



THE CATHEDRAL  
OF  
**OUR LADY OF ARABIA**



APOSTOLIC VICARIATE OF NORTHERN ARABIA

ON THE OCCASION OF THE  
EXTRAORDINARY JUBILEE OF ST. ARETHAS

**24 OCTOBER 2023 – 23 OCTOBER 2024**

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## **BISHOP'S MESSAGE**

The Jubilee year is a grace for the Vicariate. Year of memory and year of blessing. We establish roots in this land as a blessing in the land of our martyred brothers and sisters. We follow in their footsteps as witnesses of the Risen Lord, through the veneration of the Holy Cross and their profound faith in God's love.

The martyr is a witness, ever ready to testify to the truth and the spiritual experience of God. He is witness to the beauty of God and the joy of being His child. We are today witnesses of the light given to us through baptism in water and the Holy Spirit. As children of the Light, we must shine in the world and reflect the Trinitarian beauty and love.

Saint Arethas and Companions accepted to give their blood for Christ. We must also accept to give our lives for Him through a coherent way of life and a harmonious Church.

I invite all the faithful to use this Year as a blessing, deepening our faith and love for God, and to renew our commitment to the Gospel for the glory of the Most Holy Trinity.

**+ Aldo Berardi, O.S.S.T.**

Apostolic Vicar of Northern Arabia



## MESSAGE OF THE RECTOR

The Cathedral of Our Lady of Arabia stands as a beacon of faith and a symbol of unity for all who gather within its hallowed walls. May the grace and blessings of Our Lady of Arabia shine upon each and every one of you and the entire community we serve.

In this Cathedral, where faith is nurtured and love is shared, may the spirit of unity and peace continue to flourish. We are thankful for the role you play in bringing people together, fostering love, and spreading the message of compassion. This cathedral is not just a place of worship; it is a symbol of hope, solace, and strength for all who seek refuge, through the intercession of Our Lady of Arabia.

As we continue our journey of faith, may all of you find strength in our convictions and support in your community. May the Our Lady of Arabia Cathedral remain a source of inspiration and a sanctuary for all who enter its doors.

**Rev. Fr. Saji Thomas, OFM Cap.**

Rector



**T**he Cathedral of Our Lady of Arabia is the mother church of all Catholics belonging to the Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia which covers Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. It is the seat of the Bishop (in Latin: cathedra) and a symbol of unity within the vicariate. The cathedral is named after, and consecrated in honor of, the Blessed Virgin Mary's title of Our Lady of Arabia (Latin: Domina Nostra de Arabia, Regina Pacis), Principal Patroness of the Arabian Peninsula.

The Cathedral of Our Lady of Arabia was the dream of the late **Bishop Camillo Ballin, M.C.C.J.** In a magnanimous gesture of tolerance, His Majesty King Hamad bin Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa of the Kingdom of Bahrain donated on 11<sup>th</sup> February 2013 nine thousand (9,000) square meters of land in Awali in which to build the cathedral. Upon receiving the land, Bishop Camillo began the enormous task of mobilizing resources to bring his dream to fruition.

On 19<sup>th</sup> May 2014, King Hamad met Pope Francis in the Vatican and presented a scale model of the cathedral, the largest church ever to be built in the Arabian Peninsula. On 31<sup>st</sup> May 2014, the Blessing of the Foundation Stone was held. The foundation stone, taken from the Holy Door of the Papal Basilica of St. Peter from the Year 2000 Jubilee, was a gift from the Holy Father to the faithful of Arabia as a sign of profound union with the Church of Rome. This marked the beginning of the construction work of the cathedral.

On 10<sup>th</sup> June 2018, a groundbreaking ceremony was held at the construction site, graced by then-Papal Nuncio, Archbishop Francisco Padilla, and in the presence of Bishop Camillo Ballin and representatives from the government. The construction was personally overseen by Bishop Camillo until his unexpected demise on 12<sup>th</sup> April 2020. The project was continued until its completion in 2021 by Bishop Paul Hinder, OFM Cap., whom Pope Francis appointed as Apostolic Administrator of Northern Arabia.

The cathedral was inaugurated on the morning of 9<sup>th</sup> December 2021. The ceremony was attended by Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad Al Khalifa, who represented King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa. Also in attendance were Bishop Paul Hinder; Archbishop Eugene Nugent, the Apostolic Nuncio to Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar;

and Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, the Prefect of the Dicastery for the Evangelization of Peoples. The next day, on 10<sup>th</sup> December 2021, Cardinal Tagle presided over the solemn liturgy for the consecration of the cathedral, together with Bishop Paul Hinder and Archbishop Eugene Nugent as co-consecrators.

On 4<sup>th</sup> November 2022, Pope Francis made a historic visit to the Cathedral of Our Lady of Arabia. During his visit, the Pope expressed his gratitude to the people of Bahrain for their care for the country's Catholic community. He also addressed the issue of unity in diversity within the Christian community and emphasized the importance of praise and worship in bringing Christians together.



## ARCHITECTURE AND SYMBOLISMS

The design of the cathedral was created by Italian designer and architect Mattia Del Prete and Cristiano Rosponi. Its shape resembles that of a tent, alluding to the “tent of meeting” or tabernacle in which the presence of God was manifested to Moses as described in the Old Testament. The cathedral is the “tent” where the people go to meet God, to speak with Him and to cast all worries upon Him (cf. 1 Pt. 5:7). It is also the place where God’s presence is celebrated sacramentally and builds the community through Him, with Him and in Him.

