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## DARIUS PETKUNAS

## The Struggle of the Lithuanian Roman Catholic Church to Save Vilnius Archcathedral

From their first arrival in Lithuania, the Soviet communists recognized that the power of the Roman Catholic Church in the country was enormous. They realized at once that their subjugation of Lithuania would require the breaking of the influence of the Church. The first Soviet occupation in 1940 was short-lived and gave the Soviet Communist Party no real opportunity to move forcefully against the Church. In 1944 the Red Army returned and the communists soon reestablished themselves as the governing power. With this came the full-scale initiation of the Soviet anti-church policies.

Few studies concerning the plight of the Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania during the Soviet period were published before Lithuania declared its independence in 1991. The most substantial evidence about the life of the Church under the Soviets was provided in “*Lietuvos Katalikų Bažnyčios Kronika*” (“*The Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania*”) published between 1972–1989. It provided detailed evidence about the violations of human rights and the abuse of freedom of religion in the country. However, few Communist Party documents were available to the dissidents who shipped the facts about abuses to the West. The Communist Party labeled all material relating to the persecution of the Church “Secret” or “Top Secret.” None of it was for public viewing or dissemination. Even within the party such material was never widely circulated.

With independence came the first real opportunities to tell the story of the Lithuanian Churches. More extensive studies have been published in recent years. Arūnas Streikus provides a general overview of the history of the Roman Catholic Church of that period in “*Sovietų valdžios antibažnytinė politika Lietuvoje 1944–1990*” (“*The anti-Church Politics of the Soviet Leadership in Lithuania 1944–1990*”). In “*Staciatikių bažnyčia Lietuvoje XX amžiuje*” (“*The Orthodox Church in Lithuania in the 20<sup>th</sup> century*”) Regina Laukaitytė gives an overview of the plight of the Russian Orthodox Church during the Soviet years and even earlier.<sup>1</sup> However, the more complete history of the Roman Catholic, Russian Orthodox, and other Churches during Soviet period in Lithuania has yet to appear.

The present article seeks to show that during the Soviet occupation of Lithuania the Communists struggled among themselves to find an effective program for the application of their atheistic policies. It depicts the struggle of the Roman Catholic Church to attempt to save the Vilnius Archcathedral from desecration.

<sup>1</sup> Arūnas Streikus Sovietų valdžios antibažnytinė politika Lietuvoje (1944-1990), Vilnius 2002; Regina Laukaitytė Staciatikių bažnyčia Lietuvoje XX amžiuje, Vilnius 2003.



Archcathedral during Nazi Germany occupation. From: German war film chronicles.



Entering Soviet Army tanks in front of archcathedral, July 1944. From: М. Коломиев, И. Моцацкий Танки Ленд-Лиза 1941-1945, 2000.

The study is based on material in the Lithuanian archives. Additional material was found in the personal memoirs of Bishop Kazimieras Paltarokas and Vyngintas Bronius Pšibilskis “*Byla dėl Vilniaus arkikatedros: 1949–1956*” (“*Vilnius Archcathedral Dossier 1949–1956*”).<sup>2</sup> The present study may prove valuable to historians studying of the Communist movement, the plight of the churches under Communism, and general readers.

### Initial Soviet attempts to break Church power

The Soviet anti-church policies in the Baltic States were in the planning stages even before the Red Army reentered Lithuania. On May 29, 1944, as the Soviet military forces were sweeping westward, the Council of People’s Commissars in Moscow decreed that every Soviet republic would have a State Commissioner of Religious Affairs directly responsible to the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults of the USSR Council of Ministers in Moscow.<sup>3</sup> The first commissioner in Lithuania was Alfonsas Gailevičius. He was impressed by the power of the Roman Catholic Church and worked against it rather ineffectively. He required the registration of all priests and parishes, but the

church paid little attention and treated him not as a formidable opponent but as a minor irritant.<sup>4</sup> The Church insisted that the authority of the commissioner meant little to it, it answered only to the Bishop of Rome and his curia. From time to time the NKGB (People’s Commissariat for State Security) would move against individual members of the clergy and bishops, but the commissioner was unable to mount any sustained and coordinated efforts to curb the authority of the Church. The Party understood that it had to break the influence of the Church in order to successfully sovietize Lithuania.

It was not until 1948 that the Party was able to come up with a well integrated plan to incorporate more fully Lithuania and the other Baltic states into their Soviet empire. By this time Soviet intentions in Europe had become clear and there was no longer any need for secrecy. The West had made it clear that it would act decisively to curb Soviet aggressions. In 1946 Winston Churchill had articulated the attitude of the western nations to communist attempts to draw an iron curtain around its captive nations. In addition, President Harry S. Truman had addressed US Congress in 1947 asking support for nations struggling to avoid a communist takeover and to support the initiative of George Marshall to establish the plan to assist in the economic recovery in Europe. The Soviet government described the new Western attitude as imperialist and vowed that they would fight it. They would allow no threats to their

<sup>2</sup> *Aidai* 1984, No.6; Vyngintas Bronius Pšibilskis “Byla dėl Vilniaus arkikatedros: 1949–1956 – Kultūros Barai 1995. No. 5 (365), p. 66–72.

<sup>3</sup> Lietuvos centrinis valstybės archyvas (Lithuanian Central State Archives, henceforth – LCVA) f. R-181, ap. 1, b. 2, l. 1–3.

<sup>4</sup> LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 1, b. 3, l. 19–25; ap. 3, b. 9, l. 18; ap. 3, b. 12, l. 1–4; ap. 3, b. 12, l. 30–31.

sphere of influence. They would crush any signs of nationalism in the Baltic States; they would form collective farms and deport unwanted, undesirable, and untrustworthy people to Siberia and other Soviet republics. The decree establishing the program of collectivization of agriculture in Lithuania was adopted on March 20, 1948, and the first deportations came only two months later. On May 22, 1948, 61,995 Lithuanians were deported. On March 24, 1949, an additional 48,448 were deported and at the end of 1950 it was publicly declared that 90 percent of the farmers had been removed from the land and had been relocated in collective farms. To facilitate the Sovietization of the country another 33,940 were deported on October 2, 1951. In addition to these major deportations every year smaller numbers of Lithuanians were removed from the country. The destination of most of them was Siberia. In December 1951, two months after the last major deportation, the Lithuanian Supreme Council boldly declared that the complete victory of Socialism in the republic had been achieved.

### Systematic isolation of the Church from the people

Beginning in February 1948, the Central Committee of the Lithuanian Communist Party began consideration of a project for the systematic elimination of the Lithuanian Catholic Church from any influence – personal, societal, or political. The document they formulated asserted that the Lithuanian Roman Catholic Church was the tool of western imperialist aggression and made its appeal to the remnants of the exploiters who had managed to retain their power and influence and the rich farmers (“Kulaks”) who likewise had resisted the onward march of the people. The Church, they claimed, was actively engaged in anti-Soviet activity, inspiring and supporting the nationalist underground and the armed insurrectionist “bandits” who were fighting against the Soviet government. They declared that the Church was using its power and influence against the interests of the state; its priests preached sermons which inspired the people to disobedience and to disobedience against the rule of Soviet law. In addition the Church was slandering the collective farms, illegally organizing the youth and under the pretext of training of them to be obedient to the law of God they were in fact subverting them and directing them towards anti-Soviet underground movements and the armed insurrectionists. Further, international espionage agents were using Roman Catholic priests to help them achieve their aims of spreading imperialism.

It had to be acknowledged, the Central Committee stated, that the danger posed by the role of reactionary priests in the battle of the state against “aggressive” Western forces had not been sufficiently recognized. It had been wrongly assumed that there was little connection between these subversive nationalists and the Church. As a result Party organs had not alerted the people to the real danger posed by the church and its unscientific ideology and to spread and encourage the natural-scientific progress of atheism among the masses. The Lithuanian Young Communist League, trade unions, cultural, scientific, and educational organizations had not involved themselves in disseminating atheist truth. Schools, high schools, clubs, and cultural organizations had not fulfilled their responsibility to counter the influence of the Church and

its idealistic propaganda. To make matters worse, some of these organizations had closed their doors on Sundays and feast days, while the Church used these days to win the hearts of the people.<sup>5</sup>

The project was adopted on July 9, 1948. Now the state would embark on a thirteen-point program to break the Church’s power. With this program in place the state believed that it would be able to destroy the influence of the Church and that organized religion would no longer be an obstacle in the path of the onward march of atheistic communism. The Party believed that they could effectively destroy the Church as an instrument of influence in the community and the school. Now they would be able to proceed without effective ecclesiastical opposition to establish a society of people from whose hearts and minds the very idea of God had been erased. The implementation of the program began at once.<sup>6</sup>

The first step was to replace the commissioners in all the Baltic States. In 1948, Lithuanian Commissioner Gailevičius was replaced by Bronius Leonas-Pušinis, a man completely without sympathy for the Church. He would carry out his work without mercy in utter dedication to the communist cause. His first task would be to supervise the registration of churches, to which the Roman Catholic Church had until that point largely managed to avoid.

A primary act under the new plan was the implementation of a program to confiscate church properties by nationalizing all houses of prayer and monasteries. This program was adopted on June 19, 1948. Before the end of that day Commissioner Pušinis had instructed local officials that by the decree of the Lithuanian Supreme Council he was ordering the immediate seizure of all churches, synagogues, and mosques. Parishes which were properly registered would be given contracts to use their prayer houses. He furnished local executive committees with a model contract which was to be followed exactly. He also informed them that they were to determine which prayer houses might be suitable for use and which should be closed. He stated that if a confession had two or more churches in close proximity they could have use of only one of them. The Jesuits would not be permitted to register or use any facilities whatever. If anyone allowed them to do so, their prayer house would be immediately closed.<sup>7</sup> On July 8, 1948, the Lithuanian Supreme Council decided that this program should be enacted and completed by August 1, 1948, and any unused property should be turned over to the real estate fund of the local executive committees.<sup>8</sup>

The communists determined that by taking control of church property they were setting themselves above the Church and the clergy. Any clergy, bishop, or congregation which defied government regulations or made light of them, ran the danger of losing its church. The state would rule and the Church would be subservient.

5 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 15, l. 2-6.

6 Lietuvos ypatingasis archyvas (Lithuanian Special Archives, henceforth – LYA) LYA, f. K-1, ap. 10, b. 9, l. 12-13; *Ariūnas Streikus* Sovietų valdžios antibažnytinė politika Lietuvoje (1944-1990), Vilnius 2002, p. 328-332.

7 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 15, l. 46-47.

8 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 15, l. 79.



