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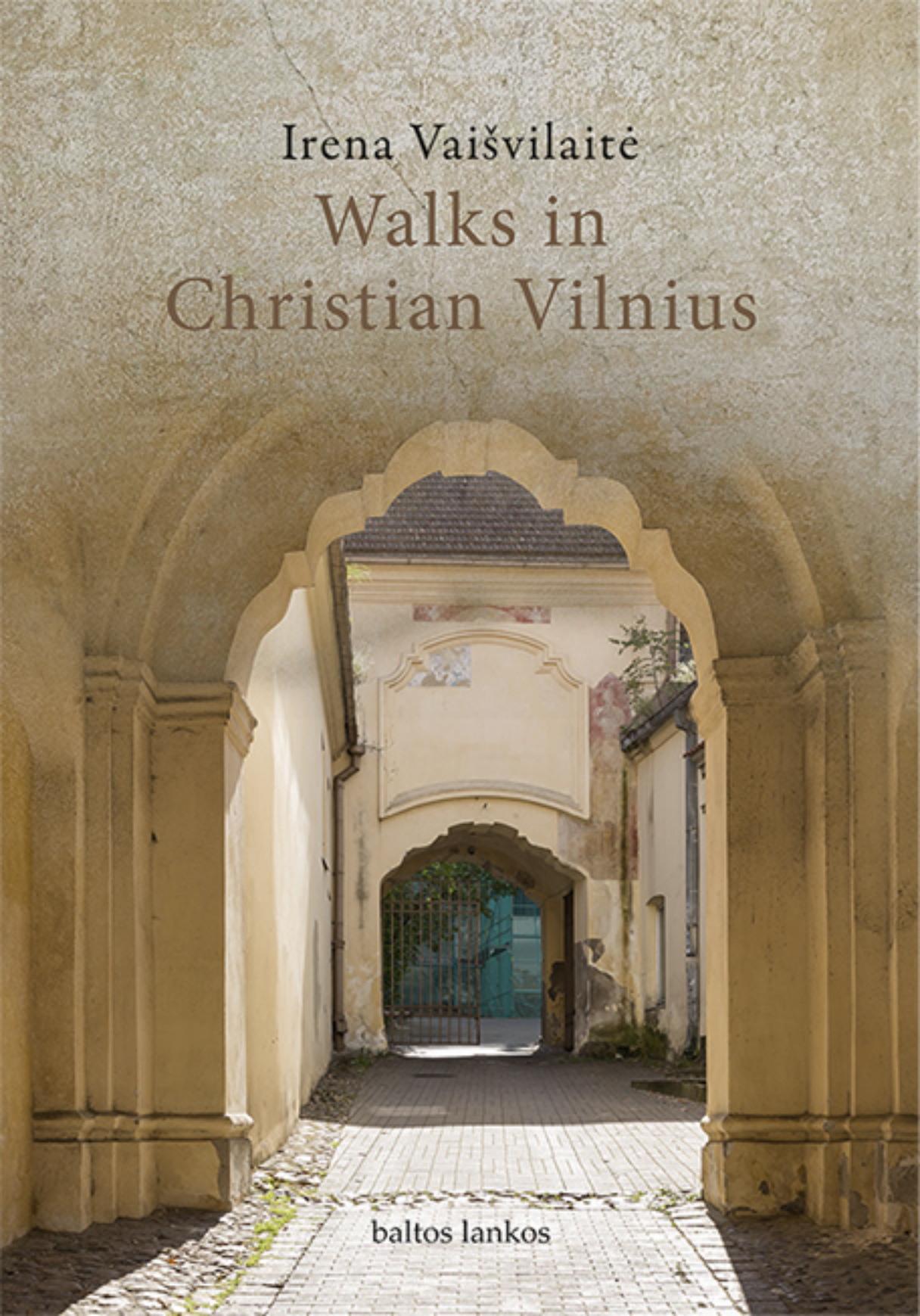
# Walks in Christian Vilnius



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# Walks in Christian Vilnius

Translated from Lithuanian by Jayde Will

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# Introduction

This guide of Christian Vilnius is devoted to one particular aspect of Vilnius. If a person should look down from any of the city's surrounding hills towards the Old Town, their gaze would first of all alight upon the spires of the various churches. Those writing about the religious history of Vilnius emphasize that Christianity, Judaism and Islam lived alongside one another in Vilnius. What is mentioned much less is another very striking aspect of Vilnius – the long-standing tradition of Eastern and Western (or Greek and Latin) Christianity coexisting as close neighbours. Both underwent fragmentation, although in Vilnius, as in no other European city, they were able to coexist without great strife and possessed their own rights, even if not always on an equal footing, well before the appearance of secular societies.