The cathedral’s interior is octagonal (eight-sided polygon) in shape. In the numerical symbolism of medieval Europe, eight was seen as representing cosmic balance and eternal life. The octagon also had deep significance for the Roman Catholic Church since according to tradition, it was a religious symbol for rebirth and resurrection.

The cupola of the cathedral is a symbol of the open heavens to which Christ ascended and from where He will return one day. The three levels of the cupola signify the Holy Trinity. In this way the Church expresses the eschatological waiting which is emphasized by the **Christ Pantocrator**: the glorious return of the Lord on the last day, a day which will signal the definitive victory of Christ over evil and death.

The architecture of the cathedral and the liturgical signs that are given prominence help people to experience the fulfillment of the Trinitarian Mystery: the meeting with the Triune God and the communion with their brothers and sisters.

## MAIN ALTAR



Rows of seats for 2,300 persons are configured around a central table, the Main Altar. The circular arrangement highlights that we are one loving community centered around the Passover of the Lord. It is reminiscent of the Last Supper at Cenacle, “when the hour came, He took His place at table with the apostles. While they were eating, He took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them, and said: Take it, this is my Body.” (Lk 22:14)

Every time the people of God gather to celebrate Holy Mass, the past, present and future become a single, indivisible cosmic event. We participate in the same Breaking of the Bread offered by Jesus; we receive in the Holy Eucharist Jesus Christ who is truly and really present today; and we unite ourselves with the angels and saints in the heavenly liturgy.

The importance of the Altar is emphasized by the cupola above it which makes heaven present. St. Pope John Paul II said that in each Eucharist a part of heaven meets with a part of the earth because Jesus Christ the Mediator in this sacrifice offers us to God and God to us.

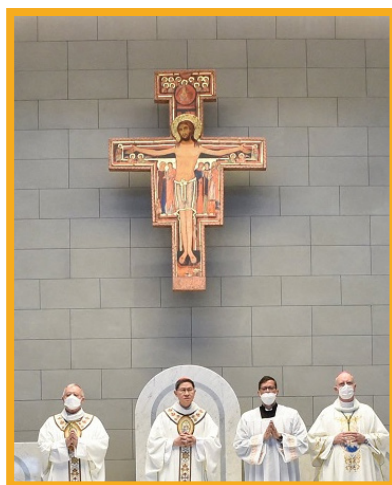
The Main Altar is big enough and low enough to represent a table to which we are all invited. It is also an image of the foundation of living water from which flow the four rivers of Paradise that quench the thirst of men in every corner of the world. (cf. *Gen. 2:10-14*) It is laid with cloths and flowers as a sign of feast. It is also illuminated with candles and candelabra to show that Christ, and with Him the assembly, is the light that enlightens the world.

The Altar was anointed during the blessing of the cathedral and therefore it is consecrated and holy; it symbolizes Christ. Thus, we reverence the Altar since it symbolizes Jesus. Because it is also the place of sacrifice where the Body and Blood of the Lord is offered, the priest begins and ends the celebration by kissing the Altar.

Hidden at the base of the altar is a small crypt in which relics of the saints are deposited. It is an ancient custom that the Church retains “the

practice of the deposition of relics of Saints.” (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*) It was common for the early Christians to celebrate memorial Masses in the catacombs, on top of the tombs of the saints. This practice was continued, when churches were built, by transferring relics of the saints to the altar.

## CENTRAL CRUCIFIX



The cathedral's main crucifix is a reproduction of the **San Damiano Cross**, the large Romanesque cross before which St. Francis of Assisi was praying when he is said to have received the commission from God to rebuild the Church. Franciscans cherish this cross as

the symbol of their mission to commit their lives and resources to renewing and rebuilding the Church. The crucifix is a tribute to the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin under whose care the two apostolic vicariates in the Arabian Peninsula have been entrusted.

The San Damiano Cross is sometimes called an icon cross because in addition to the main figure of Christ, it contains images of other saints and people related to the incident of Christ's crucifixion. The tradition of such painted crucifixes began in the Eastern Church.

Jesus Christ is represented upright in full stature while the surrounding figures are smaller. The bright white of His body contrasts with the dark red and black around it and accentuates the prominence of Jesus. Above the head of Christ is the inscription in Latin: Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.

The next largest figures are the five witnesses of the crucifixion. On the left side are the Virgin Mary and John the Evangelist. On the right side are Mary

Magdalene, Mary, Mother of James, and the centurion who in Matthew's Gospel account asks Christ to heal his servant. Both Mary and Mary Magdalene have their hands placed on their cheeks to reflect extreme grief and anguish.

Six angels, positioned at both ends of the crossbar, are represented as marveling over the event of the crucifixion. Their hand gestures indicate they are discussing this wondrous event of the death and calling us to marvel with them.

On the top of the cross is an image of Jesus now fully clothed in his regal garments and carrying the cross as a triumphant scepter. He is climbing out of the tomb and into the heavenly courts. Ten angels are crowded around, five of whom have their hands extended in a welcoming gesture to Jesus, who Himself has His hand raised in the form of a greeting. At the very top of the cross is the Hand of God with two fingers extended. This is to be understood as the blessing of God the Father on the sacrifice of His Son.

## BAPTISTRY



The cathedral has a Baptismal Font in the form of a pool at the foot of the sanctuary. It is a large marble pool for the administration of Baptism to babies and adults, either by immersion or by infusion, as indicated in the Rite of Baptism. (cf. [Introduction to the Rite of Baptism, n. 22](#))

The baptismal pool has been dug out of the floor; it is a real hole because this is a better expression of its significance as tomb. Man dies with Christ in the waters of Baptism and he is regenerated as new man in the image of the risen Christ.

