relatively small bells. They were only meant to call the monks for prayers anyway – and not the inhabitants of the town.

Reformation

From 1522 onwards, as part of the reformation, the town council of Bremen first limited and then even forbid the celebration of catholic services. The monastery of St. Paul (a monastery from the Benedictine order) just outside of the town was knocked down by the council in 1523. Fortunately the Franciscan monastery wasn't but was converted into a hospital for "mad and crazy people". Some of the monks stayed and devoted themselves to the 70 to 80 people living in the hospital. After the reformation the Church of St. John was used a few times for reformed services and served as a temporary quarter for other church communities. Over the next three centuries catholic services, catholic baptism and catholic marriage ceremonies in Bremen were forbidden.

A church as a store house

In 1801 the town council of Bremen decided to build three storage decks in the Church of St. John, preventing it being used for services any more but using it as a store house. Unfortunately the plans couldn't be accomplished because the French army captured Bremen between 1810 and 1813 and used the church building as a magazine. After the decampment of the French the citizens of Bremen decided to give the church back to the Catholics in 1816. During that time there were more or less 2,100 Catholics living in Bremen. The bedraggled church building was renovated and christened again in 1823.

The Monastery was knocked down

The buildings of the Franciscan monastery were sold to a building company in 1834 to be knocked down to build new houses on the premises. A branch of the river Balge was filled up. The land around the church was raised by the construction waste to save costs and to protect the land from the yearly floods. Therefore the street beside the Church of St. John is still called "High Street" ("Hohe Straße") today. The floor of the church already had been raised ten years earlier by an inserted ceiling. The church now has an underground level under the whole building. The front doors had to be raised as well, which you can see by looking up at the window above the main entrance.

The church building sank

In the next decades the ground-water level in the whole inner town dropped due to regulations and indentations of the river Weser. The wooden pile foundation under the building breached and rotted. The walls subsided and broke down. St. John's was also affected and therefore was renovated in 1895.

St. John's was bombed

On 26th June 1942 Bremen was severely bombed. The vestry and the roof structure of St. John's church were burned down, only the Gothic vault withstood the bomb attacks. The church was renovated provisionally to be able to be used again. During attacks on 30th March 1945 to damage the harbour and the Weser bridge the church windows were destroyed.

Another restoration

In 1948 the Catholics began to renovate the church again. The rotten wood foundation was replaced by a concrete foundation, the roof of the church was built up again and other damages were repaired. The Catholics of Bremen raised a greater part of the expenses, about 900,000 RM later 1.64 million DM (~1.2 million US-Dollar). In 1971 they finished the renovations for the time being. On 15th February 1953 the Church of St. John was appointed as a provost church by the Archbishop Berning of Osnabrück, because of its importance as a central catholic church in Bremen. The pastor was from then on a provost.

New church windows

The church windows were replaced between 1955 and 1957. Walter Klocke was instructed for the task. The fundamental idea for the motifs was to show saints from Bremen and the surrounding land as well as other significant saints, e.g. the name patron of the church St. John.

Setting up the crypt (undercroft)

In 1992 another large restoration was undertaking. A part of the underground level under the central aisle was converted to a crypt. It is used for school and student services, for family masses, prayers and meditations.

Fit for the future

From 2013 to 2016, extensive renovation works were undertaken both inside and outside the church. For the first time, the church is easily accessible for people with disabilities. The "Franziskussaal" (St. Francis Hall) was conceived to serve as a place for meeting after services. The church café opens on Sundays. The prayer places were rearranged. In the old sacristy next to the altar room you will find "Johannis-Oase" (St. John's Oasis), where needy people can have a shower and a wash.

The congregation today

Today, 10,500 Catholics belong to the provost congregation of St. John together with the Church of St. John and the Church of St. Elisabeth. More than 100 nationalities are represented.