This emergence is an exceptional phenomenon in Europe. Western and Eastern Christianity were and still are the two grand traditions of Vilnius, with the coevality and relationship between them at times amiable, at times difficult. This book is not a history of Christianity in Vilnius. It is simply a guide accompanying the reader on a few walks through the city, the Christian history of which deserves greater attention. The genre of "walks" should alert the reader to another particular aspect of this book – it is not an encyclopedia, but rather a personal story, in which there is no lack of impressions, opinions and memories.

# Vilnius' Christian Topography

The more astute travellers have noticed the particular spaciousness of Vilnius. The city, which was fortified with walls relatively late, has preserved a freedom uncharacteristic of cramped, medieval old towns. Its houses, streets and squares are interspersed with empty lots, gardens and orchards. Over several centuries, Vilnius transformed from being the capital and seat of the country's ruler into a provincial town and was thus able to preserve, even to the beginning of the 21st century, a particularly captivating charm, though this is now starting to fade.

It was still possible comparatively recently to walk from the edge of the Cathedral Square to today's Presidential Palace on unpaved paths, through the courtyards and gardens of single-storey wooden houses. Now, however, this ability of Vilnius to captivate by hiding a small manor house or orchard alongside a grand palace is disappearing, together with the woodsheds, chicken coops, lean-tos and flower and herb gardens in the courtyards of the Old Town. There is heavy construction and a lot of competition for each vacant plot of land in a city that has become a true capital city of a true country.

The layout of the city, much like the rings of a tree, tells us a story of the good and bad years in its life. Vilnius has a large Old Town, which is evidence that at one time it was the capital of a state with an extensive reach. The modest, provincial part of the city dates from the period of the 19th and first half of the 20th century. While many capitals were growing and modernizing themselves during this time, Vilnius suffered from being an outlying city of the Russian Empire, and later of the Republic of Poland, and vegetated as a result. The period of Soviet architecture has left a very obvious mark on the city. Though the gaps in the Old Town left by World War II have been filled up, the entire city is surrounded by residential areas full of grey cement high-rise blocks.

But what is so special about Vilnius' Christian urban heritage?

What strikes you first is that Vilnius is a Central European capital. As in Budapest, Prague and Krakow, the religious life of Vilnius had two centres – the Bishop's Cathedral, built within the walls of the ruler's castle, and the Vilnius parish church, which was located near the main market square. In this respect Central European cities differ from Western European cities, where medieval cathedrals were built not by rulers but by a city's burghers.

There was a duality inherent in Central European capitals. Cities existed next to the rulers' castles. Dukes and kings built cathedrals within the walls of their castles, where the most important events in the life of the state and the rulers took place, whereas a city's parish churches were built outside the castle walls and represented the centre of the life of its burghers. They contained chapels built by guilds and prominent burgher families. The elite built their chapels near the rulers, in other words, in the cathedrals. One can incidentally note that the cathedrals of rulers are devoted to the holy patrons of the state, while a city's parish churches are devoted usually to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Vilnius Cathedral is easy to recognize, though it is a rare Vilnius inhabitant who knows that the Church of St. John the Baptist, built for the occasion of Lithuania's conversion to Christianity near the old market square, next to the main street of the Old Town, was the old parish church of Vilnius. Today people assume that it is the church of Vilnius University. It is only historians who know that the University was allowed to use the church for its own needs in its early days, yet it was always the primary parish church of Vilnius.

The route from the Cathedral of St. Stanislaus, normally simply called the Cathedral, to the former parish church of Vilnius is very short. This is an indication of the fact that, when the official parish of Vilnius was established during the time of Lithuania's conversion to Christianity, the city was small and weak, and

the Duke exercised great power in the city. The city's centre – the market square – was located on the outskirts of the castle. Later, the city centre of the burghers was moved to today's the Town Hall Square, next to which the Church of St. Casimir was built at the beginning of the 17th century for the Jesuits – clear evidence that at that time the Society of Jesus played a central role in the care of the burghers' souls in Vilnius.