It has seven steps which descend to its base. The descent along the steps signifies our death with Christ,

the mystery which is expressed within the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans: “Are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were indeed buried with Him through baptism into death.” (Rm 6:3-4) Therefore to go down signifies our burial in Jesus Christ. The descent down the seven steps also symbolizes our death to the seven capital sins.

There is also a great symbolism of the baptismal pool being near the altar because through baptism we come to the Eucharist which comes from the table of the Lord.

In the shape of a large cross within an octagon ([according to tradition, the number eight is the sign of the resurrection](#)), the pool has a bronze covering made of five moveable sections. In the central section is the cross of Christ surrounded by olive and palm branches, signs of peace and eternal life.

The pool is in the middle of the assembly, easily visible so that the community can participate. (cf. *Introduction to the Rite of Baptism*, n. 25)

In the angles made by the branches of the cross are mosaics of the four evangelists who announced the Good News. The four Gospel writers are represented by the following symbols:

- **St. Matthew, a divine man;**
- **St. Mark, a winged lion;**
- **St. Luke, a winged ox; and,**
- **St. John, a rising eagle.**

St. Matthew is represented by a divine man because his Gospel highlights Jesus' entry into this world, first by presenting His family lineage, and then His incarnation and birth. St. Mark, represented by the winged lion, references the Prophet Isaiah when he begins his Gospel: "Here begins the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. In Isaiah the prophet it is written: I send my messenger before you to prepare your way: a herald's voice in the desert, crying, 'Make ready the way of the Lord, clear Him a straight path.'"

The winged ox represents St. Luke. His Gospel begins with the announcement of the birth of St. John the Baptist to his father, the priest Zechariah, who was offering sacrifice in the Temple (cf. *Lk 1*). The winged ox reminds us of the priestly character of our Lord and His sacrifice for our redemption. St. John is represented by the rising eagle; his Gospel begins with the "lofty" prologue and "rises" to pierce most deeply the mysteries of God, the relationship between the Father and the Son, and the incarnation: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be." (*Jn 1:1-3*)

During funeral celebrations, the coffin is placed on the bronze cover because the Baptismal Pool is a sign and announcement of the resurrection of Christ.

## SANCTUARY



The sanctuary is the place where the altar stands, where the Word of God is proclaimed

at the ambo, and where the priests and the other ministers exercise their offices.

## AMBO

The Second Vatican Council restored the importance of the Word in the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The celebration takes place around two tables: the Ambo and the Altar. The cathedral's ambo is constructed of the same marble as the Altar and is of very similar design. That connection is purposeful in that from the ambo we hear the Word of God proclaimed and that Word

feeds us in the same way that the Body and Blood of Christ feeds us.

The ambo is placed in a raised, fixed position, in line with the Presider's Chair. It is the image of the stone of Christ's tomb from which the angel – just like the deacon, lector or cantor – announces to the women the Good News of the Resurrection.

## PRESIDER'S CHAIR

The Chair for the President or Presider of the assembly, in the form of a cathedra or throne and flanked by the seats for concelebrants, is at the highest point of the church and in the center of the apse in order to underline the image of Christ, the Head of the Body. The elevated position also allows the Presider to be easily visible to the whole assembly and so really to be able to preside over the liturgical action.

The Presider's chair is made of white marbles, typical of Italy, with an inlay of gray marble which defines and makes the shape stand out.

## CONCELEBRANTS' CHAIRS

There are twelve Concelebrants' chairs – six on each side of the Presider's chair. The number 12 is mentioned often in the New Testament of the Bible, such as Jesus' selection of 12 apostles and the 12 tribes of Israel. The Gospel of Matthew

says "Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.'" (Mt. 19:28)

## BISHOP'S CHAIR



On the far right of the sanctuary can be found the Bishop's Chair or throne (Greek: καθέδρα; Latin: cathedra) which denotes that the cathedral is the principal church of the diocese. The Chair is an ancient symbol of



the authority of the bishop in the life of the church, derived directly from the Apostles (*cathedrae apostolorum*). It also represents the bishop's three main offices of teaching, sanctifying, and governing.

The episcopal coat-of-arms hangs directly above the Bishop's chair. The coat-of-arms of the current apostolic vicar, H.E. Bishop Aldo Berardi, O.S.S.T., was designed and created by heraldist Giuseppe Quattrococchi. It shares the classic attributes for bishops with an episcopal cross standing behind the shield, and a green galero, a medieval ecclesiastical hat, surmounting the cross and the shield, with six tassels hanging at both sides, arranged in 1, 2 and 3.

The coat-of-arms is marshalled horizontally in two parts. On the upper part is the Trinitarian cross on a silver background, prominently depicted as tribute to the Trinitarians, the Order to which Bishop Aldo belongs. The colors red and blue stand for the two natures of Christ: true

God and true Man. The silver background signifies purity of faith and religious vows.



A broken chain borders the lower part of the shield which is a sign of the redemptive ministry of the Trinitarians. The precious gold background in heraldry symbolizes the faith that sets humanity free and thus must be defended.

The Roman bridge represents the link between the Italian village (*Bovino, Foggia*) of Bishop Aldo's family and their adopted French village where the same style of construction is likewise preserved (*Ars-sur-Moselle, Metz*). The water of the rivers and the seas are symbols of life, even its tumults. The blue of the sky and the blue of the sea merge and lead to Heaven, the Kingdom of God that is

opened to us through baptism. The same baptism introduces us to the Trinitarian life and purifies our lives.