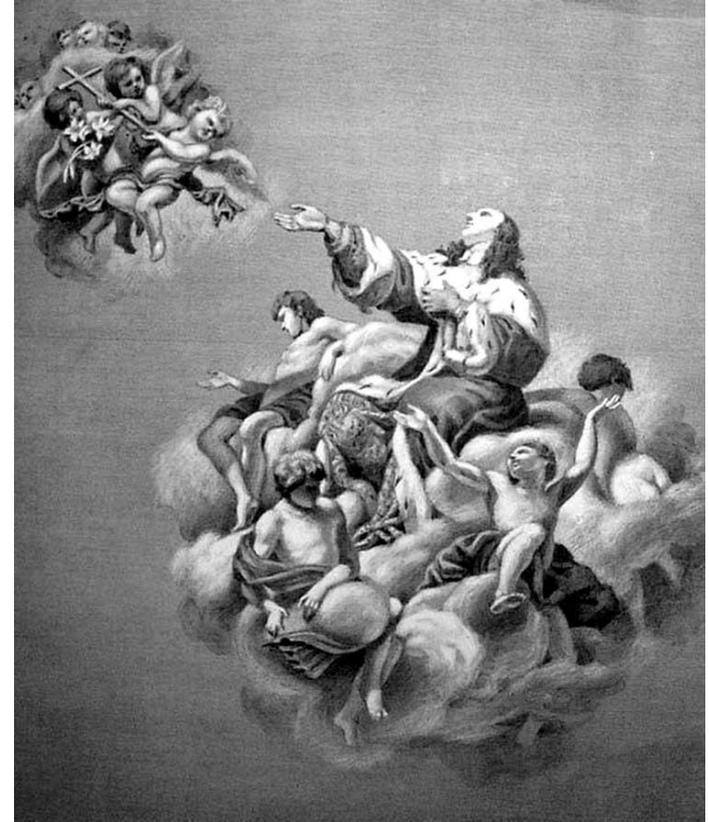
*The Archcathedral of Vilnius. Photo: Tomas Vyšniauskas.*

### Saint Casimir – protector of Lithuania against its enemies

The Vilnius archcathedral plays a central role in the history of Lithuania, even over above its importance as the central church of Lithuanian Roman Catholicism. The construction of the first cathedral began on the site on the present cathedral in 1251 A.D. after the conversion to Christianity of King Mindaugas. Indeed it was for the purpose of his coronation that the cathedral was built and it was there that he received his crown in 1253. Within 8 years Mindaugas apostatized and the cathedral was turned to the worship of Perkūnas, the god of Thunder. Where the altar had once stood now there was instead a place of sacrifice to Perkūnas. Christianity was reintroduced to Lithuania in 1387, a year

later when Grand Duke Ladislaus II Jogaila (Władysław II Jagiełło) was baptized, married the young Queen Jadwiga of Poland, and was crowned Polish-Lithuanian king. Now again the cathedral became a Christian church and the seat of the bishop of Vilnius. In 1419, the building burned and a new church was erected on the site by Duke Vytautas the Great. Soon Lithuanian aristocratic families built private chapels attached to the main church. In these chapels private masses could be celebrated for their continuing prosperity and success, and the peaceful repose of departed family members. In 1529, Sigismund II Augustus (Zygmunt II August), grand duke of Lithuania, was crowned to be the eventual successor of his father Sigismund I the Old (Zygmunt I Stary). It was not until 1544 that Sigismund II Augustus assumed his royal prerogatives in Lithuania. In 1655, the cathedral was plundered by invading Muscovites. Among other acts of plunder the Russian soldiers stripped the valuable copper roof of the church. The reconstruction of the cathedral to its present shape was undertaken by Architect Laurynas Gucevičius (Wawrzyniec Gucewicz) in 1783. The work was not completed until 1801. In 1922, Rome designated the church a Basilica and in 1925, it was given status as Archcathedral.

Of special significance to Lithuanians is the fact that their archcathedral is the burial place of St. Casimir (Lt. – *Kazimieras*, Pl. – *Kazimierz*), the only Lithuanian saint canonized by the Roman Catholic Church. Casimir was the grand son of Jogaila. He was born on October 3, 1458, to Casimir IV Jagiellon (Kazimierz IV Jagiellończyk), the king of Poland and Lithuania and his wife Elżbieta. After a short and not particularly noteworthy political and military career he retreated from the world to spend his days in the church kneeling or prostrating himself before the altar or the doors of the church. He was barely 25 years old when he died on March 4, 1484.



*The ascent into heaven of St. Casimir (St. Casimir chapel in the Vilnius archcathedral).*

It was during the Russian incursions in 1518 that interest in Duke Casimir was aroused among the Lithuanians. According to reports the small contingent of Lithuanian soldiers defending the city of Polock were surrounded and besieged by the Muscovite army. A force 2,000 Lithuanian soldiers was dispatched to aid them but could find no way to cross the raging Daugava River. Suddenly a young man dressed in white and riding a white horse appeared among them and encouraged them not to lose heart but to follow him.



St. Casimir comes to the aid of the Lithuanian army. Engraving, 17 century.

He stirred his horse to enter the raging river at a place that proved to be shallow enough for the troops to cross. When the Lithuanian soldiers got to the other side, they surprised the Muscovites who fled in terror. The soldiers wondered who the young man who had guided them and then disappeared so suddenly was. The more they thought about it, the more they came to understand that it was Duke Casimir who had come back from the dead to lead them safely across the river.

The Muscovites attacked Polock again in 1519. This time the young man in white again appeared, but this time in the air above the army. He led them to victory. In the reports he was called “*dux factus et archistratega*” (“leader and master strategist”).<sup>9</sup>

The appearance of Casimir in these visions soon came to be known throughout the whole region and even beyond the borders of Lithuania. His brother Sigismund I Augustus, King of Poland and Lithuania, immediately began to press for his canonization. When the papal legate Zacharias Ferrari came to Lithuania to investigate the claims about Casimir, he found there an active cult of veneration. He was so impressed that he himself undertook the writing of a life of Casimir and the composition of a hymn venerating him. In 1521, Pope Leo X issued a bull to Bishop Erasmus Ciołek of Polock, clearing the way for the canonization. However, the bishop died in an epidemic while traveling in Italy in 1522, and all the papers concerning the canonization disappeared.

The miracles of Casimir continued. The Canon Grigalius Svencickis (Grzegorz Świącicki) of the Vilnius cathedral chapter wrote that a young girl by the name Uršulė



Uršulė brought back to life through St. Casimir's intercession (St. Casimir chapel in the Vilnius archcathedral). Photo: Tomas Vyšniauskas.



Casimir's incorrupt body after a more than a century (St. Casimir chapel in the Vilnius archcathedral). Photo: Tomas Vyšniauskas.

9 Paulius Rabikauskas Lietuvos globėjas Šv. Kazimieras. Vilnius-Kaunas 1993, p. 74.



Painting of St. Casimir with three hands from the altar of the St. Casimir chapel. According to legend when the right hand of the saint was copied over, the original hand miraculously reappeared. Photo: Tomas Vyšniauskas.

Poland St. Casimir might be invoked in veneration. The canonization took place in the Vilnius cathedral on May 10, 1604, and on May 12 the occasion was marked by the dedication by Bishop Benediktas Vainius (Benedykt Woyna) of Vilnius of the cornerstone of a new church erected in memory of St. Casimir. This church was to become the principal site of Jesuit activity in Vilnius. In 1636, the relics of the saint were transferred to this chapel by order of Ladislaus IV Vasa (Władysław IV Waza), king of Poland and Lithuania.<sup>11</sup>

Casimir came to be regarded among Lithuanians as doubly important. He became their saint and protector against all the enemies of the Lithuanian nation, and most particularly against Russians. During the period of Russification at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century

(Urszula) had died, leaving behind her parents who refused to bid her farewell. They wanted to do whatever could be done that she might be returned to life. They prayed and made vows at the grave of Casimir and while they were still on their knees, she again began to breathe.<sup>10</sup>

Still nothing was determined about the canonization of Casimir until on September 6, 1601, King Sigismund III Vasa (Zygmunt III Waza) petitioned the Vatican to examine the archives of Pope Leo X and bring the results of their investigation to the attention of the current pontiff Pope Clement VIII. When he received no reply, he sent in 1602 Canon Svencickis to Rome to look into the matter.

In February or March 1602, the bishop and chapter in Vilnius opened the casket of Casimir and witnesses reported that even after more than a century and despite the humid conditions of the tomb the body remained uncorrupted and gave forth a pleasant aroma.

The relevant documents were found and on November 7, 1602, Pope Clement VIII in his bull “*Quae ad sanctorum*” granted that in Lithuania and

Casimir stood as a symbol of Lithuanian resistance and defiance against demands that only the Cyrillic alphabet be used and other actions meant to Russify the Lithuanian people. During the Soviet occupation of Lithuania before and after the Second World War Casimir again became a symbol of Lithuanian resistance and the people encouraged one another to invoke Casimir to drive out the communists. In 1948, Pope Pius XII named Casimir the “Special Heavenly Protector of Lithuanian young people.” At that time many young Lithuanians had naively gone to the forests to support the partisan movement to overcome and drive out the Soviets.

So it was that the communists soon came to recognize that if they were to effectively break the power of the Roman Catholic Church, they would need not only to attack the clergy and decrease the number of the parishes, but they would need to move against St. Casimir and the Vilnius archcathedral, both of which were important symbols of the Church. Rational arguments about dialectical materialism produced no positive results. The communists realized that they would have to take more dramatic action. Such action in 1948 began with the placement of loudspeakers behind the archcathedral and in front of the doors, the purpose of which was to interrupt worship. The local communists were certain that this would discourage worshippers. It did not; it merely irritated them and before long even Pisariov, assistant chairman of the Lithuanian Council of Ministers, was willing to go on record saying that this tactic was inappropriate.<sup>12</sup>

### Commissioner’s campaign to close the churches

Pušinis, the new commissioner, decided that he must take some other course of action. He hit upon a plan on July 3, 1948, and wrote to Polianski, chairman of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults in Moscow, that there were clearly too many churches in Vilnius, 41 in all. The Poles had returned to Poland and the number of worshippers was steadily decreasing. He claimed that many of the buildings were in poor physical shape and were not being properly taken care of. In addition it seemed as though many of them were only meters apart. Clearly some would need to be closed or put to some suitable use.<sup>13</sup> Within less than two weeks, on July 13, he produced a list of no less than 20 churches which, according to his investigations, could be closed without being missed.<sup>14</sup> The closing of these churches he understood would be an important step in the process of annihilating the strength of the Church. In August he wrote to Polianski in Moscow, stating that he now considered that his previous estimate was too conservative. There were 42 monasteries and only 4 were needed, and instead of 20, 30 churches could be closed.<sup>15</sup> He expected that Polianski and his committee would be delighted. They were not. They were appalled. They recognized at once that were he to be permitted to embark on this course of action, the backlash would be swift and dramatic. It would constitute a real setback to their program of secularizing the nation. On September 7, Pušinis heard

12 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 14, l. 94-95.

13 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 13, l. 34.

14 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 1, b. 23, l. 16.

15 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 17, l. 36-39.

