



Issue 3

BRIDGES

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Father Stasys Yla

The First Apparition of the Mother of God in Europe

Our Lady of Šiluva

The late Father Stasys Yla wrote a detailed chronicle and history of Our Lady of Šiluva in the Lithuanian language. The Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, Putnam, Connecticut, published this English-language excerpt from the book in 1958.

Down through the centuries, the Mother of God has demonstrated that She is deeply concerned about the faithful who were entrusted to Her by Her Crucified Son on Mount Calvary. From time to time she has appeared in different places throughout the world to impart a message of hope and salvation to troubled mankind. In the early part of the 17th century, 1608, She appeared in Lithuania at a time when Lithuania was experiencing one of her darkest hours. The place was Šiluva. (pronounced Shiluva)

Šiluva was a small town in central Lithuania whose 2,000 or so inhabitants were for the most part poor farmers. The land was very sandy, quite barren, and overgrown with pine trees. In the Lithuanian language, a pine tree forest is known as šilas. Hence, the name of the town, Šiluva.

It was here that in 1608 Our Lady appeared to some small children almost under the same circumstances as She did in Lourdes 250 years later. That is why Šiluva has been called, somewhat inappropriately, the Lourdes of Lithuania.

The First Catholic Church
in Šiluva

Lithuania first accepted Catholicism in 1251 when her king, Mindaugas, was baptized in the Catholic faith. Because of the continual attacks and pillaging upon the country by the Teutonic Knights, the faith was not able to spread until after 1410 when the Knights were decisively defeated by Vytautas, the Great. A pious noble who was a close advisor to Vytautas, Petras Giedgaudas, built the first church in Šiluva in 1457 in honor of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin.

Giedgaudas endowed the church with many rich gifts. It soon became for the people a place of fervent devotion to Our Lady. On each September 8th, people from all over Lithuania flocked to the church to commemorate the feast of the Nativity of Our Lady. The church burned down some 40 years later.

In 1500, a new church was built on the site of the old one by Andrius Zavisa who inherited the Giedgaudas fortune. Influenced by the wave of Protestantism then sweeping Europe, his successor, John Zavisa, together with a number of Lithuanian nobles, accepted the Lutheran



faith in 1532. Although he took possession of the church's lands, it seems that he did not take over the Catholic Church. He built a Lutheran chapel a short distance away.

Lutheranism was strong in Šiluva until 1550, when it gave way to Calvinism. In 1551, Melchior Zavisas, brother to John, took over the estates and the church of Šiluva.

In 1591, Melchior sold the church and its property to a staunch Calvinist widow, Sofija Vnuckienė. She in turn deeded them to the Calvinists on the condition that they build a brick church in Šiluva, a seminary for training Calvinist pastors, catechists and teachers, and a home for the needy.

The conditions were fulfilled a year or two later. The seminary, the only Calvinist one serving Lithuania, was open and functioning at the time of the apparitions in 1608. After the apparitions, it began to lose its influence and effectiveness, and ceased to function about 1625.

Catholic Church Closed

It is not certain just when the Catholic church closed its doors. It is definitely known that services were still being held in 1550. It must be remembered that while the nobles and higher class of people accepted Lutheranism and later Calvinism, the peasants and the poor farmers remained faithful to Catholicism.

In 1550, when the Calvinists became strong enough, they began to use extreme means to force the people to accept Calvinism. Many Catholic churches were burned, while others, together with their treasures, were taken over and used by the Calvinists for their own services and devotions. Thus the Catholics suffered a crippling blow. The Catholic church in Šiluva, it seems, ceased to function about 1570. It either was torn down or burned.

Treasures Buried

Fortunately, the last pastor saw fit to take the treasured image of the Madonna and Child which held a most reverend place in the Šiluva church, a number of ecclesiastical vestments cherished by the people, and some of the official documents, and placed them in a metal-covered oak chest. He secretly buried the chest in the ground near a huge rock about a half mile from the church. Not being able to stay any longer, the pastor left and this seemed the end of Catholicism in Šiluva.

However, in 1588, a statute was passed in Lithuania giving Catholics the right to repossess the churches and property unjustly taken from them some years before.