The gold star stands for the presence of the Virgin Mary – Queen of Heaven and Earth and Our Lady of Good Remedy – in our Christian life. Mary is the Stella della Daunia (Star of the Daunian Mountains in Bovino, Italy) that shines in the sky; She is the Stella Maris who guides us to the right port; Our-Lady of cities and villages; and, Our Lady of Arabia who protects the Arabian Peninsula. Our filial love of Mary guides our spirituality.

On the scroll below the shield is Bishop Aldo's Episcopal motto derived from the announcement of the Resurrection in **Mt. 28:6**: "Resurrexit, sicut dixit" ("He is risen, as He said").

## CHAPEL OF OUR LADY OF ARABIA



A chapel is dedicated to Our Lady of Arabia under whose honor and maternal protection the cathedral was built and consecrated. The Mother of God under this title shines as a beacon of hope and trust for the faithful of all ages and walks of life who flock to the Arabian Peninsula from around the world.

The devotion to Our Lady of Arabia began on 8<sup>th</sup> December 1948. It was on this day that the small chapel in Ahmadi, Kuwait was dedicated to Our Lady of Arabia. The statue of Our Lady at Ahmadi was blessed in 1949

at the Vatican by Pope Pius XI who later proclaimed the Queenship of Mary in 1954.

In early 2007, the late Bishop Camillo Ballin received permission from the Holy See to have a feast day established in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary under the title of Our Lady of Arabia: Saturday preceding the Second Sunday of Ordinary Time is celebrated as the Solemnity of Our Lady of Arabia with the permission to celebrate it also on Sunday. On 5<sup>th</sup> January 2011, the Holy See officially proclaimed Our Lady of Arabia as the Principal Patroness of the Gulf.

The statue of Our Lady in the cathedral is a replica of the original enthroned at the Shrine of Our Lady of Arabia in Ahmadi, Kuwait. The task of making the statue for the cathedral was entrusted by the late Bishop Camillo to master-sculptor **Justino A. Cagayat, Jr.**, a renowned Filipino sculptor of religious arts, from **Paete, Laguna, Philippines**.

Work on the statue began in April 2017 and it would take almost three years for it to be

completed. Our Lady's statue was carved from a single piece of **batikuling**, a yellowish-brown, moderately coarse wood endemic to the Philippines and a favorite among **Paete** artisans for centuries as it is prized for its resilience and durability.

The Blessed Virgin Mary is seated holding a rosary in her right hand and clutching the Child Jesus in her left. She measures 145 centimeters from head to toe (**sitting**). The Child Jesus with arms wide open sits on His Mother's lap and is 60 centimeters tall. Both Mother and Child are crowned. Two winged angels, each standing 60 centimeters on either side, hold aloft a cushion on which Our Lady's feet rest. Her pedestal throne measures 56 centimeters from the Virgin's feet to the base.

The statue of Our Lady was offered by the Catholic communities based in Saudi Arabia, as an expression of their closeness to the mother church of the vicariate and as a gesture of sincere gratitude to the Bishop for his unwavering pastoral care.

## CHAPEL OF RECONCILIATION



Our cathedral is a spiritual oasis that welcomes anyone who thirsts, to drink of the “spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Jn 4:14). The Church places great importance on the Sacrament of Reconciliation since to confess is to receive forgiveness from God; it is to be reconciled with Him, with others and with oneself. The peace of mind and soul which this sacrament imparts has no substitute.

Four confessional rooms – two on each side of the chapel – invite the faithful to be reconciled with the Lord through a heart-to-heart conversation with the priest, God’s agent of charity. A simple cross adorns the main chapel to encourage quiet reflection before and after confession.

## CHAPEL OF THE BLESSED SACRAMENT



The Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament is located on the right side of the sanctuary. It is a majestic place of reservation of the Holy Eucharist – the Real Presence of the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Our Lord Jesus Christ – and creates an atmosphere of contemplation and reverence. The real presence of Christ in the Eucharistic bread permits a personal meeting with Him and fosters the individual silent adoration which is fundamental to the experience of Christian faith.

The tabernacle which houses the Holy Eucharist is a simple gilded cabinet vault fixed into the wall. It is opened by two swing doors which also expose a gold monstrance during Eucharistic adoration. As is the tradition, a candle is always kept burning to the right of the tabernacle, a sign of the honor due to the Lord. Directly on top of the tabernacle is a stained-glass artwork attributed to Kiko Arguello, co-founder of the Neocatechumenal Way, depicting a “lamb standing ... that seemed to have been slain” (cf. Rev. 5:6), its blood flowing into a chalice.

The Blessed Sacrament is regularly exposed so that the faithful can visit and spend time of private prayer, adoration and quiet reflection. The body of the chapel is simple and harmonious so as to avoid distracting the worshipper's attention.

The side chapel is in keeping with the liturgical norms that state that "every effort and encouragement should be given to the practice of Eucharistic reservation in a chapel suited for private adoration and prayer." The intention is to keep the focus of the liturgy in proper perspective: during Mass our focus is on hearing the word of God and sharing in the banquet of the Eucharist. After Mass, the tabernacle remains a sign of Christ's abiding presence and a reminder of the community's care for the sick and dying.

