

HISTORY OF VILNIUS CATHEDRAL TREASURY FOUNDATION AND DEVELOPMENT TO THE PRESENT DAY

Vilnius Cathedral Treasury dates from 1387 when the diocese of Vilnius was established. The Treasury housed royal donations, Episcopal and chapter donations and bequests, gifts of the magnates and members of nobility, liturgical vessels and relics given by popes as well as liturgical plates from other churches.

The first objects in the Treasury were donated by the rulers of the newly-Christianized Lithuania: Ladislas Jagiełło, King of Poland and Witold, Grand Duke of Lithuania and their wives. Moreover, the first Treasury housed ecclesiastical plate brought by Andrew, the first Bishop of Vilnius who was a Polish Franciscan and a former Bishop of Seret in Bukovina.

Whatever survived of the original Treasury during the two hundred years, was recorded in the inventory of 1598. These were precious liturgical vestments with coats of arms of Poland and Lithuania: the White Eagle, the White Knight and the Columns of Gediminas. Unfortunately, none of these has survived to the present day. The royal family paid special attention to the Royal Chapel (later called the Chapel of St Casimir) erected by Casimir Jagiellon in the cathedral in 1484.

The sixteenth century marked a major growth of the Treasury. Upon the request of Alexander Jagiellon in 1501, Pope Alexander VI donated numerous relics to the King. On 250 anniversary of the canonization of St Stanislas, patron saint of the cathedral, holy relic of the saint appeared in the Treasury. It was most probably around the time that the Treasury received the relic of St Stanislas' arm and a reliquary most probably commissioned by Alexander Jagiellon.

A 1598 inventory lists numerous items donated to the cathedral by members of the Habsburg dynasty – the wives of Casimir Jagiellon, Sigismund Augustus, kings from the Vasa dynasty, and Queen Bona Sforza, wife of Sigismund the Old. Ornamental ecclesiastical vestments were donated to the cathedral by Sigismund the Old and Sigismund Augustus.

Members of the Vasa dynasty enlarged Cathedral Treasury. Most importantly, they founded and furnished the Royal Chapel (St Casimir Chapel). Its construction started during the reign of Sigismund III Vasa in 1624 and finished in 1636 during the reign of his son, King Władysław IV. Subsequent rulers paid less attention to the needs of the cathedral.

Andrew, the first Bishop of Vilnius, made a gift by will to the cathedral of all his liturgical vessels. The few other donations were also made by Ann, Grand Duchess of Lithuania and wife of Duke Witold. Other bishops followed in the footsteps of bishop Andrew, for example, bishop Paweł Radziwiłł, Walerian Protasewicz, Jerzy Radziwiłł, Benedykt Woyna, Eustachy Wołowicz, Abraham Woyna, Jerzy Tyskiewicz. Members of the cathedral chapter and the ecclesiastical hierarchs from the neighbouring dioceses were among the donors. First accounts of the donations of the chalices from the episcopal inauguration mass date from the first half of the sixteenth century. Some of these donations survived until the present day.

Once the magnates received an official consent to erect family chapels in the cathedral, they furnished and bestowed generous endowments on the chapels. If a family died out, the plate and vestments from the family chapel were transferred to the Treasury in the main sacristy. Besides the magnates, some private donors have also been recorded in the history of the Treasury, though they did not have a private chapel in the cathedral. Invaluable donations in the forms of votives were presented to St Casimir. Among the donors of Saint Casimir were members of the families of Pac, Sapieha, Massalski, Chodkiewicz, Połubiński and many others.

Until the middle of the eighteenth century impressive Cathedral Treasury housed several splendid monstrances of gold and silver encrusted with precious stones, dozens of chalices, crosses, reliquaries, cruets, episcopal insignia, richly decorated liturgical vestments and altar decorations. The collection was severely damaged during wars with Russia and Swedish in mid-seventeenth century. A large part of the collection was seized by the invading armies during the evacuation of the Treasury. Many items were pawned to raise funds for the defence of the country. Whatever

remained of the former Treasury returned to the cathedral in 1667. Some of the deposits were regained in exchange for money. At the end of the turbulent period a new collection was begun.

