

## THE DIOCESE OF VILNIUS BETWEEN THE FOURTEENTH AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES

The Diocese of Vilnius was erected in 1387 when Lithuania converted to Christianity. Vilnius Diocese as well as Diocese of Luck (established in 1400) and the Diocese of Samogitia (established in 1417) covered the entire territory of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. It was the largest diocese in the country and one of the largest in Europe.

Spiritual and ecclesiastical supervision of the dioceses was carried out by the bishops of the diocese who were members of the Lithuanian Council of Lords between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. They would later become senators and get actively involved in the political life of the country.

The first royal endowment was bestowed on Vilnius episcopal see by King Ladislas Jagiełło. Subsequent foundations were made by royal as well as private donors. Bishops collected significant revenue. In mid-sixteenth century the endowment of the Bishop of Vilnius was 3.5 times higher than the total income of the cathedral chapter. Bishops were elected by the chapter and nominated by the people. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries a lengthy formal procedure had to be followed before a bishop would be instituted in his office. Vilnius Episcopal see was the highest and the most prominent ecclesiastical office in Lithuania as far as the Episcopal endowments and the role the Bishop of Vilnius played in the Senate. The Dioceses of Samogitia, Łuck and Kiev were lower in rank, therefore Samogitian and Łuck ordinaries would make attempts to advance to the position of the Bishop of Vilnius.

Vilnius Cathedral Chapter received formal papal approval in 1388 and was founded by King Jagiełło on 15 May 1390. The chapter consisted of six prelates and twelve canons – this arrangement had been introduced around 1524 and lasted until the end of the eighteenth century. The chapter shared in diocesan administrative duties with the bishop, assisted the bishop in the government of his diocese and it would often delegate a candidate for the ordinary from among its members.

As in the cases of all other cathedral chapters, in Vilnius, too, the prelates were appointed different duties. The duty of the dean was to convoke the chapter and to supervise the cathedral clergy: vicars, prelates, presbyters. The archdeacon acted as the bishop's representative with the duty of supervising the preparation of the episcopal visitations in the diocese.

The church of St Stanislas and St Ladislas situated in the castle of Vilnius was first mentioned in 1387. The first cathedral was a stone building. After the first fire in 1419 it was rebuilt as a three-nave Gothic style building with vaulted ceiling. The Church underwent major reconstruction after the 1530 fire. The present building was built by Wawrzyniec Gucewicz in Neo-Classical style at the end of the eighteenth century. The cathedral was raised to the rank of Basilica in 1889, and when the Archdiocese of Vilnius was established in 1925, it became Archcathedral. The cathedral has been closed down during the long period of the Soviet occupation and between 1956-1988 it housed a picture gallery.

The Chapel of Saint Casimir is definitely the glory of the cathedral. It is remarkable site of devotion to Saint Casimir who died in 1484 and was a son of Casimir Jagiellon, King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania. King Sigismund III Vasa and King Ladislas IV Vasa commissioned artists to build the Chapel in 1623-1636. The relicts of the pious prince were then solemnly transferred to the Chapel where they remain until the present day some interruptions.

Soon after the foundation of the Diocese of Vilnius a few other churches were built. There were about 27 churches around the year 1430. Once members of the lower clergy and laymen joined in with their donations, the number of parishes started to grow. Around the year 1500 there were already about 130 churches. Interestingly those Catholic churches were situated far away from each other, and a sixteenth-century parish would cover the territory of 870 square kilometers on the

average while in the same period a parish in Poland would cover 60-77 square kilometers. Low parish network density in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was unparalleled in the Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania and on a European scale. One of the factors was the vast territory that the Diocese of Vilnius covered. It is worth mentioning that between the sixteen and mid eighteenth centuries Lithuanian bishoprics were the ones that developed most dynamically of all the bishoprics in the Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania. In the period between 1500-1772 the number of parishes in the Diocese of Vilnius tripled, in the Diocese of Łuck the parish number doubled, and in the Diocese of Samogitia the parishes became four times as numerous.

A rapid increase in the number of parishes did not coincide with the growth of the number of monasteries that were scarce in the early years of the Diocese. By the second half of the sixteenth century there had appeared only a dozen Benedictine, Franciscan, Dominican and Franciscan Observants (Bernardines) monasteries. Their number started to increase only in the seventeenth century when many parish churches and religious orders received new endowments. The Diocese was home to the largest number of religious orders in the Commonwealth and it comprised one-fifth of all monasteries.

In the early years of the Diocese the support of most churches was provided for by royal endowments. The magnates would follow in the footsteps of the royal donor. Funds for the permanent support of the newly-found churches were to be drawn from the estates donated by kings. In the case of private endowments the land was not donated immediately after the erection of the church, and the support of the parish priest was provided for by the revenue from the magnate's estate. Complications would set in once the church collator changed his/her religious denomination and handed the church and the endowment to the congregations of other Christian denominations. Numerous examples of such practice are found in sixteenth-century Lithuania.

The Marian cult in the Diocese emerged already in the Middle Ages. It was partly due to the influence of the Orthodox Church where a solemn veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary had a long-lasting tradition. Early-Byzantine-style images of Blessed Virgin Mary surviving from the territory of the Grand Duchy testify to the influence of the Orthodox Church on the spreading of the cult of the Virgin in the country. At the turn of the seventeenth century the number of miraculous images in the Diocese of Vilnius increased, and the majority of them were dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Many of these images were crowned with papal crowns in the eighteenth century.

The cult of Saint Stanislas had been promoted since the foundation of the Diocese of Vilnius. It was the time when the cult was flourishing in Poland. The cult lasted until the end of the eighteenth century despite the fact that St Stanislas was not the best-loved saint in Lithuania. Saints Adalbert, Ladislav and Florian enjoyed even less popularity in the Diocese of Vilnius, although they were venerated all across Poland.

Saint Nicolas was the most popular saint in the Diocese of Vilnius between the fifteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries. The first churches built in the fifteenth century would often be dedicated to Saint Nicholas, the Bishop. The cult seemed to wane in mid-sixteenth century, while the cult of Saint John the Baptist flourished until the end of the eighteenth century, and it was not by chance that the first parish church in Vilnius was dedicated to Saint John the Baptist. The cult of Saint George was also spreading in the Diocese of Vilnius, while in Poland these were rather Saints Hedwig, Dorothea or Margaret. Between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, parallel to the old cults, new saints' cults emerged: the cult of Saints Francis of Assisi, Dominic, Francis Xavier and Stanisław Kostka. Early seventeenth century is the period when the cult of Saint Casimir becomes very popular. The cult of Saint Casimir reached all the dioceses, but it was always strongest in the Diocese of Vilnius.