10 Vytautas Ališauskas, *Mindaugas Paknyš Šv. Kazimiero koplyčia*. Vadovas. Vilnius 2004, p.29.

11 *Rabikauskas* 1993, p. 86-112.



for registration? He must proceed in such a manner that no one could legitimately claim that he had acted unfairly. In other words he should not move against priests unless it is absolutely clear they had acted subversively or illegally; only then would the public see that their punishment was right and proper.<sup>21</sup>

### Pušinis's move against the archcathedral

Pušinis decided that he must act against the archcathedral. He also knew that this would take more time than he would like. He would have to follow Moscow's directive and treat the archcathedral as an individual church and find some justification for closing it. He decided to take a statistical approach. He reported on April 1, 1949, that the archcathedral parish had 2000 members.<sup>22</sup> In the June 26, 1949, report he was ready to revise that number downward. He stated that only 70 people were attending the Sunday morning Polish service and that there were two masses for the Lithuanians to the first of which 200 came and to the other 400.<sup>23</sup> In October he wrote that by this time there were only 12 old ladies in the parish, no doubt a tribute to the highly effective atheist propaganda of the regime! Polianski disputed these figures, writing to Pušinis on October 15 that it was hardly credible that attendance in church had plummeted in less than a year from 2000 to 12.<sup>24</sup> Pušinis had an explanation. He wrote back on October 18 that Canon Father Jan Ellert had moved to the Holy Spirit parish and the Polish congregation has followed him, and Canon Father Edmundas Basys had moved to the St. Teresa's church and the Lithuanian congregation had followed him. Apparently there were only 10 or 12 old ladies in the parish who were not attracted to either of them and decided to stay put.<sup>25</sup>

Pušinis himself was responsible for the fact that the archcathedral had been without priests since July 25. He had confiscated the registration certificate of archcathedral administrator Father Basys and instructed Vilnius city executive committee that he was to be forced to leave the city,<sup>26</sup> and Archbishop Mečislovas Reinys had been placed under arrest in 1947. Although diocesan officials had appointed Father Juozas Vaičiūnas to take up the duties of administrator of the archcathedral parish, Pušinis would make all final decisions and he had already set in motion his plan to force the closure of the church. The plot worked. By the end of October the Lithuanian Communist Party, Vilnius city executive committee, and the Council of Ministers had approved the closure of the building, and on November 2, 1949, the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults in Moscow concurred on the understanding that the people had abandoned the archcathedral and were going to other churches.<sup>27</sup>

The parish reacted immediately and in October 1949 they sent a delegation to Moscow to meet with Polianski and call for the reopening of the archcathedral.<sup>28</sup> When the delegation was unable to accomplish its purpose, an additional letter of complaint to Moscow was sent on November 26, 1949.<sup>29</sup> Over the next several months the archcathedral parish council directed several protests to the commissioner, the Council of Ministers, and Moscow. In their March 10, 1950, letter to Polianski they stated that although services were no longer held in the archcathedral, the building occupied an important place in the hearts and the minds of all Lithuanians. They reported that on March 4, the day of his feast, thousands of Lithuanians visited the shrine of St. Casimir. The fact that no services were held there did not deter the people from coming and offering veneration to the saint. They asked that Polianski respond favorably to their October 1949 request for the reopening of the archcathedral.<sup>30</sup>

Although it had been stated that redundant churches should be put to educational-cultural purpose and the archcathedral should be made a museum, the archcathedral building was in fact turned over not to the Vilnius Museum of Art, but to the Vilnius city executive committee, a group of lower lever communists with no particular knowledge or appreciation for cultural antiquities. The Department of Art in the Council of Ministers was responsible for taking charge of valuable pictures and other treasures, but they were not quick to do so. In order to save the treasures of the archcathedral the Vilnius State Museum of Art in 1950 petitioned the Department of Art in the Council of Ministers, requesting that the archcathedral and its treasures be put under its administration. Nothing came of it.<sup>31</sup>

On March 31, the representatives of the archcathedral parish council were summoned at the Vilnius City Executive Committee and informed that the building was now the property of the Committee and would be made a museum. Whatever in the building pertained directly to cultic activity would be turned over to the church.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the continuing storm of protests it soon became clear that the closure of the archcathedral fit perfectly into the authorities' plans. It was a symbol of Catholic power that had to be crushed. Polianski informed Pušinis on April 12, 1950, that complainers should be informed that the decision was final; there would be no review, and the matter was closed.<sup>33</sup> Bishop Paltarokas now realized that it was very unlikely that the church would regain control of the archcathedral, but he hoped that it might be possible to arrange with the communists that the church might retain access and control over the shrine of St. Casimir. It was to this end that he petitioned Mečislovas Gedvilas, the chairman of the Council of Ministers, on April 26, asking that visitors be permitted to enter the shrine directly from the outside.<sup>34</sup>

21 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 14, l. 98-101.

22 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 1, b. 31, l. 72.

23 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 22, l. 32.

24 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 1, b. 31, l. 72.

25 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 1, b. 31, l. 65.

26 *Regina Laukaitytė* Mėginimai sovietizuoti Lietuvos bažnyčių 1944-1949 m. – *Lietuvos istorijos metraštis*, 1997, p. 190.

27 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 1, b. 31, l. 82.

28 *Aidai* 1984 No.6, p. 334.

29 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 1, b. 41, l. 45.

30 *Aidai* 1984 No.6, p. 334.

31 LLMA, f. 289, ap. 1, b. 134, l. 7.

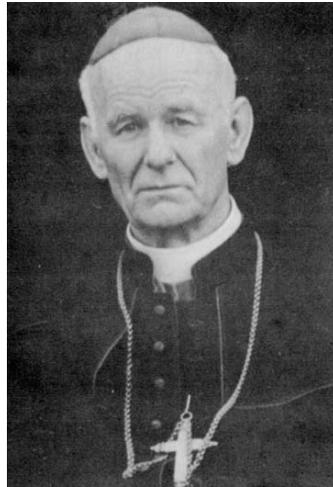
32 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 1, b. 41, l. 55.

33 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 1, b. 41, l. 45.

34 *Aidai* 1984 No.6, p. 334-335.

Concerned, however, that the relics of St. Casimir could be desecrated or stolen, Paltarokas decided to go over the heads of the local and national officials and appeal directly to Joseph Stalin.

This was indeed a dangerous course of action to take, not least because when it became known to high officials of the Communist Party that one had circumvented their decisions by appealing to Stalin, the reprisals could be swift and brutal. The new MGB (Ministry for State Security) could be called upon at any time by any of these officials to deal with those who defied their authority. By that time Paltarokas was the only Roman Catholic bishop in Lithuania not in prison; over 250 priests have been detained or sent to Siberia and only 3 dioceses of the 6 were governed locally. To Paltarokas personal safety meant little when it was the honor of Lithuania's national saint which was at stake. He wrote on May 30, 1950, suggesting that perhaps an arrangement could be made by which the communists took the archcathedral but the Church was permitted to retain its chapel, where in addition to the relics of St. Casimir there were also the burial place of Casimir's brother – Polish-Lithuanian King Alexander Jagiellon (Aleksander Jagiellończyk) – and the heart of King Ladislaus IV Vasa, who together with his father had been responsible for building the chapel. He suggested that to move the relics elsewhere would be expensive and unseemly. It would be better to wall off the chapel from the rest of the building and cut a door in the outside wall so that people might enter. In this way Lithuania's patron saint could be suitably honored.<sup>35</sup>



*Bishop Kazimieras Paltarokas (1875 – 1958). From: Bronius Kviklys Lietuvos Bažnyčios, V tomas, Vilniaus arkivyskupija, 1 dalis, 1985*



*Archcathedral portico after removal of statues. From: Napolys Kitkauskas Vilnius cathedral, 1977.*

The usual practice of the Kremlin was that when letter of such a nature was sent to Stalin, it would be immediately redirected to the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults, which would in turn call upon the local commissioner of religion to deal with the matter.

Pušinis was at that time occupied with the preparations for the tenth anniversary of the “voluntary” entry of Lithuania into the Soviet Union, which was scheduled for July 21, 1950. He was annoyed that on the portico of the archcathedral were three large and imposing statues of St. Casimir, St. Stanislaus, and St. Helena. He reasoned that to see these statues during the anniversary festival parade or indeed at any time would be offensive to workers and the dedicated public officials who so humbly served them. On June 6, 1950, he wrote to Kareckas, the chairman of the Vilnius city executive committee, instructing him to see to it that the offending “idols and crosses” were removed at once.<sup>36</sup>

The communists had not yet decided what to do with the building. No attempt had been made to put it to use as a museum and the inventory was slowly disappearing. On June 12, 1950, Paltarokas and Canon Ellert wrote to Pušinis saying that, since it was clear that Vilnius city executive committee did not intend to use the archcathedral as a museum, it would be appropriate that the building be returned to the church, so that it could once again be put to its proper use.<sup>37</sup>

### Continuing thievery of archcathedral treasures

Paltarokas had good reason for concern. The main door had been locked and sealed, but not very securely, and entrance could easily be gained to the building by anyone through a number of other doors not properly secured. The archcathedral was a treasure house of paintings, statues, and religious artifacts of precious metals – all of which were there for the taking by anyone who decided to walk out with them. Dudonis, the representative of the Finance Department of the Vilnius city executive committee, was in charge. He had the key but he could not be bothered to make sure that the building was secured.<sup>38</sup> On November 24, 1950, the archcathedral was burgled and a number of valuable items were taken.<sup>39</sup> A second burglary took place soon thereafter.

Now Pušinis was beginning to get worried. He was indirectly responsible for the archcathedral and the security of its contents which were now considered to be museum items. In December 1950, he wrote to Gedvilas, chairman of the Council of Ministers, reminding him that the archcathedral had been burgled two times and that state property of great value was disappearing. This was a matter of concern not only in the religious community but among the intelligentsia who were concerned about the building and

<sup>36</sup> LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 24, l. 28.

<sup>37</sup> *Aidai* 1984 No.6, p. 336.

<sup>38</sup> Lietuvos ypatingojo archyvo Lietuvos komunistų partijos dokumentų skyrius (The document department of the Lithuanian Communist Party at the Lithuanian Special Archives, henceforth – LYA LKP) f. 1771, ap. 153, b. 5, l. 17–19.

<sup>39</sup> LYA LKP, f. 1771, ap. 153, b. 5, l. 17–19.

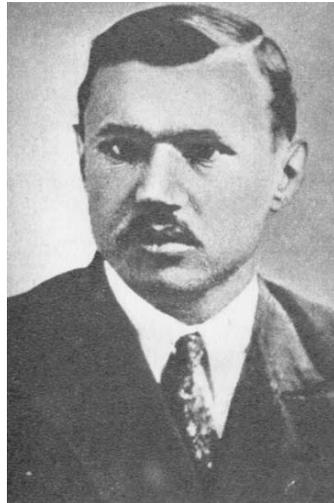
<sup>35</sup> LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 1, b. 41, l. 55.

its contents purely from the standpoint of history and culture. Pušinis asked that Gedvilas use his agencies to secure the protection of state property.<sup>40</sup> For whatever reason his plea went unheeded, and on January 11, 1951, the archcathedral was burgled yet again.<sup>41</sup>

The Vilnius city executive committee, which was directly responsible for the building and its contents, now became concerned. To cover itself the committee wrote on July 5, 1951 to Juozas Banaitis, head of the Department of Art in the Council of Ministers, that although it had requested that his agency take charge of the articles of value in the archcathedral, it had not even received a reply. M. Naumov, assistant chairman of the Vilnius city executive committee, wrote again on September 4, 1951. This time he requested that the contents of the archcathedral be taken into protective custody on or before September 15.<sup>42</sup> Again there was as usual no response and nothing protected the treasures, excepting the poorly locked doors.