## ICONS OF ST. ARETHAS OF NAJRAN AND ST. ISAAC OF NINEVEH



Commissioned in Lebanon, the icons feature two outstanding Arab saints who had a profound influence on Eastern and Western Christianity: St. Arethas of Najran who was

martyred in the year 523 AD in south Arabia, and **St. Isaac of Nineveh** who was born in Qatar and is considered the father of Eastern mysticism.

The icon depicts St. Arethas at the moment of his martyrdom with the scene on the left showing him being carried by two men as he was said to have been martyred at the ripe age of ninety-five. On the right, St. Arethas faces his martyrdom by the sword.

St. Isaac of Nineveh is shown holding a scroll to represent his extensive writings, mainly on ascetical treatises and monasticism, which later influenced Christian mysticism in both the East and the West.

These icons were written in June 2023 on wooden boards according to the patristic tradition of natural colors mixed with egg yolk, white vinegar, and holy water, in 22-carat gold. They came from the iconographic brush of Odile Chakhtoura Chamoun of the Antonine Technical Institute in [Beirut, Lebanon](#).

# THE MYSTICAL CROWN ARTWORKS

The mystical crown artworks, comprising sixteen icons, are the masterpiece of Kiko Arguello. The icons are arranged in such a way that they commence from the Trinity and lead to the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. They not only illustrate the major events in the history of salvation, but also radiate the beauty of our faith and act as a tool for catechesis.

Kiko created what he called a “mystical crown”: a circular space at the base of the cathedral’s dome, entirely frescoed, with panels illustrating the salient episodes of Jesus’ life and announcing his triumphant return: “The images of the mystical crown intend to touch the spirit of the faithful who contemplate them. Their purpose is to help mankind to raise its spirit towards God.”

## 1. THE CHRIST PANTOCRATOR



Christ Pantocrator

The icon of Christ Pantocrator (“All-Powerful”) is found at the center of the circular artworks and constitutes the majestic complex of the Deesis, that is, the supplication made by angels and saints to Christ in Heaven. The Mother of God, St. John the Baptist and the angels are tense in prayerful invocation to Christ Pantocrator. His face strikes anyone who looks at it: no one can escape his gaze full of love. He is the One who contains all things in Himself and He comes now as a just judge, full of mercy, to judge the living and the dead.



The two expressions written in the Book of Life which the Pantocrator holds open in his left hand refer to the communion between God incarnate and man. On the page to the left we read “Love your enemies” (Mt 5:44), words which are the heart of the New Covenant and image of the new man. On the right-hand page we read: “I am coming” (Rev 22:20) which are words of encouragement and an invitation to perseverance to those who are still in the drama of life. The right hand is blessing, pointing with the fingers to the Trinity.

## 2. THE HOLY FAMILY



The icon of the Holy Family is a reinterpretation of the famous icon of the Trinity of Andrej Rublev which finds its foundation in the well-known Biblical episode that happened at the Oaks of Mamrè. (Gen. 18:1-3, 10) According to the Fathers of the Church, the three mysterious visitors are three angels who appeared in human form and represent the very essence of the Trinity. Abraham addresses them as a single person, although they are presented in three.

The communion that characterizes the three visitors is a sign of the eternal and perfect love of the Most Holy Trinity.

In the icon of the Holy Family, Kiko, keeping the shapes unchanged and softening them, represents the Holy Family as a reflection of the Trinitarian life on earth. The family is communion of love.

To the right, St. Joseph, with a green robe, has his head bowed towards the other figures. His hand rests on the table where the signs of the Eucharist can be seen: the table with the bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ. To the left is seated Mary with a dress in delicate tones; in the center Christ dressed in red and blue, color of divinity and royalty, places His hand on the table blessing it. Their faces show their love for each other.

### 3. THE ANNUNCIATION



The angel Gabriel, announcer of God's saving messages (Dn 8,16; 9,21-22; Lk 1,11-20), due to the great importance of the moment, is sumptuously dressed in bright colors and precious stones; in his left hand he has the message-bearer's stick, while with his right he blesses the Virgin; the two joined fingers of the right hand indicate the two natures of Christ, human and divine.

Mary is wrapped in a brown colored maphorion (cloak), a symbol of poverty and of freshly-plowed land ready to receive the seed to bear fruit. The blue robe, sign of purity, indicates detachment from earthly things.

The divine plan of a new and definitive covenant of God with man is not imposed, but is welcomed and accepted by Mary in full freedom on behalf of all humanity. Mary is seated on the throne with her feet placed on a pedestal which raises her above the angelic nature. The stars on her forehead and shoulders are a sign of her virginity before, during and after childbirth.

#### 4. THE NATIVITY

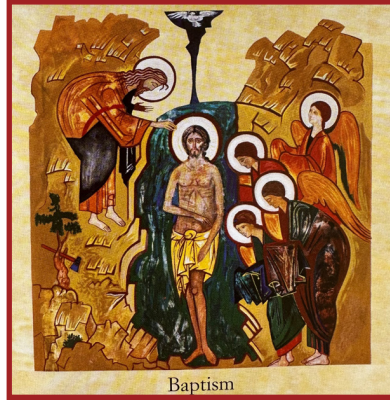


The star of Bethlehem, above the cave, illuminates and guides all the characters present in the Nativity, a sign of God's intervention. A ray of the star goes upwards, symbol of the unique essence of God, while downwards the star is divided into three rays symbolizing the three divine Persons. The Child lies at the entrance of the dark cave, symbol of hell, while upon His head shines the light of the Most Holy Trinity.