Alexander Sapieha, Bishop of Vilnius in 1667-1671, made a vow during his inauguration to donate golden chalice and paten to the cathedral. One of the most generous donors in the second half of the seventeenth century was the Bishop of Samogitia, Kazimier Pac and Vilnius Bishops Mikołaj Stefan Pac and Alexander Kotowitzc. The number of private donations in this period decreased in comparison with the previous centuries. Among the most important donations is tapestry series "History of David and Solomon" as well as a chalice of gold given by Kazimierz Leon Sapieha.

During the Great Northern War that broke out in 1700, Vilnius Cathedral was forced to pawn its treasures. Some of them were never regained. Moreover the cathedral provided support to the churches in the country by handing some of its less valuable liturgical vessels.

In the last decades of the eighteenth century, owing to the generosity of laymen and, above all, members of the clergy, the Treasury was rebuilt and refounded. Some of the donors were: Suffragan Jerzy Ancuta, Bogusław Gosiewski, Bishop of Smoleńsk, Krzysztof Jan Szembek, Bishop of Ermland, Antony Tyszkiewicz, Bishop of Samogitia as well as Vilnius Bishops Karol Piotr Panczerzyński, Michał Jana Zienkowicz and Ignacy Jacob Massalski. However, the new acquisitions did not match the splendour of the seventeenth-century holdings. Only five items of pure gold remained in the Treasury, though a few new relics were acquired as well as numerous silver objects. Some of the new reliquaries and crosses were silver-plated wood.

Further damage to the Treasury was the effect of the Kościuszko Rising of 1794. Many silver objects had been given away to pay the costs of the rising which still did not help to prevent the first Partition of the Commonwealth in 1795.

Bishops continued to bestow their donations of chalices, and members of the chapter regularly gave liturgical vessels to the cathedral after Lithuania was incorporated into Russian empire. However after the Rising of 1831 the tsarist authorities started to close down Catholic churches and monasteries as part of the repressions. During that time the Cathedral Treasury received the most valuable objects from the churches and monasteries as part of the repressions. During that time the Cathedral provided storage room for all of these items. As a consequence, the Treasury had once again come into the possession of the fifteenth and sixteenth-century plate and liturgical vestments. The newly-acquired objects were shared with other churches. After the Rising of 1863-1864 liturgical vessels were sent to the priests in exile Tomsk Gubernia, in Mariansk and Irkutsk.

At the turn of the twentieth century the Treasury became a museum of ecclesiastical art. Precious vessels were rarely used and placed in a specially arranged room in the chapter.

Most of the Cathedral Treasury was hidden on the cathedral premises on 1 September 1939, at the outbreak of World War II, and remained there for half a century. The Soviets occupied Vilnius at the beginning of the war and handed it to Lithuania that was soon incorporated into the Soviet Union. The Cathedral was turned into a gallery in 1955 and became a branch of the Fine Arts Museum. The objects that remained in the Cathedral belonged now to the museum holdings, but it was known the secret of the Treasury would pass away and the collection remained undiscovered until 1985 when archeological and renovation works were carried out in the cathedral. Some secret niches were found between the entrances to the chapels of Vilnius Cathedral. In the niche between the Gastold Chapel and the Chapel of St John of Nepomuk (nowadays the Chapel of the Deportees), objects from the Treasury were found. They were meticulously catalogued and once hidden in the museum storage rooms. Only a few people knew about the find since the real danger of the Treasury being taken away to Russia persisted.

The Cathedral was reconsecrated and given back to the Catholic community on 5 February 1989. A mass was celebrated after almost half a century. The relicts of St Casimir were transferred back to the Cathedral from St Peter and Paul Church on 4 March of the same year. On this occasion the museum gave back some of the vessels needed for the celebration of liturgy. However, in the light of the unstable political situation, it was decided that the remaining vessels will remain hidden. Eight years after Lithuania had regained its independence, in 1998 the treasury was shown to the church authorities, state authorities and media for the first time. At present the treasury belongs to the cathedral.