Soon Pušinis found himself in a very unpleasant situation. Church officials were still hopeful that they could get the archcathedral back. In the summer of 1951 Canon Ellert and Chancellor Krivaitis visited Pušinis and asked for permission to petition him to return the archcathedral to the Church. Pušinis said that it was certainly within their rights as Soviet citizens to direct such a request to him, and that if they chose to do so, it would of course be carefully considered. This brought a swift reaction from Piotr Kapralov, the minister of the MGB, who in the presence of the Party's First Secretary Antanas Sniečkus stated that it was obvious that Pušinis had become a dangerous man and was acting in league with Bishop Paltarokas. The MGB were already calling him "Paltarokas' friend." It was clear to him that Pušinis intended to give the Church back its archcathedral.<sup>43</sup>

Pušinis found it necessary to write to Sniečkus on August 17, 1950, to explain his actions. Of course he had told the Catholics that they could petition. That was their right, he noted. He stated, however, that when they had sent the petition to the Council of Ministers, he had not recommended that they agree with the return. He had recommended instead



*Antanas Sniečkus (1903-1974), First Secretary of the Lithuanian Communist Party. From: LKP istorijos apybraiža, 1978*

that they establish a museum as quickly as possible, so that no more vestments and other valuable items would be stolen, since the burglaries only infuriated the Christians. Some believers had discovered that sandals were being made out of costly vestments.<sup>44</sup>

The burglaries continued, and at the end of 1951 Pušinis wrote to Polianski telling him that many valuable items were being taken, including precious paintings by well-known artists. In addition some art work and other material were being vandalized. He stated that he had asked the minister in charge of the audit committee to take measures to protect the treasures, but like others he had done nothing.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, on February 1, 1952, an audit committee was established to inventory the archcathedral valuables.<sup>46</sup> The authorizing documents for the inventory were issued on March 6. On March 8, 1952, S. Jurčenko, the assistant chairman of the Vilnius executive committee, wrote to Banaitis to remind him that, according to the instructions of the Council of Ministers, issued on February 2, 1952, he must designate a representative and take possession of all treasures of museum quality on or before March 11.<sup>47</sup> It was determined that there were in the archcathedral at that time more than 4000 items of considerable value, a number of which had been disfigured by vandals, so that their value had decreased. Many of these items of value were now sent to the Museum of Art. The committee noted also that the department of finance at the Vilnius city executive committee had arbitrarily appropriated for its own use or disposal much valuable furniture and equipment and had disposed of it irresponsibly.<sup>48</sup> Some very large paintings had had to be left in the archcathedral because they were too large to put in storage of the Vilnius Museum of Art.<sup>49</sup>

### Ecclesiastical efforts to rescue the relics of Saint Casimir

Because the archcathedral inventory was now being distributed, Bishop Paltarokas wrote to Pušinis on March 17, 1952, suggesting to him that this would be an appropriate time to remove the relics of St. Casimir to another church where they would be more secure and where they could be given their proper honor by the Lithuanian people.<sup>50</sup> Pušinis, who had some concern because the MGB felt that he was being too kind to the Roman Catholics, decided to take the matter up with Chairman Gedvilas. Gedvilas advised that the "coffin of St. Casimir should stay put."<sup>51</sup> Pušinis recognized at once that this was not a good plan of action. If the relics were to be stolen or desecrated there would undoubtedly be a groundswell of reaction which would be felt as far away as Moscow and which would cause him and others in Vilnius serious career problems. He decided to drop

44 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 28, l. 69-71.

45 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 29, l. 90.

46 LLMA, f. 289, ap. 1, b. 134, l. 2-3.

47 LLMA, f. 289, ap. 1, b. 134, l. 4.

48 IYA LKP, f. 1771, ap. 153, b. 5, l. 14.

49 LLMA, f. 289, ap. 1, b. 134, l. 7.

50 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 1, b. 58, l. 37, 38.

51 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 1, b. 58, l. 36.

40 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 1, b. 45, l. 110

41 IYA LKP, f. 1771, ap. 153, b. 5, l. 17-19.

42 Lietuvos literatūros ir meno archyvas (Lithuanian Archives of Literature and Art, henceforth – LLMA), f. 289, ap. 1, b. 134, l. 1.

43 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 28, l. 69-71.

the whole matter into the lap of Polianski. In his letter of March 22, he reported the decision of Gedvilas and stated that he agreed with it entirely. However, there were other circumstances that needed to be taken into consideration and for that reason it might be advisable to remove the remains of Casimir to the Church of Saints Peter and Paul with the understating that it would be done without any superstition or ceremony and in fact without any participation whatever by believers. It was of course up to Polianski to decide what course of action should be taken.<sup>52</sup>

In his April 3, 1952, answer Polianski stated that he needed much more information about St. Casimir – when he was buried, what sort of coffin holds his remains, where his coffin should be placed: in the altar or in the crypt beneath the chapel. What ceremonies should be observed in connection with his remains, how many people visit the coffin, and why is it necessary to move the coffin? Of course, as always, Pušinis must send pictures.<sup>53</sup> On April 16, Pušinis replied giving details about the burial place of Casimir. He noted that no services had been held in the chapel since 1949 and that it was necessary to remove the remains because the building in which the chapel was housed was being converted into a museum and would no longer have any religious use associated with it. According to Pušinis there were also other coffins in the chapel, mostly of wives of kings, and not objects of veneration. The Catholic faithful, whom he termed “religionists,” did not attach any special significance to them.<sup>54</sup>

No answer had come by July, so Pušinis wrote again on July 16, expressing some desperation. He stated that something really needed to be done. The situation with the archcathedral was worse than bad. The archcathedral which ought to be used for cultural purposes was standing empty. If this was the situation in the center of the capital city, what could one say about the situation in the rural areas?<sup>55</sup>

Finally permission came from Moscow and from the Council of Ministers in Lithuania to move the relics of St. Casimir with the understanding that absolutely no believers were to be involved in the transfer.<sup>56</sup> On September 4, 1952, Paltarokas met with the



*Mečislovas Gedvilas (1901–1981), Chairman, Council of Ministers. From: LKP istorijos apybraiža, 1978.*

members of his chapter and made final plans to move the relics. From his memoirs one gains the impression that Paltarokas and his chapter decided that the relics of St. Casimir ought to be transferred to the Church of Saints Peter and Paul, the most decorated church in Vilnius. In fact, they only accepted what had been earlier decided by state officials in Vilnius and Moscow.<sup>57</sup>

The transfer of the relics presented some logistical problems which made it impossible for everything to be taken at once. In the large silver coffin was a smaller wooden coffin which contained the relics of the saint. On September 24, 1952, Bishop Paltarokas met together with the priest of the Aušros Vartai (Chapel of the Dawn Gate), the dean of Vilnius, and the pastor of the Church of Saints Peter and Paul. They decided that the small wooden coffin should be taken separately by car to the Church of Saints Peter and Paul. It was planned that it should be opened in the presence of communist officials so that all could see that the relics were intact. Later the larger silver casket would be brought and placed on the high altar of the Church of Saints Peter and Paul. It was also decided that St. Casimir's day should be celebrated on the Sunday closest to March 4 and that in every church in Vilnius the litany of St. Casimir should be displayed near each altar to encourage the revival of the cult of the saint.<sup>58</sup>

On October 9, at noon, Bishop Paltarokas, Canon Ellert, Konstantinas Gajauskas, Dean of Vilnius, pastor of Saints Peter and Paul, together with Stankaitė and Venkutė, representing the Commissioner, along with Prokofjeva, the representative of the Department of Finances of the Vilnius City Executive Committee, gathered in the chapel. Workers removed the silver coffin from the altar and opened it to reveal inside a smaller wooden casket, covered with brocade of woven gold. They were instructed to open the casket to inspect the remains, but found that it was securely locked with two locks, the keys to which nobody seemed to have. It was decided to allow Paltarokas to take the casket to the Church of Saints Peter and Paul with the understanding that proper keys would be found and then the remains would be examined.

The casket was taken in the back seat of a sedan and Bishop Paltarokas and Canon Ellert sat up front with the driver quietly praying the rosary as they traveled through the streets of Vilnius to the Church of Saints Peter and Paul. No one whom they passed had any idea of the cargo they were carrying, the bishop wrote later in his memoirs. They were met at the door of the church by Father Dr. Juozas Stankevičius, the parish organist Žebrovskis, and one lady. They placed the casket in the chapel on the right side behind the presbytery and prayed the litany of St. Casimir before departing.<sup>59</sup>

Paltarokas was concerned also about the silver sculpted memorials from the shrine which recalled healings performed by St. Casimir. In the chapel these had stood on both sides of the altar. On January 17, 1953, Chancellor Krivaitis and Father Antanas Gobis of Panevėžys diocese together with Prokofjeva of the Vilnius executive committee met in the archcathedral to move them to the Church of Saints Peter and Paul. Since the church had no vehicle, it was necessary for the priest to flag down a passing truck to load the

52 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 1, b. 58, l. 36.

53 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 1, b. 58, l. 53.

54 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 1, b. 58, l. 37, 52.

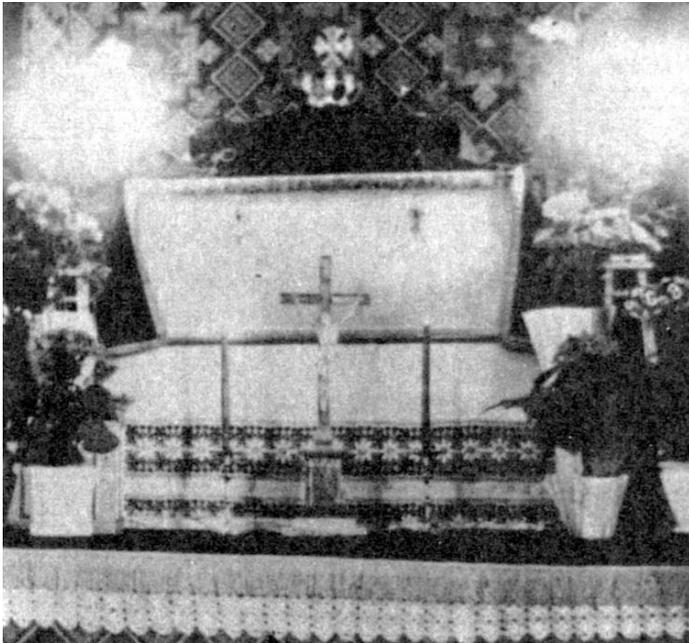
55 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 32, l. 53.

56 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 34, l. 62-63.

57 *Aidai* 1984 No.6, p. 337.

58 *Aidai* 1984 No.6, p. 337.

59 *Aidai* 1984 No.6, p. 337-338.



*Reliquary of St. Casimir in the church of Saints Peter and Paul, 1952. From: Paulius Rabikauskas Lietuvos globėjas šv. Kazimieras, 1993.*

sacred treasures and take them to the church. The silver casket was transported to the church in the same manner. The coffin and the statue of Casimir were in need of repair. In the archcathedral the statue and coffin had stood against the wall and no one could see that the back side of them had never been covered with silver. Because they would now stand away from the wall this defect would now have to be corrected.<sup>60</sup>

#### Commissioner's attempts to control the placement of the relics

Now Paltarokas decided that it was time to place the relics of St. Casimir in the high altar of the church with great ceremony and to make their whereabouts known to the faithful. This shocked Pušinis, because he had thought that once the church had the relics

<sup>60</sup> *Aidai* 1984 No.6, p. 338.



