



# St. Mary's Church

Bergen's oldest existing building



DEN NORSKE KIRKE  
Bergen domkirke menighet

# Welcome to St. Mary's Church



TOTA SPES NOSTRA EST IN MORTE DOMINI

ALL OUR HOPE IS IN THE DEATH OF THE LORD

No matter who you are or where you're from: Welcome to St. Mary's Church! You have come to a holy and unique place. While the city outside has changed, this church has been a place where people have come to pray and to worship God for centuries.

Every year people from all over the world visit St. Mary's to experience its long history, beautiful interior and active parish life. We invite you to tour this sacred place and we hope you leave feeling renewed and with a sense of peace.



# History



St. Mary's Church is the oldest existing building in use in Bergen and has a rich assortment of unique art. It was most likely built between 1130 and 1170. We don't know with certainty who built it, but judging by the decorative details, the stone masons may have been inspired by architecture in Northern Italy and England.

Twice the church was ravaged by fire – in 1198 and 1248. The building is unusually well preserved and has been in continuous use since the late Middle Ages. Before the major restoration between 2010 and 2015, the church was last restored in the 1860s. At that time, the building's appearance was

returned to the way it looked in the Middle Ages. The interior, however, was made much less ostentatious to conform to protestant sentiments. In the High Middle Ages St. Mary's Church was the citizen's main church. Important city government institutions were connected to the church and the church yard. In 1408 it became the official church for German merchants based in Bergen, and it remained so until 1766, when it became the parish church for the German congregation. It did not become an ordinary Norwegian parish church until 1874. Today, it plays a central role in Bergen as a church, cultural heritage site and concert venue.

# Architecture

St. Mary's is a basilica, i.e. the body of the church is divided into a tall nave and two lower side aisles with separate roofs. This is a feature borrowed from medieval cathedrals. It is one of few parish churches in Norway with two towers in its west-facing facade. The towers are original but had to be repaired after the fire in 1248. The choir has probably been lengthened at some point, most likely after the most recent fire.



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# Altar reredos



The oldest treasure in the church is the altar reredos (altar screen), dating from the 15th century. It was made in northern Germany, probably Lübeck. The screen consists of a central panel, and two narrower, side panels. Mary, holding the infant Jesus, is depicted in the middle, “clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars”. On her right we find St. Olav, with St. Anthony below. On her left stands St. Catherine with her sword and wheel, and below her, St. Dorothea. On the side panels we see all the disciples, excluding Judas, but including Paul. All bear their symbols and carry the book of the Gospel. The hinged side panels can be opened and closed. The cabinet is closed only during advent and lent. When the panels are closed, one can see paintings depicting the life of Jesus. The crucifix on top of the altar reredos was added in 1682 and carries the inscription “All our hope is in the death of our Lord.”

# The pulpit

There is nothing similar to this pulpit anywhere else in Norway. It was given to the church in 1676 by a group of prominent German merchants at Bryggen. The use of tortoiseshell and the lacquer work is foreign to us and may suggest a connection to East Asia, possibly through Holland. The pulpit and the staircase are decorated with 8 of the 9 main Christian virtues, represented by women with various attributes. Penitence with a pelican, prudence with a snake, the naked truth, chastity with two turtle doves, patience with a lamb, hope with a dove and

parts of an anchor, faith with book and cross, and love with two children.

Both above and below the pulpit there are two half spheres, symbolizing the northern and southern hemispheres. They are both decorated with symbolic animals and astrological signs. Around the lower hemisphere are five small cherubs that seem to carry the pulpit, surrounded by gold leaf and fruit garlands.

The pulpit underwent major restoration in 1952-1956, and again in 2010-2015.





# The portals



The church has three portals in addition to the west portal between the towers. Each of these represent different phases in the development of portal architecture in the Middle Ages. The oldest type is the portal in the northern side aisle, whose style is simple and can be traced back to Roman times. In the northern wall, we find the most common portal type of the Middle Ages, with its three recessed rows of arches. On the southern side is the late Romanesque grand portal, whose style is typical of 13th century cathedral portals. Here, each row of arches has its own texture. On either side of the portal and on the pillars, we find ornamental carvings of plants and animals which are difficult to place in any particular stylistic context. The portal seems to be the result of a blend of influences from different regions.



# The choir

The choir walls are decorated with 13 life size statues of the disciples and St. Paul. (2 further statues of Moses and John the Baptist can be found in the back of the church.) The statues are from 1634 and include symbols which represent their personal attributes. On the church floor we find the gravestones of German sea captains, merchants and clergy of the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries. These stones were collected from all parts of the church and laid down in the choir in the 1930s. By the south wall there is a choir stall from 1589 as well as a bible from Nürnberg, printed in 1692.

# Epitaphs



Many of the 23 paintings in St. Mary's Church are epitaphs – memorials to persons with a connection to the church (priests, merchants, aldermen). Most of them were removed during the restoration in the 1860s, but there are still several left. On the walls of the nave, there are faint traces of medieval frescoes from the 15th century.



These were uncovered in the 1930s. They are not easy to interpret today, but on the northern wall the Ascension is depicted, and on the southern wall we can just see the miracle of Pentecost. On the wall above the choir arch, we see remnants of a depiction of the Day of Judgment, with devils and a large church bell. A crucifix from the 16th century is well preserved above the choir arch.

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# The organ

The new organ of St. Mary's Church was built by Josef Weimbs Orgelbau from Hellenthal in der Eifel in Germany. It has 31 stops (38 ranks), 2 manuals and pedal. The organ façade was designed by the Swedish architect Ulf Oldæus. The instrument was built in 2014-15 and was inaugurated during the reopening of the church on June 21st, 2015. The sound is influenced by various German Baroque organs.



# BERGEN DOMKIRKE MENIGHET

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