



Review of the International Scientific Conference “Monastic Life in Lithuania: History and Perspectives” Dedicated to the 400th Anniversary of the Foundation of the Benedictine Monastery in Kaunas

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Monasteries are an important part of the history and present of many European countries and cities. It would be difficult to imagine a large European city without a monastery in or around it. This is also general in Lithuania. The first missionary monks (Franciscans and Dominicans) reached Lithuania before the Christianisation of Lithuania. Later, in the 15th and 18th centuries, with the founding and support of the monarch, the nobility and the townspeople, monasteries of different orders continued to be established in various places in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL). Most of the time, the monastic order settled in a particular area with a specific purpose: to spread the faith, to teach, to establish an education system, to care for the ill and the poor, and so on. Monasteries have been and remain one of the key elements of Christian life, often maintaining close connections with the city and with people living beyond the monastery walls. Studying both the spiritual and personal life of monks and nuns and their relations with the laity opens up a wide range of topics for scholars, allowing them to delve into political, mental, economic, cultural, and art history. Finally, it is also important that monasteries are not just relics of the past, but important actors in our contemporary life.

These are the topics of the past and present of the monasteries that were the focus of the conference “Monastic Life in Lithuania: History and Perspectives”,¹ which took place on 30–31 May 2024 at Vytautas Magnus University (VMU). The conference was dedicated to the 400th anniversary of the foundation of the Benedictine Monastery in Kaunas. Commemorating this important anniversary, the programme had a significant focus on the key events, personalities and sacred heritage of the monastery’s past. However, the conference also featured presentations on many other monasteries (Benedictines, Discalced Carmelites, Franciscan Observants, Jesuits, Bernardines, Dominicans, Sisters of St Catherine and The Bridgettines, Orthodox Christian and Basilian monks and nuns, etc.) and their related topics.

Welcoming speeches were delivered by the Dean of the Faculty of Catholic Theology of VMU Assoc. Prof. Benas Ulevičius, the Prioress of the Benedictine Sisters’ Monastery in Kaunas Sister Paulina Aleksandra Vanagaitė OSB, and the Director of the Vytautas Kavolis Transdisciplinary Research Institute, Assoc. Prof. Jurga Bučaitė-Vilkė. It was welcomed that the conference attracted great interest of Lithuanian and foreign scientists. More than thirty historians, art historians and theologians from different countries presented their papers.

The first session of the conference, moderated by Prof. Anna Sylwia Czyż (Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University), focused on the history of Benedictine monasticism. Sister Assoc. Prof. Gabrielė Aušra Vasiliauskaitė OSB (VMU) discussed a short, but very significant phase in the history of the Benedictine Monastery in Kaunas – the period from 1936 to 1943, when Bishop Teofilus Matulionis (now Blessed) was the chaplain of the monastery and the rector of the Church of St. Nicholas. According to the speaker, the latter period was a time of flourishing for the community. She presented a collective picture of the monastic community at that time and the importance of Bishop Matulionis for the flourishing of the community. When the bishop was rector of the church, he initiated the reconstruction of the interior of the House of Prayer in order to provide a suitable place for the Perpetual Adoration of the Most Blessed Sacrament. The reconstruction and the triptych “The Apostles”, created by stage painter Liudas Truikys, were described by art historian Sister Dr. Kotryna Indrė Šurkutė OSB (Vilnius St. Joseph’s Theological Institute). Historian Prof. Tomasz Kempa (Nicolaus Copernicus University, Torun) gave an overview of two founders of the Benedictine monasteries in the GDL – Mikołaj Krzysztof Radziwiłł “the Orphan”, founder of the Benedictine monastery of Nesvizh, and his client Andrzej Skorulski, founder of the Benedictine monastery in Kaunas. Prof. Jolanta Gwioździk (University of Silesia in Katowice) talked

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about how monastic formation was organised in the Benedictine monasteries of the Congregation of Chelmno at the time of Krystyna Eufemia Radziwiłłówna, and what models were used for this. The speaker discussed books, which were essential tools for monastic formation. Historian Dr. Jarosław Pietrzak (University of the National Educational Commission, Krakow) presented the reforms carried out by one of the most prominent abbesses of the Benedictine monastery of Nesvizh in the 18th century, Justyna Eufemia Szaniawska. During her days as abbess, the monastery was in its flourishing period. She helped to raise the monastery buildings from the ruins, and took care of the intellectual development of the nuns entrusted to her care, medical care and establishing a music school.