The Bishop of Zemaitija, The Most Reverend Merkelis Giedraitis, started legal proceedings to reclaim all the Catholic churches and their property. A member of his staff, Rev. Jonas Kazakevicius, was successful in reclaiming the church in Kelme. He knew about the church in Šiluva and sought to obtain the documents that would prove that Petras Giedgaudas had given the land and the church to the Catholic Church. His efforts proved fruitless. Nowhere could he find the necessary documents. The case looked hopeless and in all probability would have remained so unless heaven had not intervened.

The Apparition

In Šiluva, the people, being poor, simple farmers, eked out a living by tilling the soil. Their older children tended the flocks while the younger ones were accustomed to play around a huge rock that was nearby.

One hot summer day in 1608, while they were playing, the children suddenly saw a Woman with beautiful, long hair and pretty, loose-fitting garments on the rock. She held a Child in her arms. Tears flowed from her eyes. The children became frightened and not one dared to say a word to Her. One boy ran to the Calvinist catechist to relate what they had seen.

Word of this spread rapidly, and next day, a large number of people went to the place where the Woman appeared. The Calvinist catechist was also present together with the rector of the Calvinist seminary, Saliomonas Grocius. The catechist upbraided the people for listening to what he called the tales of the children. He tried to explain that, if someone did appear, it was the devil himself who was attempting to draw them away from the Calvinist faith.

As he was speaking, the Woman again appeared on the rock as She did the day before, very sorrowful with tears in her eyes holding a Child in her arms. She appeared just as the children had related the day before. The assembled people became very frightened and not one dared to say a word. The Catechist himself, frightened as he was, got enough courage to ask, "Why are you crying?" The Woman, in a very sorrowful tone, answered, "Formerly in this place, my Son was honored and adored, but now all that the people do is seed and cultivate the land." Having

said this, the Woman disappeared in the sight of everyone present.

The apparition was seen by many people, so it was useless for the Calvinist leaders to deny it. They tried to explain that it was nothing but the work and trickery of the devil.

Aid of a Blind Man

The people were dumbfounded and many of them didn't know what to say or believe. To them, a very old blind man gave this explanation: "Think what you will but I say to you that on the rock appeared not the devil as the Calvinists would have us believe, but the Most Blessed Virgin with Her Son in Whose honor once stood the old Catholic church which was destroyed many years before." This old man was adamant in his belief that an apparition had taken place.

News Spreads

News of this strange event spread throughout the land. The local bishop became interested and sent his representative, Father Kazakevicius, to investigate. Apparently he and the bishop were satisfied with the testimony received, for the Chancery issued no statement denying the fact of the apparition or forbidding the faithful to make known the event. Tradition proves that the faithful were convinced of the apparition.

Buried Treasures Found

The important thing was to get the documents which would help the Catholics to reclaim the property now held by the Calvinist. Having heard that the documents were needed, the blind old man mentioned that he knew something about them.

The old man related how there once was a Catholic church in Šiluva, how the church was destroyed, and how the last Catholic pastor had buried the image, vestments and the documents. Father Kazakevicius asked him if he could show him the place. He replied that he could. When the old man was led to the spot next to the rock on which the Blessed Virgin appeared, his blindness left him and he began to see. This was the first miracle recorded after the apparitions.

The old man fell on his knees, kissed the ground, and thanked God for the grace granted him. He then pointed out the place where to dig.

Documents Found

The metal-covered oaken chest with the treasures and the documents was found. Fortified with the documents, Father Kazakevicius legally demanded that the Calvinists return all the property and treasures of the Catholic church in 1612. The judges were for the most part Protestant and the legal battle for the church land lasted over ten years. In 1622, the Tribunal at Vilnius decided in favor of the Catholics.

First Pastor After The Apparitions

Father Kazakevicius was appointed pastor of the Catholic people in Šiluva. In 1624, he built a small wooden church which soon proved much too small for the many pilgrims who visited the place.

The pilgrims had heard of the apparitions and of the finding of the cherished image which was now placed above the main altar of the church. People from all over Lithuania flocked to Šiluva to visit the little church and pay homage to the Mother of God.

According to Bishop M. Valancius, who wrote a study of Šiluva's history, the place was so popular that in 1629, during the annual ceremonies held on the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin, more than 11,000 faithful received Holy Communion.

