

Rev. Virginijus Lenkaitis

Šiluva in the Old Days and Now

Šiluva village is mentioned in the written historical sources on the XV century. At the beginning of the XVII century Šiluva became famous for appearing of Virgin Mary with baby on her hands, which has granted honour of the saint place to the small town.

In 1457 Petras Gedgaudas, wealthy Lithuanian noblemen, founded a parish and later built a church. That church was the fifteenth one in Zemaitija (Samogitium) and that country got the name of "Šilai". In the course of time a small settlement grew up around the church. Petras Gedgaudas was a diplomat of Vytautas the Great. He often went abroad. On his visit to Rome he got the painting of Maria and brought it to his church in Šilai. Later the settlement was called "Šidlava" (from a Polish "szydło"), then Šiluva. After the death of Gedgaudas Šiluva was inherited by Mikalojus Kesgaila. His daughter Barbora married Andrius Zaviša, the nobleman of the Zeimiai mansion. Andrius Zaviša took well care of the church and from then on the "Zavišos" became the owners of Šiluva.

In the XVI protestantism came to Lithuania. The children of Zavišos adopted protestantism and became members of the Calvinist sect. Jonas Zaviša adopted the Calvinist faith. He built a church for them and gave as a gift 146 valakas (1 valakas = about 20 ha) of the Catholic Church land to the Calvinists. The Calvinist church got the name of Zbaru from the name of a settlement called Zbarai.

And what happened with the Catholic church? Now as all the land and other property were in the hands of the Calvinists, it was difficult for the church to hold out. The landlords attended the Calvinist church themselves and also forced their serfs to go to the same church.

Then Jonas Holubka, the last parish priest of Šiluva Catholic church made an iron box and put into it the dearest things: the painting of Maria brought from Rome by Gedgaudas, liturgical dress, and also the parish foundation document which testified that those lands had been given to the church by Vytautas the Great. Then the box was hidden deep in the ground near the church at a big stone. The church was closed.

In 1578 and 1590 Lithuania was under the rule of King Steponas Batoras and King Zigmantas Vaza.

At the then bishops request the order was issued to restore the land and the churches captured by the Calvinists to the Rome Catholics. It was a slow process. The Catholics in Šiluva hadn't got any documents proving their property. Those documents were in the iron box deep in the ground and nobody knew about them.

That fatal morning in summer 1608 or 1612 herdsboys were pasturing cattie. Suddenly they saw a woman standing on the stone with a baby in her hands. She was radiant with inexpressible beauty. The woman was sad and tears dropped from her eyes.

The herdsboys, scared by such an unusual sight, ran away to inform the people. They told cathet Mikalojus Fieras their view. The cathet together with teacher Saliamonas Grocijus and the other people ran to the stone. And there they were, a crowd of people round the stone and a beautiful Lady with a baby in her hands on it with tears running down her cheeks and dropping on the stone. People watched that glorious sight and could not pronounce a word. At last M. Fieras dared to say:

– Tell us, beautiful Lady, why are you weeping? Who hurt you?

Maria looked at the crowd and said:

– They used to worship my Son there and now I see the fields being ploughed and sowed.

The news about Lady's declaration spread quickly all over Lithuania. The bishopric in Zemaitija (Samogitium) told priest canon Jonas Kazakevicius went to Šiluva and talked to the people who had watched the miracle. He talked to an old blind man who knew where the box with the documents was hidden. Kazakevicius took the old man to the stone. The old man recovered his sight and showed the place where the box was hidden. They dug up the box and found not only the documents, but also the painting of Maria. The documents proved that all the land and other property belonged to the Catholic church. Priest Kazakevicius brought an action against the Calvinists. He made every effort in that case and in 1622 won it.

After the restitution of the property priest Kazakevicius thought of building a new church. He did it in 1627 when he was appointed the dean in Šiluva. He built a small wooden church by his own means, because the landlords where Calvinists and did not give any help.

Šiluva, famous for its mirades, attracted many visitors. The church was too small, and the de an started building a new church. It was again a wooden church but a bigger one and it was built in the shape of a cross. In 1646 priest Kazakevicius died. He did not see the consecration of the church. It took place 1651 by bishop Petras Parcevskis. Priest Kazakevicius had also set up a free of charge school for children.

In 1663 bishop Aleksandras Sapiega built the first chapel. He set an altar on the stone. There by the altar stood a small wooden statue of Christ in the shape of a cross. Nobody knows the sculptor of the statue that is still standing today.