The afternoon session of the first day of the conference (moderated by Assoc. Prof. Aušra Vasiliauskienė (VMU) and Prof. T. Kempa) was opened by Prof. Anna Penkała-Jastrzębska (University of the National Educational Commission, Kraków) who presented the correspondence of Maria Augustyna Radziwiłłówna, a nun and later the Prioress of the Warsaw Monastery of Benedictine Nuns of Perpetual Adoration of the Most Blessed Sacrament. These sources give an opportunity to learn about the daily life of the monastery and the relationship with the Radziwiłł family. Historian Prof. Vaida Kamuntavičienė (VMU) talked about the priests of various Kaunas monasteries (Jesuits, Dominicans, Bernardines) of the 17th–19th centuries, who were chaplains of the Kaunas Benedictine. The historian Assoc. Prof. Domininkas Burba (VMU) based on the books of the Vilnius district land court and the castle court as well as the Lithuanian Treasury Tribunal, analysed the legal proceedings of Benedictines in Vilnius in the 18th century. According to the historian, the most frequent legal conflicts of the nuns took place with the lay nobility, and the main topics were debts, disputes over the ownership of estates and peasants, assaults and brawls. Art historian Karolina Koroliova-Barkova (Church Heritage Museum, Vilnius) gave a thorough presentation of the dispersed heritage of the Benedictine monastery in Vilnius, which experienced the difficulties and trials of the 20th century. She discussed the places where the Benedictine treasures ended up and what remains of the monastery. The latter presentation was perfectly complemented by Dr. Viktorija Vaitkevičiūtė's (Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania) presentation about the collection of books of the Vilnius Benedictines, which is kept in the Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania. The speaker provided additional data on the provenance marks of the former Vilnius Benedictine book collection, the circumstances of the books' arrival at the monastery and what books were kept in the monastery. A similar topic was also discussed by Dr. Milda Kvizikevičiūtė (Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania). She presented the structure of the library of the Bernardine (Observants Franciscans) monastery of Tytuvėnai and gave an overview of the books of the monastery stored in the National Library (at present, the National Library has identified about 600 books from the library of the Bernardine monastery), and discussed the cultural and historical value of these books.

Prof. Iwona Pietrzakiewicz (University of the National Educational Commission, Kraków) talked about the Benedictine monks of Senieji Trakai and their links with the local community. She discussed the involvement of the local community in the foundation and the activities of the monastery, and based on surviving sources, she reconstructed the local forms of piety. Historian Ričardas Jaramičius (VMU) presented the history of the Discalced Carmelite Monastery of Kaunas in the period 1772–1845, when the monks settled at the Church of the Holy Cross. Art historian Assoc. Prof. Aušra Vasiliauskienė (VMU) presented the changes in the interior of the Holy Trinity Church (near Kaunas former Bernardine monastery) in the first half of the 20th century. She pointed out which changes in the iconographic programme were caused by these transformations and which signs were indicative of the Bernardine legacy in the church and which signs were indicative of the later Salesian ownership. Historian Kseniya Liubaya (University of Warsaw) talked about the Zavisza family's relations with various monasteries and their support, as well as the initiatives taken by the family members to bury their family members in churches and chapels belonging to monasteries. A collaborative conference paper with K. Liubaya was presented by Andrei Liuby (University of Warsaw). They discussed the ecclesiastical correspondence of the Zavisza family in the Roman archives. This material gives an insight into the relationship of this family with the Catholic Church, and in particular with the Jesuit order, and the main themes of this relation.

The second day of the conference focused on the relations of men's and women's religious orders with society and with their founders. It also focused on the influence of monasteries or particular monks and nuns on the political, cultural, artistic life of a local area or state. First sessions of the day were moderated by R. Jaramičius and Prof. V. Kamuntavičienė. Historian Dr. Natalia Bilous (Institute of History of Ukraine, National Preserve "Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra") talked about the spiritual, cultural and scientific activities of Archimandrite Yelisey Pletnetetsky of Kyiv Cave Monastery. According to the speaker, under the leadership of the Archimandrite, who gathered around him the most prominent Orthodox spiritual and scientific figures of the time, the monastery became a sort of scientific and cultural centre. The historian Prof. Wioletta Zielecka-Mikołajczyk (Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń), based on the wills and other similar documents in the land court books of the Ashmyany district from the second half of the 17th century to the beginning of the 18th century, presented the contexts of the legacies and the attitude of the local nobility towards the monasteries. The historian identified which monastic centres were the most important for the testators living in Ashmyany and what kind of support was given to the monasteries. Historian Prof. Dorota Wereda (University of Siedlce) discussed the foundations of Basilian monasteries in the GDL in the 17th–18th centuries. As one of the main factors in this process, the historian highlighted the confessional policy of the monarchs. Historian Assoc. Prof. Oleh Dukh (Ivan Franko National University of Lviv) continued the topic

of the Uniate nunneries. He gave a detailed presentation of the development of nunneries in the Kyiv Uniate Metropolis from 1596 to the first half of the 19th century. The historian described the processes that accompanied the establishment of the nunneries and the difficulties encountered over the centuries.