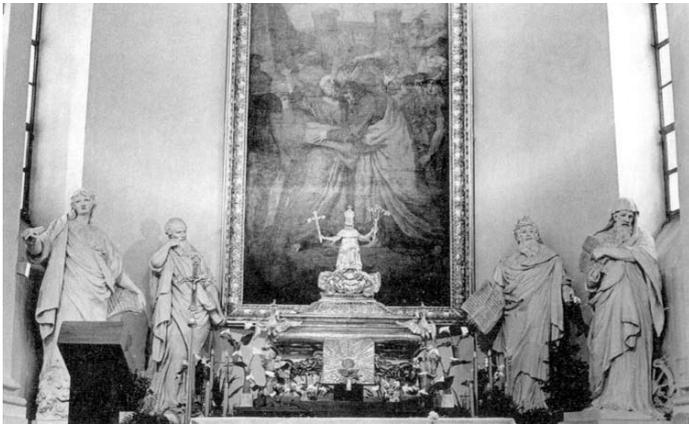
*Solemn placement of the reliquary of the high altar in the church of Saints Peter and Paul. From: Zenonas Ivinskis šv. Kazimieras 1458-1484, 1955.*

the whole matter would die quietly. But now the relics were no longer in his hands and the church could do as it pleased.

When on May 7, 1953, Paltarokas announced in Pušinis office that he intended to have a ceremony at which at least a 100,000 people would attend. Pušinis decided that he had to act. Such a gathering would endanger the participants. People might be crushed or trampled in the crowd. He simply would have to take action. The next day, May 8, he received a report that rumors were spreading that loudspeakers were being set in place around the Church of Saints Peter and Paul. He immediately inquired of the Radio Committee what technicians had been involved in setting up this equipment and where they had gotten the equipment. He told the one responsible for it that if he persisted in this action or was ever involved in such an action again, he would find no one but himself to blame for the consequences. The technician got the message and refused to do any further work on the project.<sup>61</sup>

The next day, May 9, Pušinis contacted the chief of the regional police and arranged careful surveillance of the area by police at vantage points where they could observe

<sup>61</sup> LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 34, l. 62.



The reliquary on the high altar. Photo: J. Grikienis.

without themselves being observed. He then summoned to his office Father Mykolas Tarvydas, pastor of Saints Peter and Paul Church, Canon Ellert, and Chancellor Krivaitis. He told Father Tarvydas and Canon Ellert that they were answerable for any incidents or problems which might develop in conjunction with the ceremony. He expressed his wish that the Polish sermon must be given by Canon Ellert, and not Father Żebrowski who was from the “rural parish” and not noted for being tactful.<sup>62</sup>

On that same day, May 9, Vespers was led by Bishop Paltarokas. Pušinis was delighted that only 300 people attended. This he considered normal. The next morning at Matins there were 4,000 worshippers – somewhat more than normal. The same number participated in the mass at 11 o'clock which included a procession of bishop and clergy around the church and the placement of the coffin in the high altar. The bishop preached in Lithuanian, and, contrary to Pušinis' wishes, the Polish sermon was delivered by Father Żebrowski.

Pušinis' report to Polianski on May 14 detailed the ceremony and his reaction to it. He noted that he had decided not to interfere in any way, even in legal matters, because he did not want to provide the Church any occasion to complain publicly that it was being mistreated. He had been so circumspect that he even made sure that the police did not show themselves openly. He regarded the whole event as a failure, since according to his report only 35 priests and 3000 believers showed up. He described it as the biggest defeat the Roman Catholic Church had suffered in over 300 years – a result of the careful and thoughtful work of the Lithuanian Communist Party, which had succeeded in educating the working class to free themselves from their bondage and superstition.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>62</sup> LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 34, l. 63.

<sup>63</sup> LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 34, l. 63.

The same day he wrote to Vladas Niunka, the secretary of propaganda and agitation at the Central Committee of the Lithuanian Communist Party, stating again that this event was a humiliating defeat for Paltarokas and the archcathedral chapter. They had tried to whip up enthusiasm throughout the country so that 100,000 people would attend, and had even attempted to put up loudspeakers so that the crowds could hear the sermons and ceremonies. What a terrible disappointment it was for the Church that only 3500 people came. Undoubtedly the defeat of the Church was the result of the victory of the Party's propaganda against religion and superstition.<sup>64</sup> He repeated the same in his account to Polianski, Sniečkus, and Gedvilas on July 23.<sup>65</sup>

Pušinis expected that Polianski would be elated and would congratulate him for a job well done. Polianski's August 25 response was not what Pušinis expected. He stated that the committee was concerned that Pušinis' report was a hodge-podge of facts mixed together with his own subjective excitement. Furthermore, he had told them all that before. What they wanted now was information about how many Lithuanians were coming to the shrine from day to day and about this he had told them nothing. He had shirked his responsibility as a Soviet official by not seeing to it that all Soviet laws were strictly enforced. Instead he seemed to be bouncing from one extreme to the other, and was not showing the proper responsibility. He could have used legal means to see to it that some of those 35 participating priests were not permitted to participate. Finally, it was completely inappropriate for him to say to Ellert that Father Żebrowski should not be permitted to preach. On what basis did he describe him as lacking intact or uncontrollable?<sup>66</sup> Moscow appeared to realize that what Pušinis described as the defeat of the Church was in fact a major victory. Now they had the relics in their secure possession.

### Growing concerns of art lovers over the desecration of the archcathedral

It was not only the Roman Catholics and other Christians who expressed their great concern about the mounting desecration of the Vilnius archcathedral. Secular art lovers and those concerned about the preservation of cultural antiquities and museum officials were among those who complained loudly that something must be done to correct or improve the situation. T. Filipaitis, the director of the Vilnius Museum of Art, wrote to the Ministry of Culture on August 31, 1953, requesting that the whole archcathedral be put under the control of his museum. He stated that the archcathedral could then become a branch of the Vilnius Museum of Art and adequate storage and restoration facilities could be made available for the preservation of the archcathedral treasures. In addition, academic expositions would be held from time to time to exhibit significant items of value from the collections of the archcathedral and other institutions.<sup>67</sup> The Department of Architecture in the Council of Ministers now decided to establish a special commission to examine the archcathedral and its situation.

<sup>64</sup> LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 35, l. 87.

<sup>65</sup> LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 36, l. 30-33.

<sup>66</sup> LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 34, l. 98-99.

<sup>67</sup> LLMA, f. 289, ap. 1, b. 134, l. 7-8.



Archcathedral in the 1950's. From: *Vilnius: Architektūra iki XX a. pradžios, 1958.*

On September 4, 1953, the newly formed commission visited the archcathedral. Their examination showed that the building had undergone extensive damage, so much so that it was surprising that the casket of St. Casimir had even survived. The high altar had been completely demolished and altars in the side chapels were in a chaotic condition. All the paraments had been removed, valuable materials had been stolen or given to other institutions without permission and without an accurate accounting of their whereabouts. In the Casimir chapel only the bare walls and statues remained. The roof was leaking and there was serious water damage. Here as elsewhere in the archcathedral many windows had been broken. All of the well constructed cupboards in the storage area above the sacristy had been broken or defaced and some cupboards and their contents had been taken by the committee of finance of Vilnius city executive committee without inventory and without any recognition that they were valuable. All carpet in the building had been taken, the chandeliers were on the floor and in the process of being dismantled. Mr. Dudonis of the finance committee, who had held the keys, claimed that the chandeliers had been dismantled by thieves, but it was generally recognized that this was impossible. It would have taken a number of electricians several days to dismantle the chandeliers and a truck would have been needed to cart away the chandelier parts. Electrical wall light fixtures had been torn out of the wall and some had been removed from the building. In addition, valuable large pictures painted by Pranciškus

Smuglevičius were heavily damaged. Some of the furnishings had been lent to the Leningrad film studio and could not be accounted for. It was not known whether they had been returned, for they were lying in the piles of rubble on the archcathedral floor. The building no longer had any semblance of a church. Instead it looked like a vacant warehouse littered with piles of rubble.<sup>68</sup>

The commission reported that it was imperative that the committee of finance be called to account for its dereliction of duty. It should also be called upon to reveal what had happened to the precious contents of the building. Furthermore, the Academic Restoration Workshop must be instructed to take the necessary steps to examine the building and to save it and its contents. Otherwise, the contents and the building must be put under the authority of the Department of Architecture in the Council of Ministers. As a first step some means must be found before winter of repairing the roof and windows of the St. Casimir chapel. The department of finance must seal all the doors and coordinate any further sales or transfers with the Department of Architecture. Finally the commission must request the Council of Ministers and the Central Committee of Communist Party as to what was to be the final disposition of the building and ask for funds to cover the cost of the rehabilitation of the building.<sup>69</sup> It was not mentioned that the finance committee had rented the northern nave of the church to a Vilnius vegetable shop for the storage of some 30–40 tons of potato, an act completely out of keeping with the directive which stated that the building must be used only for cultural-educational purposes.<sup>70</sup> Department of Architecture was unwilling to keep silent about the scandalous activities of a sister communist agency, the department of finances of the Vilnius city executive committee which had managed in the space of less than three years to completely ravage the archcathedral and disperse many of its treasures in a manner which brought absolutely no return to the government. On October 22, 1953, J. Kumpis, the head of the department, sent reports to Gedvilas, Niunka, and A. Guzevičius, the Minister of Culture, stating that the Vilnius city executive committee had completely misused the building and now wanted to get rid of it. Therefore it was insisting that some other organization should now take it over.<sup>71</sup> He strongly suggested that the Finance Committee's stewardship of the property should be carefully reviewed and the committee should be instructed to return all items of value which they had given to other groups or agencies. In addition, since the building was an all-Union monument of first importance, it should be repaired immediately beginning with the roof and the windows.<sup>72</sup>

On November 10, 1953, the Vilnius Museum of Art called together its experts and announced that it wished to take over the archcathedral and renovate it for use as a museum to house treasures of the feudal period. Included would be materials which would illustrate the struggle of the working class in the city of Vilnius during and after the medieval period – art work, sculptures, graphics, folklore, and other illustrative

68 LYA LKP, f. 1771, ap. 153, b. 5, l. 17-19. LLMA, f. 289, ap. 1, b. 134, l. 8.

69 LYA LKP, f. 1771, ap. 153, b. 5, l. 17-19.

70 *Psihikskis* 1995, p. 70.

71 LLMA, f. 289, ap. 1, b. 134, l. 8-9.

72 LYA LKP, f. 1771, ap. 153, b. 5, l. 14-15.



Empty St. Casimir chapel 1952-1989. From: *Napalys Kitkauskas Vilnius cathedral, 1977.*

materials.<sup>73</sup> This would require them to remove the largely valueless altar pictures and stations of the cross with more relevant materials. Kneeling desks, altar rails, and other unaesthetic remnants of the building's former use would of course need to be removed and disposed of.<sup>74</sup> The detailed plan presented was meant to prove a striking contrast between the realistic and materialistic world view on the one hand and outmoded idealistic world view of the old feudal order. This would expose the inadequacy of the old order.