Tadas Bukota, a prepossess of Šiluva, after visiting in London on his diplomatic mission, brought a marble statue of Maria with a baby in her hands and put it in the altar of the chapel in 1770. People loved the statue they told their prayers to Maria by it. Even now the statue is called „The Health of Patients” . Now it stands with the altar in the chapel of the church.

When the first chapel got old, the helper of Zemaitija (Samogitium) bishop Simonas Giedraitis in 1818 built a new bigger chapel the style of which reminded Vilnius archicathedral. It was in use by 1912.

Which the approaching of the 300th anniversary of Marie’s Declaration, there spread ideas of building a new chapel. A famous artist and architecture Antanas Vivulskis prepared the project. A national poet prelate Jonas Maciulis-Maironis on September 8, 1912 consecrated the foundation of the church. By the common efforts of the prayers and the then dean in Šiluva Marcijonas Jurgaitis the construction of the gothic chapel was finished in 1924 (by the project of A. Vivulskis).

The then dean in Šiluva Jonas Domininkas Lopacinskis started building a new Church in Šiluva in 1760. It was finished in 1775 by another dean Tadas Bukota. The author of the church project is unknown. The painter was Jesuit Podgaiskis from Naugardukas. The construction of the church was over in 1798. Tadas Bukota, the helper of Zemaitija (Samogitium) bishop, consecrated the church on September 10, 1786.

Later it was found out that the picture of Maria, brought by Gedgaudas from Italy to the first church in Šiluva in 1457, was the best copy of the copy of Hodegetria, one of St. Lukas pictures, that was in Konstantinopolis till 1453. The same picture now can be found in Rome, in Maria Maggiore basilica. The picture in Šiluva became famous of its magic power, when it was found in the iron box and put in the altar of the church in 1612. Priest J. Skirmantas found a goldsmith who made a golden dress to the picture. It was done about 1770.

Bishop Steponas Giedraitis worked a lot exploring the power of that magic picture. He addressed Pope Pious VI asking him to declare the picture as magic and to crown it. The permission was given and in 1786 the picture of St. Maria was crowned. Since then the St. Marie’s Birth 8 day Church Festival in Šiluva (September 8-15) called „Šilines”.

From 8 of September 1999 archbishop metropolitan of Kaunas Sigitas Tamkevičius called „Šilines” from first Sunday untill second Sunday of September - feast in Šiluva (decretum N.377, 08 09 1999). About 100 000 pilgrims gather here.

In 1979 the chapel was decorated and gilded. Andriejauskas did the work. In 1980 the ceiling of the chapel was decorated with beautiful 4 frescoes and paintings; “Declaration of Maria”, “Finding the Chest”, “Crowning the Miraculous”, “Consecrating the Foundation of the Church”. Artist V. Palys made 7 Marie’s Pain stations. In 1986 four canvases by A. Kmieliauskas – “Maria and Lithuania”, “Christening of Zemaiciai”, “Lithuania Land of Crosses”, “The Declaration of St. Casimirus to Lithuanian Army” - were brought to the tower of the chapel.

In 1959 the miraculous picture of St. Maria was restored by Ona Smigelskaite from Vilnius. In the process of restoration the signs of folding the picture were found – it had been folded four times and was lying there for a long time. It proves the picture's presence in the iron box.

In 1967 the new organs were set. On June 6, 1968 the Holy Father Paulius VI complied with Juozapas Matulaitis-Labukas, the bishop of Kaunas Archdiocese, Vilkaviskis diocese apostolic administrator and bishop Liudas Pavilionis request and declared the church in Šiluva the small St. M. Maria's Birth Basilic. On September 7, 1993 the Holy Father John Paul II visited Šiluva.

A sculpture "Angeles on their Knees" by Robert Antinis (father) and Robert Antinis (son) was built in 1999 at the Apparation Chapel in Šiluva. Now Šiluva is the modern township, a memorial of urbanism one of the most saint place in Lithuania with the late baroque basilica (1760-1775), miraculous image and the Apparation chapel (1924) located in north-central Lithuania.

Prayer to our Lady of Šiluva - Our Lady - Health of the Sick.

O most Holy Virgin Mary, you who appeared to the shepherds in the fields at Šiluva, you whose tears bathed the rock where once an altar stood You who with plaintive voice said, "You plow and seed here where formerly my Son was honored", grant that we, mowed by your tears, may once, as our forefathers did, revive the spirit of adoration of your Son in our hearts, strengthen the tottering structure of the shrine that is the family and seek forgiveness for the negligences and sins of our nation.

O Mother of God, we desire to raise up the glory of your revelation from forgotten ruins, that we may all the more honor you the patroness of our country and, with your help, obtain for our nation the spirit of a living Faith. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Our Lady of Šiluva, pray for us.

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