At the conference, much attention was also paid to the Dominican monastery and its heritage in the GDL. Historian Valiantsina Zakharych (University of Warsaw) spoke about the role of women in the founding of Dominican monasteries in the GDL in the 17th–18th centuries and presented a collective portrait of such women. Art historian Prof. Anna Sylwia Czyż (Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University) analysed the unknown frontispiece of the visitation of the monasteries of the Lithuanian Dominican Province from 1756. Marek Miławicki OP (Dominican Historical Institute in Krakow) described the network of Dominican priors (men and women) who belonged to the Province of Lithuania in the 19th century, and revealed the difficulties the monasteries had to face during the liquidation of the monasteries by the Tsarist Russian government. Art historian Dr. Rima Valinčiūtė-Varnė (VMU) presented the altar ensemble of the Corpus Christi (Dominican) Church in Kaunas in the second half of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century. Based on the drawings of the church's measurements, visitations and other archival sources of the time, the scholar described the Dominican iconography and assessed the artistic features of the church.

The afternoon session (moderated by Dr. R. Valinčiūtė-Varnė) was begun by the historian Dr. Aliona Liubaya (University of Warsaw), who presented the reports of the Jesuit mission as a source for a better understanding of the local history of the cities of the GDL. In her presentation, the historian focused on the case of Bobruysk. Independent researcher Dr. Raisa Zianiuk discussed the role of alcohol in the life of Catholic religious communities in the lands of Lithuania and Belarus at the end of the eighteenth and the nineteenth century. Art historian Dr. Gabija Surdokaitė-Vitienė (Lithuanian Culture Research Institute) in presentation reviewed the regulations of four women's monasteries – Bernardine, Benedictine, Sisters of St Catherine and The Bridgettines – in their regulations relating to embroidery. She showed how these rules were followed in practice and analysed the mastery and artistry of nuns' embroidery. Art historian Daiva Vaišnorienė (VMU) talked about the spread of the cult of St. Barbara in the Post-Tridentine period of the GDL through monasteries, the founding of the first brotherhoods of St. Barbara and the traditions of piety, as well as the iconographic ways of representing this saint in sacred art.

In the last session of the conference (moderated by historian Dr. Inga Puidokienė (VMU)), were analysed the life of monasteries and religious fraternities during the Tsarist and Soviet occupation and their activities in the diaspora. Theologian Dr. Viktor Bilotas (VMU) presented the Catholic monks who in the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century found themselves living in Siberia, indicating which congregations these monks belonged to, and the locations of these

people. Historian Dr. Vilma Žaltauskaitė (Lithuanian Institute of History) analysed the functioning of Catholic Church fraternities in the Vilnius and Samogitian (Telšiai) dioceses in the 19th century, highlighting the period after the 1863–1864 Uprising, when the repressive measures of the Tsarist government against the Catholic Church also affected the functioning of fraternities. Historian PhD student Ignas Stanevičius (Vilnius University) discussed the missionary and pastoral activities of the Jesuit Fathers in the Diaspora in the 1950s–1980s. The speaker highlighted the main pastoral goals and forms of the Jesuits, and emphasised the challenges and problems that the monks faced in their daily life in the Diaspora. Historian Dr. Monika Rogers (VMU) talked about the secretly operating Lithuanian women's religious communities during the Soviet era and their anti-Soviet activities.

After two days of scientific presentations, the third day started with a Holy Mass at St. Nicholas Church. Later, the participants were invited to excursions to Kaunas churches and monasteries. First, the participants had the opportunity to get acquainted with the Church of St. Nicholas and the Benedictine Monastery of Kaunas, which were presented by Sister Assoc. Prof. Gabrielė Aušra Vasiliauskaitė and Prof. Vaida Kamuntavičienė. Later, Dr. Rima Valinčiūtė Varnė spoke about the Church of St. George the Martyr of Kaunas and the monastery.

In this review, we have only briefly introduced the main topics of the conference and provided an episodic overview of the conference papers. After the presentations, discussions took place, giving the speakers the opportunity to further reflect on the interpretations and questions raised in their research. This allowed some of the participants to expand on their presentations and to prepare scientific articles to be published in the scientific journal "Istorija". In this issue you can read the first articles of the participants. We plan to publish further articles by the participants in the next issues of the journal in 2025.