#### Disagreements over the disposition of the archcathedral

The Vilnius Museum of Art had put its plan into very appropriate communist terminology, but Gedvilas appeared to have been unimpressed. Party officials still were not clear about how the archcathedral ought to be used, so Gedvilas charged the chairman of the Department of Architecture in the Council of Ministers with the responsibility for presenting a final and detailed plan. On February 1, 1954, Veselovskis, the assistant chairman of the department, wrote to J. Vildžiūnas, chairman of the Vilnius city executive committee, and Guzevičius, Minister of Culture, stating that a meeting should be called in the near future to make a "concrete" determination about the archcathedral's use.<sup>75</sup>

The top communist officials decided that it more appropriate than the exultation of the struggle of the feudal period against the exploitation of the working class, would be to dedicate the building to an exposition of the history of the Communist Revolution. To the great surprise of culture lovers on April 17, 1954, the Central Committee of the Lithuanian Communist Party transferred the archcathedral to the Ministry of Culture for the establishment of a museum of history.<sup>76</sup> Although nothing was indicated at that time about the particulars it was clear to all what sort of history the communists to enshrine – the history of the peoples revolution and the heroic struggle of the Lithuanian Communist Party against the forces of repression.

For this decision to become effective the approval of the Council of Ministers was needed. On June 26, 1954, the Council decided that at the present the building should be transferred to the Ministry of Culture, for the purpose of establishing a museum of history.<sup>77</sup>

However, changes in the decision-making system were such that it was necessary for Gedvilas to again call a meeting of the experts to formulate one common opinion about what sort of museum ought to be established in the archcathedral property. Several opinions were voiced at the August 16, 1954, meeting. Some favored the establishment of a museum of ethnography and folk art. J. Lozoraitis noted that in all of Lithuania there was not a proper museum of atheism and therefore the establishment of one would be unique in the republic. He thought that it would certainly be ironically appropriate that

73 LLMA, f. 289, ap. 1, b. 134, l. 10.

74 LLMA, f. 289, ap. 1, b. 134, l. 13.

75 LLMA, f. 289, ap. 1, b. 134, l. 25.

76 LYA LKP, f. 1771, ap. 149, b. 108, l. 3-4.

77 LLMA, f. 289, ap. 1, b. 134, l. 26.

such a museum should be housed where formerly the base superstitions of the Roman Catholic religion had been practiced. The majority, however, agreed that the church be turned into an art gallery.<sup>78</sup>

When the plan for the turning the archcathedral into a historical museum reached Moscow, the Ministry of Culture of the USSR, protested in strong terms. It was clear that another meeting would have to be called to decide what course of action should be taken.<sup>79</sup>

That meeting was held on December 4, 1954, in the Ministry of Culture to discuss the appropriate use of the building. The majority agreed that it should be made a museum, but there was no general agreement about what sort of museum it ought to be. The discussion was frank and open. V. Girdžius argued that under no circumstances should the archcathedral be made a history museum. He recalled that the Ministry of Culture in Moscow had protested this idea. Speaking in words which every communist could understand Jurginis asserted that were the building made into a museum, everyone would be constantly reminded of its original use. The museum plan must be abandoned and the building must be made an art gallery. He objected to the suggestion of Pečiūra that the building be turned into architecture museum. V. Mackevičius in turn stated that it would be most difficult to draw attention away from the central part of the church where the altar was standing and it would be impossible to effectively disguise it. Furthermore, lighting in the church was poor and this argued against its use as an art gallery. It would be better that it simply remain an architectural monument. His opinion was supported by Žilėnas and Čipkus, neither of whom wanted to see the building made a museum. The majority, however, insisted that the building could not be left idle. It must be put to some use. Pečiūra again insisted that the building be made a museum of architecture. He made the point that almost all of the available art was religious in nature and the government certainly had no intention of sponsoring a museum of religious art. Another committee member, Brancovskis, suggested a Vilnius city museum be established on the site. Abišala recalled that the desire of the government and the Communist Party was that the building be made a history museum. His opinion was only that the building must be saved from ruin and put to some constructive purpose. He thought that perhaps a museum of architecture might be the best choice. He noted also that many other Vilnius churches were being used for storage and other inappropriate purposes. "First let the building be renovated"; he said, "then we can discuss its use." The common mind of the commission was that the building should be made an art gallery.<sup>80</sup>

The decision, however, was not theirs to make. All they could do was to pass their recommendation on to the higher Party officials. The top leaders of the Party decided that a museum of the history of the revolution would be of far greater value than an art gallery. In spring of 1955, Gedvilas passed along to Nikolai Bulganin, the chairman of the Council of Ministers in Moscow, his request that permission be given to establish a historic museum complex, since there was at that time no museum in which was de-

picted the heroic struggle of Lithuanian workers against feudalists and capitalists and the struggle of those same workers to establish a Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic. Part of the exhibition would be housed in the Vilnius archcathedral. He noted further that educational institutions, travelers from abroad, and the Vilnius citizens often expressed their disgust that there was no adequate historical museum in Vilnius.<sup>81</sup>

Pranas Gudynas, new director of the Vilnius Museum of Art, was not yet ready to give up the fight to have the archcathedral turned over to his agency. In May 1955, he presented to the minister of culture J. Smilgevičius his argument that, although his museum was receiving additional items for cataloguing and display, he had no place to put them either for storage or exhibition. The archcathedral would be an ideal place and would provide much needed space for exhibitions.<sup>82</sup> The Council of Ministers finally took up the question and agreed.<sup>83</sup> On November 12, 1955, J. Smilgevičius wrote to Sergei Kaftanov, the minister of culture in Moscow, stating the facts of the matter. The archcathedral had originally been earmarked as a museum of history and for this reason had been transferred to the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture. Now after careful consideration it was evident that the archcathedral could satisfy an even greater need as a place to exhibit Russian, Lithuanian, and foreign treasures.<sup>84</sup> It is unclear whether the authorization came from the Moscow Ministry of Culture, but by November 25, 1955, the Council of Ministers in Vilnius was able to move ahead with their plans for the building. On that day a decree was issued, stating that the Vilnius archcathedral would henceforth be the State Gallery of Art.<sup>85</sup>

### The Death of Stalin and attempts to regain the use of the archcathedral

The Roman Catholic Church was not willing to abandon its hope that it would regain the occupancy and use of its archcathedral. The period after the death of Stalin was marked by a lack of clarity in many essential matters, such as one might expect after the death of an absolute dictator. Toward the end of his life Stalin had adopted a pragmatic approach toward the Russian Orthodox Church, not of course favoring it, but not going out of his way to openly persecute the churches. The ascendancy of Nikita Khrushchev to the position of First Secretary of the USSR Communist Party made it clear that the road ahead for the Church would not be smooth. Khrushchev and his closest advisors seem to have believed that it really was possible to build a socialist workers' paradise in the Soviet Union. To do so would require steadfast confidence and determination, as well as single-minded devotion to the communist cause. It was clear to him and his advisors that the Church called for just as sort of devotion and commitment which they understood must be given only to communism. Therefore Khrushchev embarked upon a determined anti-church policy, hoping that he could smother or destroy what he re-

81 LLMA, f. 289, ap. 1, b. 134, l. 46.

82 LLMA, f. 289, ap. 1, b. 134, l. 64-65.

83 LLMA, f. 289, ap. 1, b. 134, l. 87.

84 LLMA, f. 289, ap. 1, b. 134, l. 87.

85 LLMA, f. 289, ap. 1, b. 134, l. 89.

78 LLMA, f. 289, ap. 1, b. 134, l. 27-28.

79 LLMA, f. 289, ap. 1, b. 134, l. 29.

80 LLMA, f. 289, ap. 1, b. 134, l. 29-32.

garded to be the people's real enemy and the greatest single impediment to the building of the new Soviet society. On July 7, 1954, the Party issued a document, entitled "The Serious Shortcomings of Scientific-Atheistic Propaganda and their Correction."<sup>86</sup> Even before the document appeared, Georgy Malenkov, the chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers, warned Khrushchev that this decree was a declaration of war against the Church and that it would create a host of problems. Khrushchev answered in a blasé manner: "If mistakes are made, we will correct them."<sup>87</sup>

The first result of the decree was a great increase of religious activity among the people. Fearing that the time was coming when it would be not so easy to receive the Church's ministry, many decided that it would be best not to delay the baptism of their children and other church activities. In addition, some Russian Orthodox bishops called their people to show themselves brave and courageous in the face of the coming persecution. The Party had made its big mistake and had to scramble quickly in an effort to correct it. On November 11, 1954, a new document came off the presses, entitled: "Misdirection in the Application of the Scientific-Atheistic Propaganda Among the Populace."<sup>88</sup> Here the Party admitted that the division of the people into opposing categories of believers and non-believers was counter-productive to the people's efforts to build a socialist society. Soon the doors were opened for priests and bishops to return to their churches from Siberia and it was even permitted that some religious materials could be printed.

The Lithuanian Roman Catholic Church decided to use this sudden thaw in church-state relations as the occasion for new efforts to regain the use of their archcathedral. At the first time-ever meeting with Chairman Gedvilas on December 22, 1955, Bishops Petras Maželis and Julijonas Steponavičius, and Canon Juozapas Stankevičius, the administrator of the Kaunas archdiocese, inquired about the possibility of the return of the Vilnius archcathedral. From point of view of the communists this was too much to ask. If it were an ordinary church it would not be a great problem, but the power of the communist government and its reputation rode on its possession of this important symbol of Roman Catholic power. The KGB (The Committee for State Security) as well advised that with reference to this building there could be no compromise. The bishops later visited Bishop Kazimieras Paltarokas who was ill and weak and, according to a KGB informer, they told him that they had been informed that the government regarded the taking of the archcathedral as a step of such importance that they were unwilling to retreat. Paltarokas replied: "If the government had realized its mistake in taking the archcathedral, which was in fact a step backwards, they could have corrected it and moved forward."<sup>89</sup> On February 6 information gathered by secret KGB agents was passed by KGB Chairman Kazimieras Liaudis to Sniečkus.<sup>90</sup>

## Tensions between Vilnius and Moscow over the return of the archcathedral to the Church

By this time Polianski in Moscow was beginning to think that it had been a mistake to confiscate the archcathedral. Although earlier he had said that the decision was final and irrevocable,<sup>91</sup> now he was beginning to have second thoughts. He considered that it might be a good idea to mollify the Church by returning its archcathedral.

Polianski shared his concerns about this matter with top officials of the Moscow Communist Party Committee for Propaganda and Agitation and they at least partially agreed. When at the end of 1955 or the beginning of 1956, Niunka met with P. V. Kovanov, the chief assistant for Propaganda and Agitation in Moscow, he brought up the matter of the archcathedral. He stated that it had been unwise to confiscate it and suggested that this decision ought to be reviewed. Niunka could not agree. He feared that the return of the archcathedral would be seen by the Catholic clergy and religious elements as a victory of the Church over the communist state and that the Church would use it to incite nationalistic and anti-revolutionary fervor. Although Kovanov did not reject his thoughts, he objected that Niunka was too narrow-minded and needed to develop a broader perspective, "since the interests and our politics require it." Kovanov also brought the matter before Sniečkus, who was not in favor of returning the building to the church.