The Catholic Provost Parish of St. John, Bremen

together with the Church of St. John and the Church of St. Elisabeth



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St. Rimbart
Archbishop and monk of the Abbey Corvey/Weser
St. Francis
his friars set up the Church of St. John



St. Willehad
the first bishop of Bremen



St. John the Baptist
the patron saint of the provost parish



St. Ansgar
archbishop of the unified dioceses Bremen and Hamburg



St. Peter
patron of the cathedral and the town Bremen
St. Paul
apostle of the nations

Paschal Candle

The big candle standing in the sanctuary during Eastertide and then afterwards at the baptismal font is hallowed during the Easter vigil. On that night Christians celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. At the same time the paschal candle is a sign for the flame of faith with which the baptised are going up to the returning Christ Jesus.

The Cross

Above the altar is the cross. It is the most important symbol of the Christian belief. It stands for the self-sacrifice of Christ and his victory over death through the resurrection. The cross in St. John's is made of a late Gothic carcase of a triumphant cross – Jesus as a conqueror of death – and a simple modern cross out of wood.

The Altar

In the catholic church the altar is a central place for the Lord's supper. It's the table the congregation gathers around – as a sign of their relationship with Christ. The altar was designed by Johannes Nie-meier and set up in 1994. The cross of Tau (T) is linked to Saint Francis who used this kind of cross in his letters. In the altar is a relic of the garment of St. Francis.



The Tabernacle and the Permanent Light

The word tabernacle means tent and is a symbol for the presence of God in the world. In the church services the bread and wine are transformed on the altar. For believers the bread and wine become the body and blood of Jesus Christ. In them Christ exists even after the service. The transformed bread is kept in the tabernacle. The tabernacle in St. John's is formed as a house. When you open the doors the presentation of the bread is shared and therefore indicates to the breaking of the bread in the last service. To show the presence of God there is a light burning permanently close to the tabernacle. Its origin lies in the pillar of fire in which God freed Israel out of Egypt.



The Ambo

The ambo is a reading desk near the altar. It is the place for preaching and interpreting God's Word. The relief of a hand indicates this. Altar and ambo – the desk of the bread and the desk of the word – form an artistic unit in the presbytery.

Our Lady of Pity

The mother of God is shown with Jesus after he was taken down from the cross. The figure emerged in about 1600 in the region of Regensburg.

The Undercroft (Crypt)

In 1992 a part of the cellar vault below the central nave was turned into a crypt. This place is used to hold services for pupils, students and families as well as prayer and meditation sessions. In the anteroom of the crypt (St. Francis Hall), the foundation pillars of the monastery from the 13th century can still be seen.



The Stations of the Cross

The custom to follow the way of the cross began in the middle ages in Jerusalem. Not all of the pilgrims could travel to the Holy Land but they still wanted to remind themselves of Jesus' suffering. Out of that tradition the devotion to the stations of the cross with 14 stations of Jesus' suffering and death originated. The stations of the cross were created by Heinrich Fleige and christened in 1894.



Book of life

People can write the names of deceased persons into the "book of life". If you do not know the place where the deceased person is buried, or if you don't have the possibility to visit the burial place, you can find a place for mourning here.



St. Anthony of Padua

This Franciscan monk is the patron saint of the poor and helper to all in need. Under the name "Antoniusbrot" (bread of Anthony) donations are gathered to help the needy, e.g. in St. John's the donations are being used to help the "Bremer Treff" (Bremen's gathering) who give out low cost meals. Honouring Saint Anthony as the "patron for lost things" originated from the legend that a young monk once took with him the Psalter of Anthony without his permission. Consequently phenomena haunted him so that he brought the book back as quickly as possible.



Brick Gothic

The front of the Church of St. John shows detailed the beauty of the brick Gothic of North Germany.

The Organ

The organ was built by Franz Beil and christened in 1965. It was tuned in the 70s and renovated and repositioned in 1995 and 2017.



St. Francis Hall
Place of encounter and church café with a statue of St. Francis

Votive/Prayer Candles

The Church of St. John is a church of prayers. Many people come here daily to look for silence and to pray. The lighted candle stands for our requests, our thanks and for all that is on our heart. In St. John's the candles are lighted in front of the icon of "the mother of God the never ending help".