## 5. THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

The crib where the baby Jesus is placed is a manger that has the form of a tomb, prefiguration of Christ's death rejected from birth. (cf. Is. 1:3) The tight bandages with which the child is swaddled and which the angels indicate to the shepherds as a sign of recognition (cf. Lk 2:12) foreshadow the burial and will be abandoned in the sepulcher as the only sign of His Resurrection for Peter and John. (Lk 24:12; Jn 20:5-7)

Mary lies outside the grotto; She is laid down in a large purple mantle, the color of royalty. Joseph is in the lower right, his attitude denotes profound meditation. Above, on the left, are seen the Magi which the star leads to the adoration of the Child. It is the manifestation of God to all peoples. The angels, in the center, adore the Child with their hands covered, to show His royalty.



In this icon the composition of the Baptism is presented according to traditional schemes. Christ is at the center of the scene, naked like every man at his birth. His figure, taller than the others, is majestic and marks the compositional axis. Jesus enters the waters of the Jordan, which the Fathers of the Church call the "fluid sepulcher" and indicate as a prefiguration of His burial, and emerges with His luminous figure from the dark mass of the waters, symbol of sin and death: it is the manifestation of the Son of God. Jesus, anointed and consecrated by the Holy Spirit, blesses the waters with His right hand, changing their meaning.

The sky is torn as the Holy Spirit descends like a dove and is about to land on the head of Jesus. In the background of the icon, the other color of the mountains contrasts with gold, which shines with its own light, symbol of the divine presence. The voice from heaven and the sign of the Spirit in the symbolism of the dove anticipate the mission of Jesus of Nazareth. These two signs indicate the fulfillment of the ancient prophecies about the Spirit and the Messiah.

At the top John the Baptist is depicted dressed in skins, a symbol of his being a prophet and martyr. He is bent towards Jesus to bear witness to the kenosis of Christ. A red line, symbol of the passion of Christ and of His love for us, follows His curvature.

## 6. THE TRANSFIGURATION



The icon represents the evangelical narration of the transfiguration: “While He was praying His face changed in appearance and His robe became white and dazzling” (Lk 9:29). Christ transfigures in front of the three Apostles – Peter, James and John – that He had brought with Him after the announcement of his Passion to let them foretaste the joy of paradise, appearing in the splendor of His divine glory.

The icon of the Transfiguration is the icon par excellence, because the vision communicated to the disciples is one that all iconographic art must be able to communicate: the divine light. In this atmosphere of intense light, Jesus blesses with one hand

and holds a scroll with the other: it is the list of sins that He has come to defeat and replace with grace. The feet rest on the peak of Mount Tabor. The mountain is the place where Jesus retires to pray to put Himself in intimate relationship with the Father; the transfiguration will be the effect of prayer.

To the right and left of Jesus the figures of Moses and Elijah stand out. Moses, the legislator, holds the tablets of the law facing Christ; Elijah, the zealous prophet, bows with reverence indicating Christ as the fulfillment of the law and of the prophecies.

## 7. THE ENTRANCE INTO JERUSALEM



Jesus goes up to Jerusalem thus initiating the week of the Passion. Jesus' entrance takes place, according to the tradition of Israel, as befits a king, riding on a donkey. The people welcome him festively and among them are many rich characters, dressed in sumptuous clothes that highlight their social status.

In his left hand Jesus holds a scroll: "Behold, I come. In the scroll of the Book it is written of me that I may do Your will" (Ps 40:8-9). Christ is turned towards His Apostles and is reminding them of this. The faces of the Apostles, however, are shadowed because they do not

understand what is happening. In front of everyone is John, the disciple who witnessed the Passion, and Peter, dressed in yellow as a sign of his denial.

On the right side of the background stands Jerusalem, all dazzling, with the temple placed in the center of the city, a prefiguration of the heavenly Jerusalem. On the left side stands the Mount of Olives, from which Christ descends to go to Jerusalem. On the rock placed in the center we find an oak tree, a symbol of the Church.

## 8. THE LAST SUPPER



The icon portrays Jesus and the twelve Apostles as they are gathered in the Upper Room

in Jerusalem around a round table at the moment in which Jesus, after having placed the signs of the New Covenant, is making the shocking announcement that one of them would betray Him: "In truth, I tell you: one of you will betray Me". The Upper Room is the place where Jesus entrusts to His Apostles His Body and Blood in the Eucharist and where He enables them to repeat His actions in everlasting memory of Him.

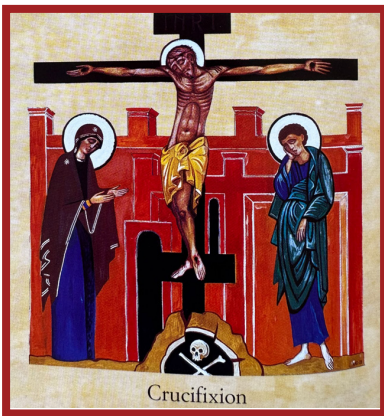
Jesus and the twelve are seated around the round table, sign of the profound communion that unites them. Over the red tunic, sign of his human nature, his kingship and his sacrificial love, He wears a black cloak, a sign of His imminent passion and death.

The figures of John and Judas are curved in the same way, but while John leans over the heart of Jesus to ask Him who will betray Him, Judas leans over the chalice of wine to dip the morsel in it, ready to betray Him. The other Apostles look

at each other bewildered; faces filled with shadows express their disorientation because they don't know what is about to happen.

On the table, which has the color of the earth, are the signs of the Eucharist, the cup of consecrated wine and bread: they are the Eucharistic signs of Christ's sacrifice and the invitation to eat of Him to remain in communion with the Father.