Sniečkus was concerned that Moscow was beginning to wobble. He instructed Niunka to meet with F. V. Konstantinov, the Moscow chief of propaganda and agitation for the Soviet Socialist Republics, to counter the arguments of Polianski. Niunka was surprised that when he met with Konstantinov, Polianski was also invited to attend. Polianski was quite agitated. He stated that Lithuanian communist leaders had made a grave error when they confiscated the archcathedral. They had failed to take into consideration the fact that millions of Roman Catholic workers would be incensed by this action. The result was that the confiscation did not strengthen the state and the Party but only weakened them. Niunka said that the opinion of the Lithuanian Communist Party was that the Catholics in Vilnius could be given some other church. Polianski strongly disagreed and stated flatly that he intended to inform concerned Moscow officials about the inappropriate head-strong actions of the Lithuanian communist leaders. Konstantinov did not take a position. He was not about to get caught in the middle between Polianski and his agency and the leaders of the Lithuanian Communist Party.<sup>92</sup>

In Vilnius Pušinis understood the situation and kept his cards close to his chest. He was Polianski's agent and always made it clear to his chief that he understood his position and supported him one hundred per cent. To the Lithuanian communists, however, he took an entirely different position. He told them that he was determined that the archcathedral not be given back to the church. On January 9, 1955, he and Gedvilas together composed a letter to the central bureau of the Lithuanian Communist Party in which they declared that the archcathedral must remain in state hands.<sup>93</sup> Liaudis, the chairman of the KGB, was of

86 LYA LKP, f. 1771, ap. 11, b. 111, l. 9-13.

87 М. В. Шкаровский Русская Православная Церковь при Сталине и Хрущеве. Москва 2005, 350.

88 Шкаровский 2005, 349.

89 LYA LKP, f. 1771, ap. 190, b. 10, l. 98-99.

90 LYA LKP, f. 1771, ap. 190, b. 10, l. 98-100.

91 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 1, b. 41, l. 45.

92 LYA LKP, f. 1771, ap. 190, b. 12, l. 150

93 LYA LKP, f. 1771, ap. 190, b. 10, l. 93.

the same mind. His February 6 letter to Sniečkus stated that Roman Catholics in Vilnius had more than enough churches and were well satisfied with the present arrangement. There was no need to give back the archcathedral.<sup>94</sup> Consequently on February 8, 1956, the Central Committee of the Lithuanian Communist Party decided that the request that the archcathedral be returned to the church must be declined.<sup>95</sup>

Pušinis had anticipated this decision and already on January 14, 1956, he had told Polianski that the requests of the Catholics that the archcathedral be returned was once again being rejected.<sup>96</sup> In the same report he remarked that some things that happened in Lithuania were simply beyond the realm of comprehension. If eight years earlier, when the archcathedral was closed, it had been turned into a museum immediately, by this time the believers would long since have reconciled themselves to it and the matter would be closed. But now not only believers, but also the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church insistently asked for the return of the archcathedral. He stated that he understood the concerns of the believers and ventured the opinion that, if the government was not going to do anything with the building, it would not be illogical to allow them to use it as a church. He said that the government needed to decide how the building was to be used and put it to that use.<sup>97</sup> The Central Committee in Vilnius which had dragged its in this matter so long finally made a decision in February. On February 10, Pušinis communicated to Polianski in Moscow the news that the matter was now finally settled. The building would not be returned to the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>98</sup>

As of February 1, 1956, the property was deemed to be transferred to the Vilnius Museum of Art. Remodeling work began at once and progressed speedily.<sup>99</sup> During remodeling, Gudynas, the head of the Museum of Art, contacted S. Vabalevičius, the head of the Department of Building Development and Architecture, to place before him a problem. He had determined that the pulpit and pews were of little intrinsic artistic value and that their continued presence intruded on the line of sight in the building. He asked for an official opinion to the effect that the pulpit and pews could be removed and put in storage. On March 3, S. Vabalevičius replied that he had called together a committee to consider this request and the committee could not agree with the position taken by Gudynas. The pulpit did have esthetic value and the pews could be used as benches by museum visitors.<sup>100</sup> Dissatisfied with this answer on March 5, Gudynas took up the matter with J. Smilgevičius, the Minister of Culture.<sup>101</sup> Now finally he received the authorization he had sought. The pulpit was consigned to storage, but the pews were to remain in the building for weary visitors.

The struggle of the Church to regain the use of the archcathedral continued. The bishops were not going to quietly stand by while their treasured archcathedral was

turned to secular use. Pušinis was still hesitating to take any firm role in the matter. He had decided that he would stand on the sidelines and see how the things would develop. On March 1, 1956, he wrote to V. Gostev in Moscow that the interest of the Catholics in regaining the use of the building was intensifying. They had petitioned him and the Council of Ministers, but the Lithuanian government was standing firm and the petitions had been rejected.<sup>102</sup>

The Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults in Moscow still favored returning the building to the Roman Catholic Church. Polianski was furious that the Lithuanian Communist Party and government would dare to ignore the position taken by his agency. Moscow must always have the final word. When news came that reconstruction work had begun, Polianski immediately wrote to Pušinis. His letter from April 20, 1956, stated that remodeling and reconstruction work must cease immediately, and Pušinis must inform the Lithuanian Council of Ministers that the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults had decided that the matter of the disposition of the archcathedral had not yet been finalized.<sup>103</sup>

On April 26, Polianski took the matter to the Central Committee of the Communist Party in Moscow asking that they instruct the Lithuanian government to accede to the Roman Catholic petitions and cease the implementation of their plans for a museum.<sup>104</sup>

While Polianski and his Council wanted to neutralize Roman Catholic opposition, which seemed to be centered around the confiscation of the archcathedral, the Lithuanian Communist Party was unwilling to back down. As far as they were concerned, the interests of the Council were too narrow and in this case the interests of the Lithuanian Communist Party must prevail. On June 6, 1956, Sniečkus decided that he too could take his case to the Central Committee of the Communist Party in Moscow. His position was that the request of Polianski was ill considered. He had not taken into consideration the fact that the underground resistance movement in Lithuania had been destroyed and now the Roman Catholic Church had become the only refuge for the remaining anti-Soviet and nationalistic elements in the population. He went on to state that these nationalistic elements looked to the Roman Catholic Church as the only institution strong enough to save the nation and its culture from Russification. Reactionary Roman Catholic priests simply do not understand the principles of scientific socialism and obstruct its spread. To return the archcathedral to the Church would only embolden them.<sup>105</sup> The Central Committee in Kremlin agreed with Sniečkus and refused Polianski's request.

### The Archcathedral becomes an art gallery

On June 4, 1956, the new Art Gallery hall was opened within the walls which had once marked out the Roman Catholic archcathedral in Vilnius. The three expositions were concerned with Lithuanian art of the 16<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries, western European art of the

94 LYA LKP, f. 1771, ap. 190, b. 10, l. 97.

95 LYA LKP, f. 1771, ap. 190, b. 10, l. 95; LYA LKP, f. 1771, ap. 190, b. 12, l. 132.

96 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 43, l. 36.

97 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 43, l. 49-50.

98 LYA LKP, f. 1771, ap. 190, b. 12, l. 132.

99 *Psišilskis* 1995, p. 71.

100 LLMA, f. 289, ap. 1, b. 134, l. 92.

101 LLMA, f. 289, ap. 1, b. 134, l. 93-94.

102 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 44, l. 23.

103 LYA LKP, f. 1771, ap. 190, b. 12, l. 105.

104 *Streikus* 2002, p. 171.

105 LYA LKP, f. 1771, ap. 190, b. 10, l. 69-71; LYA LKP, f. 1771, ap. 190, b. 12, l. 105.

15<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and applied art of the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>106</sup>

Even then the Roman Catholic hierarchy refused to give up its struggle for the archcathedral. Pušinis reported to Moscow on July 7 that Bishop Julijonas Steponavičius and his diocesan Chancellor Česlovas Krivaitis had issued an ultimatum to the effect that the archcathedral must be returned to the Church. Steponavičius made it clear that until the archcathedral was returned no priest would obey any request to meet the commissioner in his office without his personal approval. In addition he stated that they would not meet with any foreign delegation accompanied by a representative of the Lithuanian Soviet government, nor would they write articles in foreign languages about the supposedly “happy” state of the Church in Lithuania. There could be no question that what was uppermost in the mind of Steponavičius was the archcathedral. Pušinis made it clear to Moscow that this was the shape of the current tension between him and the Church. To him it was clear that the ultimatum was issued from the bishops and represented their own personal position rather than that of the Lithuanian people. Under the circumstances neither he nor the government would back down. He had made it clear to Steponavičius that the road which he was taking would not bring him to the goal he sought. No good would come of it. From this point on the matter was closed.<sup>107</sup>

The winds were changing again and now were beginning to blow against the Church. In 1958, the Party began to take a more aggressive stand against the church. When Bishop Steponavičius met with the new Commissioner Justas Ruginis, it was made clear to him that the matter of the archcathedral would not be considered. In his report to Moscow on July 11, 1958, Commissioner Ruginis stated that Steponavičius had recognized that to bring up the matter would gain him nothing.<sup>108</sup>

It would appear that Party officials were still more preoccupied with the matter of the archcathedral than even the bishops had been. Long after the museum was opened, Party's First Secretary Sniečkus was still mulling over the attempts of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults to twist the Party's arm to surrender the archcathedral to the church. In a letter to the Central Committee in Kremlin, dated on December 7, 1960, he painfully recalled the conflict with Polianski. He remembered that at a time when international ten-



*Archcathedral as Soviet Art Gallery. From: Napolis Kitkauskas Vilnius cathedral, 1977.*



*Museum visitors. From: Bronius Kviklys Lietuvos Bažnyčios, V tomas, Vilniaus arkivyskupija, 1 dalis, 1985.*

sions were at their highest, the Roman Catholics had used the opportunity to try to create internal tensions within the country by asking for the return of the archcathedral. When their requests were rejected, they had turned to Polianski and his Council in Moscow to support them. Polianski had paid no attention to the reasoned arguments of the Lithuanian Communist Party. It was only after Sniečkus and his colleagues had taken the matter to the Central Committee in Kremlin that the situation had been resolved. They were able to show that the return of the archcathedral would have emboldened anti-socialist and nationalistic groups in the population.<sup>109</sup> Sniečkus alluded again to the fact that the Church was still the only formidable opponent to the government – the most dangerous enemy within the country's borders. It was directed and controlled by a foreign power, the Vatican in Rome. The confiscation of the archcathedral was of decisive importance in breaking the power of the Church, because it was not only the largest church in the country, but it represented the spiritual center of the Lithuanian people.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>106</sup> Pšibilskis 1995, p. 71.

<sup>107</sup> LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 46, l. 10.

<sup>108</sup> LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 52, l. 34.