A much larger church was built in 1641. Consecrated ten years later in 1651, it served the many pilgrims for almost 140 years. During this time, offerings continued to come in, and on September 7th, 1786, a new renaissance-style church was solemnly consecrated.

Chapel Built

The number of pilgrims to Šiluva steadily increased and more of them experienced extraordinary graces from Almighty God.

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Miracles happened and the faithful were wont to visit the rock on which Our Lady appeared, touch it, place flowers on it, kneel before it, and pray fervently to the Mother of God.

This increasing devotion prompted the Ordinary, Bishop Aleksandras Sapiega, to build a small wooden chapel around the rock in 1663. It served the faithful until 1818, when a more spacious one was built by Bishop Simonas Giedraitis. In 1912, a larger, more elaborate chapel was begun. Because of the war, it was not completed until 1924. The altar itself was built over the rock on which the Blessed Virgin appeared. Pilgrims were accustomed to go on their knees around the altar and kiss the rock which remained visible.

Miraculous Image

One of the items hidden in the buried chest was the Miraculous Image of the Madonna and Child. Where it originally came from is not known but, it is possible that it was brought from Rome and given as a gift by Vytautas, the Great, to Petras Giedgaudas, who built the first church in Šiluva.

The image is a replica of the famous St. Luke pictures of Mary and similar to the image of Mary, now in the Church of Maria Maggiore in Rome and known as "Salus Populi Romani" (Salvation of the Roman People). It shows the Madonna in royal robes holding the Divine Child, also arrayed in royal garments.

When it was found in the hidden chest soon after the apparitions, it was intact and once again placed in the church. So many gold and silver votives were attached to it that in 1671, they were melted and the gold and silver were used to decorate the picture. Gold leaf and precious stones were added to enhance its rich beauty.

A Marble Statue

Sometime between 1770 and 1775, the bishop at that time, the Most Reverend Jonas Lapacinkas, had a marble statue of the Blessed Virgin made in London. It was placed in the chapel on the rock itself. It was publicly crowned on September 3rd, 1886 by Bishop Mecislovas Paliulionis. It carried the title "Health of the Sick". The faithful prayed before it and many of them experienced renewed health of the body and the soul.

Some years later, a new statue replaced the old one. The old one, together with the altar that was built over the rock, has been preserved in the closed chapel in the church.

Papal Approval Given

All the bishops in the Šiluva diocese approved of the devotion on the part of the faithful to Our Lady of Šiluva. This great devotion and the number of miracles prompted the ecclesiastical authorities to seek papal approval of the public devotion.

After extensive investigations by the local bishop, Pope Pius VI approved of the cult to Our Lady of Šiluva with enriched indulgences. Another privilege granted the church was that its pastors became "infulati" i.e. they could wear episcopal vestments on certain occasions during the liturgical year. The first "infulatus" was Father Tadas Bukota who built the new shrine church at Šiluva. He later was appointed auxiliary Bishop of Zemaitija.

On September 8th, 1786, with permission of the Chapter of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, the Miraculous Image was solemnly crowned with a pure gold crown in the presence of four bishops, a few senators, many noblemen, and over 30,000 people. The entire coronation ceremony was under the direction of the Most Reverend Steponas Giedraitis, then Bishop of Zemaitija.

Our Lady of Šiluva Reigns

It may be asked why these apparitions are not better known in the Catholic world. In 1795, at the time of the Great Partition, Lithuania was taken over by Russia. Until 1904, Russia ruled her with a very heavy hand. It was forbidden to teach the language, the press and religious book printings were suppressed, and travel was limited. Such restrictions stymied the apparition's story to be told.

During the independent years between 1918 and 1940, knowledge of the apparition spread through Europe and devotions increased. Under Soviet occupation, devotions continued in a very subdued yet, constant state.

Presently, renewed interest in Catholicism's history in Lithuania has heightened devotions to Our Lady of Šiluva. Pope John Paul's visit in 1993 allowed the world to view this remarkable site. As the Mother of God appeared to and fortified Lithuanians in their darkest hour in 1608, She again

blesses the people of Lithuania with freedom of faith.



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