## 9. THE CRUCIFIXION



This icon captures the moment of the dialogue between Mary, the apostle John and her Son Jesus on the cross shortly before His death. Jesus is crucified on Mount Golgotha,

in Greek: Skull, outside the walls, thus the architectural background shows the walls of Jerusalem. Two doors appear next to the cross: on the left there is the large door, that which leads to perdition; on the right is the narrow door that leads to salvation, through which passed as the first Jesus carrying with Him the crushing weight of universal sin, defeating death with His death.

The head is bowed, the eyes are closed and from His face shines forth an infinite sweetness. There is not a sign of suffering on His body, the curve of the belly, rather than expressing spasm and torment, gives lightness and elegance to His body.

The completely black wood of the cross, sign of death, rests on a cave that is also black where tradition says rests the head of Adam. The other figures, on the left Mary and on the right John, are weeping and express great pain. The Madonna stretches Her hands towards John as a sign of welcome towards every man.



## 10. THE DESCENT INTO HELL



Christ, with golden robes shining and fluttering of divine glory, to represent the descent, is at the center of the icon: He crosses death, symbolized by the black circle, inside other blue and green circles, signs of the universe transfigured and redeemed by the Savior; the mountains, symbol of ascendance, placed in inverse perspective, contemplate the scene.

With feet that bear the marks of the nails, He breaks the gates of Hades, a symbolic rift of the foundations of the earth whose gates are tightly closed and do not allow anyone to get out, concealing within them

invisible, black abysses. It opens the tombs of all the dead, from creation to the end of time, to reconcile humanity to God, restore its likeness to Him and lead it back to Paradise: it is the defeat of evil and the triumph of good.

Also the hands are marked by nails, and with His right Jesus grabs Adam by the wrist, dressed in a heavy robe of a beautiful green that makes him majestic, and draws him to Himself: it is the meeting of the first with the second Adam. To His left, wrapped in a red cloak (the color symbolizing the energy that gives life, but also suffering, maternity) is Eve, with her arms outstretched towards Christ and her hands covered because they have grasped the forbidden fruit.

## 11. THE EMPTY TOMB



The resurrection of Jesus had no witnesses, therefore in Eastern iconography the foundational event of the Christian faith is not represented as a glorious Christ ascending to heaven amidst the banners of victory and trumpets of angels and beams of light, but with the few elements taken from the account of the characters receiving the message: the empty tomb, the shroud, the boulder rolled away from the entrance, the angel.

The three women – Mary of Magdala, Mary mother of James and Salome – go to the tomb and find it empty. In their hands they hold the jar of perfumed myrrh for anointing, in a great gesture of love, the body of their Lord who had been placed in the tomb without any rite of purification as Passover was imminent.

An angel, majestic and serene, clothed in light, sits on the rock of the sepulcher which has been rolled away from the mouth like a smooth rock by omnipotent hands. With one hand he points to the empty tomb and with the other to heaven to indicate that Jesus is no longer among the dead but belongs to another life.

The shape of the tomb, the white bandages, the dark cave in the rock, the three women with the perfumed myrrh recall the icon of the Nativity: a child wrapped in swaddling clothes in a manger that looks like a tomb in front of the dark cave.

## 12. THE ASCENSION



This icon represents the event of the Ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ and the hope from the Church, living members of his body, of his glorious return. It announces the definitive salvation of man and the victory over death. The Lord Jesus, after becoming incarnate and taking on human nature, died and rose again.

The composition follows the pattern of the ancient tradition and is divided into two parts. The upper part is the celestial one in which the figure of the glorious Christ stands out within the cosmic spheres. The lower part is the terrestrial part

occupied by the Apostles, the Mother of God and the angels. The union between the two parts is given by the figure of the Mother of God slim and stretched upwards, separated from the other figures by the garments of angels.

Christ's gesture is that of the Pantocrator as the One who exercises lordship over all things. In his left hand he holds a scroll, symbol of the announcement of the Good News and of the "chirograph", the document of our condemnation, which Jesus with His resurrection definitively canceled.

The Theotokos, the Mother of God, personification of the Church, constitutes the supporting axis of the lower level. The Apostles are standing with their faces upwards, divided into groups of six and arranged symmetrically around the Virgin Mary. Some look at Christ who is received in heaven, others look at the two angels.

### 13. PENTECOST



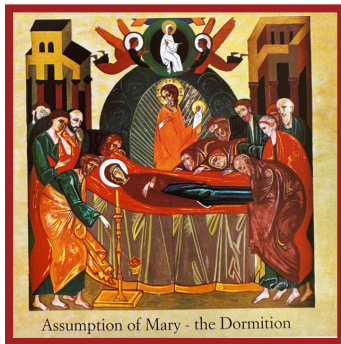
Christ, having completed His mission, returns to the Father, but before ascending to heaven had promised that He would not leave us alone: “I will always be with you, until the end of the world.” (Mt 28:20) In this icon is presented the unity of the Church lived in the diversity of the charisms of ministries, liturgical traditions and theologies. The circular structure of the composition underlines the communion present among the witnesses and echoes that of the Last Supper. The colors of this icon are particularly striking: the red, of fire and of the love of the Holy Spirit, and gold, symbol of the glory of God.