<sup>109</sup> LYA LKP, f. 1771, ap. 190, b. 12, l. 104.

<sup>110</sup> LYA LKP, f. 1771, ap. 190, b. 12, l. 100, 102.



Archcathedral in the 1980's. From: *Vilnius, 1980*.

Four days earlier, on December 3, 1960, the Central Committee had mulled over the question of how it could be that a new church with a high tower had been built in the center of Klaipėda in less than three years, while the building of a new library in Vilnius had already been going on for 10 years and the end of the project was not yet in sight. They decided that the blame must be laid at the feet of the late Chairman Polianski. They claimed that he had bullied the Lithuanians and subjected them to enormous pressure to allow the building of the church in Klaipėda. He tried the same tactics on the Central Committee in Vilnius when he tried to bully them into returning of the archcathedral to the church. "We fought and decided on our own that under no circumstance would we return the building."<sup>111</sup>

### The Shrine of St. Casimir is turned into a museum of atheism

The museum of atheism, which some Communist Party officials had planned to be housed in the archcathedral, was instead given a home in St. Casimir's church in Vilnius. It was established in 1963 and became a center of anti-religious activities. Here, atheistic

<sup>111</sup> LYA LKP, f. 1771, ap. 190, b. 12, l. 100, 115.



St. Casimir's church used as museum of atheism. From: *Bažnyčia Lietuvoje, 1989*.

exhibitions and anti-religious lectures by former Roman Catholic priests and others were held. School children and workers were sent there for the reorientation against religion which the state found it had to very actively insist upon. In 1972, official statistics reported that 126,000 people had visited the site and that there were 2,000 organized excursions to the museum.<sup>112</sup> Perhaps the decision to use the St. Casimir church was meant to cut the tie between the saint and the nation in which he was so highly venerated.

In one sense at least the confiscation of the archcathedral did not produce its desired effect. The building was still standing and the people remembered that it was their church. Not a few of the visitors to the Gallery of Art really came in fact to say their

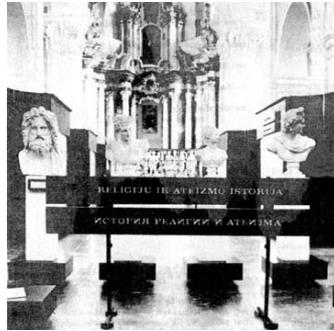
<sup>112</sup> *Arūnas Streikus* Ateistinės propagandos pobūdis Lietuvoje 1975–1988 m. - *Genocidas ir rezistencija*, 2003, No. 1, p. 7–21.

prayers in the place they still thought of that their archcathedral. Consequently, it must be said that the Central Committee's purpose was never really accomplished.

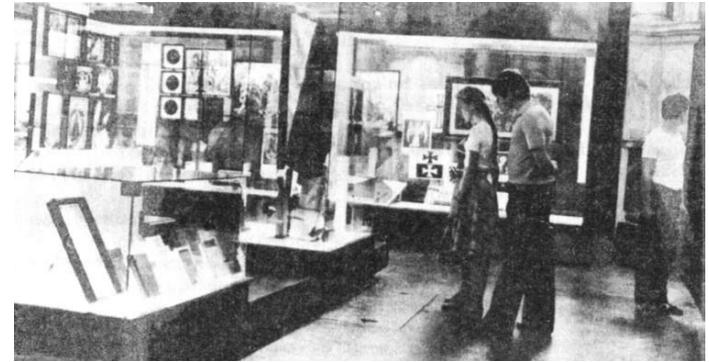
On January 11, 1982, the Lithuanian Communist Party passed a decree "Concerning the Strengthening of Atheistic Education." To implement it, they decided that there would be great propaganda value in publishing for foreign distribution a photo album of churches in Lithuania. It was also decided that the propaganda value of the book would be enhanced were it to be sponsored by the Catholic Bishops Conference. When it was resolved on April 26, 1982, that the project should go ahead, Commissioner Petras Anilionis approached the conference. Bishop Liudas Povilonis agreed that it was a good idea but stated that the bishops would only approve the project if pictures of the archcathedral, the Assumption of the Virgin Mary church in Klaipėda, and St. Casimir's church were included. On November 1, 1983, Anilionis stated in a letter to Lioginas Šepetyš, the Secretary of the Central Committee of the Lithuanian Communist Party, that it was impossible to fulfill this request. A different sponsor would have to be found. Approaches were made to "Tėviškė," the organization which maintained contact with Lithuanians abroad, and the Lithuanian agency responsible for cultural ties with foreign lands. Finally it was decided that the "Mintis" publishing house in Vilnius should be the publisher. Originally the title of the work was to be "Religion and Church in Lithuanian SSR."<sup>113</sup> A year later, on December 3, 1984, Anilionis complained that "Mintis" had been in possession of all of the material for two years but nothing had been produced. At that time the work was referred to as "The Church in Soviet Lithuania". It was not until 1989 that the book finally saw print under the title "The Church in Lithuania."<sup>114</sup>

### Perestroika and renewed Catholic efforts to retrieve the archcathedral

At this point the Soviet Union itself, however, was beginning to crumble. The program of Perestroika announced by Mikhail Gorbachev at the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress in 1986, could not save a collapsing economy; it only strengthened the desire of the people for freedom. This desire had never been wholly extinguished. The Church and its priests latched on to the notion of "Glasnost," the new program of openness in the discussion



*Display in Museum of Atheism featuring statues of Zeus, Hermes, Apollo, and Aphrodite before the high altar in St. Casimir's church. From: Kultūros barai, 1983 No.8.*



*Interior of the museum of atheism. From: Kultūros barai, 1983 No.8.*

of political and social issues, and began all sorts of activities which were in violation of governmental policy. The bishops stopped asking for government approval when transferring and placing priests, and parish priests began to intensify their work among the young. In 1984 a committee was organized by the Bishops' Conference to prepare for the celebration in 1987 of the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Christianization of Lithuania in 1387 when there was a mass baptism of Lithuanians. This committee announced that the appropriate place for the celebration was the archcathedral, since it was there that the baptisms had taken place. Committee asked the Bishops' Conference to petition the Kremlin for the return of the archcathedral for liturgical use and also for the return of the Klaipėda church, which was being used a philharmonic hall.<sup>115</sup> Shortly St. Casimir's church was added to the list.

Now Moscow was deluged with letters from Lithuanians, all asking that these requests be fulfilled. The Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults turned them over to Commissioner Anilionis in Vilnius in the closing months of 1985. He determined that he must hold a meeting with the bishops and Aleksandras Česnavičius, the assistant chairman of the Council of Ministers. At the meeting, which was held on December 20, 1985, it was flatly stated that neither the archcathedral, nor St. Casimir church would be returned. There were already 11 churches to serve the 500,000 citizens of Vilnius and certainly that was plenty! The government would not object if the bishop of Vilnius should decide to one of those 11 churches to be the archcathedral, and if the Roman Catholics wished to rename any of them St. Casimir's, that would be quite alright.<sup>116</sup>

Of course the Church was not satisfied with this response. In 1986, priests of the Vilnius and Kaunas archdioceses and the diocese of Panevėžys wrote to Gorbachev request-

<sup>113</sup> LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 112, l. 215.

<sup>114</sup> LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 114, l. 245.

<sup>115</sup> LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 117, l. 138.

<sup>116</sup> LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 117, l. 261.

ing that the three churches be returned. The 1986 report which Anilionis sent to Moscow stated that believers and priests had brought up the matter again and again, but his answer was always the same. These churches would not be returned and no concessions would be made.<sup>117</sup>

#### Lithuanian communists surrender – the archcathedral is returned

The Church was more determined than Anilionis thought. On July 20, 1987, Klaipėda Catholics celebrated a great victory. On that day Assumption Church was returned to them.<sup>118</sup> The church continued to press for the return of the archcathedral and St. Casimir's in Vilnius. On February 8, 1987, as shouts calling for freedom were already being heard in the streets, Anilionis wrote K. M. Moldobajev, assistant chairman of the Council, that the bishops were continuing to insist on the return of these churches. The Church, its clergy, and believers were incensed that St. Casimir's was being defiled by being used as a museum of atheism. He stated that he certainly would not advise the return of the buildings, since the state had already expended a great deal of money to renovate and maintain them, but perhaps it would be wise to move the museum of atheism to some other building and turn St. Casimir's into an art gallery or if absolutely necessary, into a museum of religious history.<sup>119</sup>

The political situation throughout Lithuania was now almost out of control. On June 3, 1988, an initiative group of 35 well known community leaders was established to “support” Gorbachev's *Perestroika*. 17 of these members were Lithuanian communists. The



*Lenin ascends to oblivion, Vilnius 1991. Photo: Antanas Sutkus*



*Statue and reliquary of St. Casimir in procession to archcathedral. Photo: Klaudijus Driskius*

117 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 122, l. 29.

118 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 136, l. 12.

119 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 136, l. 7-8.



*The Mother of God gazes upon St. Casimir (St. Casimir chapel in the Vilnius archcathedral). Photo: Tomas Vyšniauskas.*

committee was named “*Lithuanian Perestroika Movement*” (“*Lietuvos Persitvarkymo Sąjūdis*”). A meeting was called on October 22, 1988, to establish the movement. Top officials of the Lithuanian Communist Party were unsure how to react, and so they decided that their wisest course of action would be to attend the meeting. There they heard that the people of the nation were going to gather the next morning at the doors of their archcathedral to pray for God’s guidance. Algirdas Brazauskas, the first secretary of the Party, Vytautas Sakalauskas, chairman of the Council of Ministers, and Lionginas Šepetys, Party secretary, quickly conferred and hastily wrote up a document officially returning the archcathedral to the Church. Their handwritten decree was then announced to the assembled gathering by Justas Paleckis, head of the Lithuanian departments of Culture and Ideology. The deed was done. The next morning, Cardinal Vincentas Sladkevičius, together with his bishops and priests, and thousands of Lithuanians were met at the door of the archcathedral by Romualdas Budrys, director of the Art Gallery, who announced that he was happy to be returning this temple to the Church.<sup>120</sup>

The next letter of Anilionis to Moscow took a very different tone. He simply reported that the archcathedral and St. Casimir’s church were being given back to the Roman Catholics. The official transfer of the archcathedral would take place on February 1, 1989 after necessary repairs had been completed. St. Casimir’s church would be turned over no later than March 4, 1989, St. Casimir’s day.<sup>121</sup> The Commissioner’s reign was over. He and his committee in Moscow were no longer in control.

The reconsecration of the archcathedral took place on February 5, 1989. On March 4, 1989, the day of his feast, the relics of St. Casimir were returned to his chapel with great public ceremony.<sup>122</sup> The struggle had finally come to an end. The victory of the Communist Party had lasted only a few decades and the matter, which was supposed to never be brought up again, was now finally concluded in the favor of the Lithuanian people. This people had proved themselves to be far different from the ideological worker’s society the communists had thought them to be. Now the path ahead was clear. Lithuania would declare its independence and Soviet rule would be at an end.

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120 *Lietuvos Rytas* 1998.10.22, No. 247, p. 1-2.

121 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 135, l. 4.

122 *Lietuvos Rytas* 1998.10.22, No. 247, p. 2.