The representation is arranged on two levels. In the upper part, the small community of the Apostles with Mary is ready to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and the new law of love. The room of the Last Supper is open at the top, expression of the communion that has been created between heaven and earth. The twelve Apostles, symbol of the twelve tribes of Israel, are seated in a semicircle on the same plane, to indicate equal dignity and harmonious unity. The Mother of God is at the center of the composition and is highlighted with respect to the Apostles, arranged in two groups around Her, as if to indicate Her as the figure of the Church upon which the Holy Spirit descends.

In the lower parts, inside a black arc, appears a mysterious character dressed as a king. He is King Cosmos, prince of this world, a mythological figure borrowed from pagan iconography. The black circle is a sign of the universe still a prisoner of the prince of this world and of death.

In the form of tongues of fire, the Holy Spirit rests in a unique and personal way on the head of each of the Apostles, communicating Himself as agape among men. This icon reveals to us the mystery of our spiritual birth. The Holy Spirit descends in person on each of us and makes us children of God in Baptism.

#### 14. THE DORMITIO OF THE VIRGIN MARY



The usual pattern of ancient iconography was followed in the icon of the Dormitio of Mary. At the basis of the theme are the apocryphals and sermons of the Fathers of the Church (3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries). The icon is split into two distinct spaces. One is the real one, characterized by the

architectural background in the center of which the death of the Virgin is represented; the other is the more mystical one, which remains invisible to those around the Virgin's bed and refers to the symbolic reading of the event that is taking place.

The scene takes place in Zion inside the house of the Virgin Mary. The Apostles and some women of Jerusalem gather around her funeral bed. The Virgin Mary seems to be lying on an altar rather than lying on a bed. Wrapped in a purple cloak, the maphorion, a sign of Her royalty, sleeps with Her hands crossed on Her chest and Her head slightly raised.

The icon of the Dormitio is Christ's song of victory over death; for this victory Mary's body does not suffer corruption and enters the glory of God. Mary, all holy and completely consecrated to God, is crowned Queen of the angels and saints. At the center of the icon appears Her Son inside a sky-blue mantle, a sign of his divinity: in the blue are the faces of the angels who participate in the solemn event. The Risen

One holds Her in His arms, like a newborn baby, still in swaddling clothes with the same tenderness with which She once held the Son of God made flesh in Her arms. Now He has come to take Her with Him and take Her up to Heaven.

In the upper part Mary, in a white robe, is seated on a throne in the center of three circles, symbol of the Trinity, above a stroke of sky, whose doors open to welcome the Mother of God. The Assumption of Mary into Heaven is the announcement and promise of the Resurrection of the flesh of all men.

## 15. DEPOSITION



This icon shows Christ when He was taken down from the cross. He had completed all the work of His earthly life and rested in the sleep of death. His body is marked by the scourging and His side is torn, His hands and feet are pierced.

St. John kisses His hand, Joseph of Arimathea stands and turns towards Christ, Nicodemus bows down before the Lord, embracing His feet. The Virgin holds Jesus' head in her lap and leans over His face with maternal tenderness: the two are intertwined and fused in a single act of love. Mary expresses a sorrow that is serene and composed. She is the only one with her eyes open; she looks at heaven, a look of faith directed towards the Father.

Behind Mary the group of distraught holy women represents the drama of humanity in front of the questions posed by suffering, injustice and death.

The winding sheets that had wrapped Jesus' body have been abandoned beside the tombstone and announce the Resurrection.

The central and dominating element of the whole icon is the great bare, black cross, the symbol of Christ's death. According to tradition, it represents the invitation to climb on to it that is addressed to every Christian. The cross waits for all of us to follow in the footsteps of Christ. God has prepared it as an altar where in

every generation, the Christian, “alter Christus”, announces the Paschal Mystery.

## 16. APPEARANCE OF THE RISEN CHRIST



The Risen Christ appears to His disciples on the evening of the Sunday of the Resurrection. His glorious Body is no longer subject to the laws of nature: He is able to pass through closed doors. Nevertheless Christ clearly bears the signs of his Passion. He himself points them out: “Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself.” (Lk 24:39)

In the crown this icon is opposite that of the Transfiguration. If during His earthly life, to prepare His disciples for the scandal of the cross, Christ on Mount Tabor had dazzled them with the splendor of the divine glory, now that He is risen, He invites them to recognize in His

glorious Body the Crucified, the man Jesus, conqueror of death. Even the colors of His clothes show this: the purple tunic, symbol of divine nature, is covered with a blue cloak, sign of His humanity.

Jesus stands at the center of the composition and within His open arms are gathered the two groups of disciples who welcome Him full of amazement. They look at His serene face, full of tenderness: His power and His love. His heart has been pierced so that every man, however great a sinner, can receive His forgiveness.

In this icon it is important to note that the two apostles in the foreground are St. Peter, on the left, and St. Andrew, on the right. They represent respectively the Western and the Eastern Churches. In the Council of Florence (1439-45) there was an attempt to bring about the unity of the two Churches. The icon expresses the hope that this unity will come about soon.

# THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE CATHEDRAL: 2018-2021





# THE BLESSING AND CONSECRATION OF THE CATHEDRAL

10<sup>th</sup> December 2021



# THE VISIT OF POPE FRANCIS TO THE CATHEDRAL

4<sup>th</sup> November 2022



# EPISCOPAL ORDINATION OF BISHOP ALDO BERARDI, O.S.S.T.

18<sup>th</sup> March 2023

First ordination to be celebrated in the cathedral which also ushers in a new chapter in the life and mission of the Vicariate of Northern Arabia.





**OUR LADY OF ARABIA CATHEDRAL**

AWALI, KINGDOM OF BAHRAIN