Vilnius' oldest Catholic church is considered to be the Church of St. Nicholas of Myra. It is thought that it was built before the official baptism of Lithuania. It is a small building close to the former city wall and immediately adjacent to the ancient Vokiečių gatvė, or German Street. The Church of St. Nicholas was devoted to the foreign Latin-rite Christians living in Vilnius, first and foremost merchants, the majority of whom were from cities belonging to the Hanseatic League. It is from that time that this part of the city acquired the name "German".

Not far from the city wall is the oldest Franciscan Convent in Lithuania, together with the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The mendicant Franciscan, Dominican and Augustinian orders, which appeared during the Late Middle Ages in cities which had a Christian tradition older than that of Vilnius, established themselves on the outskirts of cities, near the defensive walls, but also beyond them. There were several reasons for this – the Franciscans and Dominicans were orders where sermons played a central role. They therefore needed large churches which could accommodate many believers, and larger vacant plots of land were no longer available in the centre of medieval cities.

Moreover, once the mendicant orders were established, competition with the diocesan clergy under the Bishop became particularly acute, which is why the Convents were built slightly away from the Bishop's Cathedral and the parish churches. The old Franciscan

Convent of Vilnius is located near the former city wall, but it is not far from the Bishop's Cathedral or the old parish church. Even closer to the two centres of diocesan life, the Cathedral and the old parish church, is the Dominican Convent of Vilnius with the Church of the Holy Ghost.

The closeness of the Franciscan and Dominican houses of worship to the city centre are evidence of the fact that in Vilnius, where the Franciscans and Dominicans were the first to establish themselves even before the official baptism of Lithuania, these mendicant orders were powerful and influential.

The Church of St. Nicholas, which was built for foreigners, or perhaps built by foreigners, as well as the Dominican and Franciscan Convents, are located along the road that takes you to the ancient capital of Trakai. Many inhabitants of this area were foreigners, the first Western (Latin rite) Christians in Vilnius.

Vilnius is different from other Central European cities in that, on its outskirts, there are neither the old buildings of contemplative Benedictine Canons Regular nor the monasteries of Premonstratensian Canons Regular founded by St. Norbert of Xanten, which were of great importance to the Christianizing of Bohemia and southern Poland. When Lithuania was being Christianized, it was the young mendicant orders who were the most active in evangelizing. It is true that Vytautas settled Benedictines in the old capital of Trakai; however, this stable religious order did not spread further in Lithuania.

A number of religious orders, which include the Discalced and Calced Carmelite monks and nuns (The Church of St. George, the Church of St. Teresa, the Church of All Saints) and Benedictine nuns (the Church of St. Catherine of Alexandria), moved to Lithuania, including Vilnius, later during the 17$^{th}$ and 18$^{th}$ centuries and established themselves farther away from the city centre.

The Society of Jesus, otherwise known as the Jesuits, was particularly active in Vilnius from the end of the 16th century to the end of the 18th century. The Jesuits were invited to the capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania by the Bishop of Vilnius and the country's ruler to strengthen Catholicism in a city and country that had been greatly affected by the Reformation.

While the Jesuits were establishing a college in the Lithuanian capital, they were allowed to use the parish Church of St. John the Baptist. The Professed House of the Jesuits (that is, Jesuits who have taken their Final Vows) and the Church of St. Casimir, the first canonized saint of Lithuania, were located near the Town Hall Square. The Jesuit Novitiate together with the Church of St. Ignatius of Loyola were situated close to the castle and Bishop's Palace, while in the neighbourhood of Snipiszki, located along the Neris River, was the large building of what is called the "House of the Third Probation" (the time before the Final Vows), together with the Church of St. Raphael the Archangel.

Beyond the city walls, either in the private holdings of the nobles or on lands allocated to them by the Bishops of Vilnius, were monasteries and churches of the Canons Regular of the Lateran (the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul), the Trinitarians, the Congregation of the Mission and the Order of the Visitation.

Many of the monasteries and their churches were closed in the 19th century by the Russian Tsars, as punishment for their support of participants in the uprisings of 1830 and 1863 against the Russian Empire. Some of the monks returned to Vilnius after the Empire fell in 1918 but by no means all of them recovered their former premises.

The second time the work of all monks was forced to stop and their property expropriated was when Vilnius and Lithuania were occupied by the Soviet Union. At the present time, not all the churches which belonged to the religious men and women have yet

been returned to the believers, while some of the monasteries and convents have become private or state property.

The Franciscans returned to their churches, having regained the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary as well as the Church of St. Francis and St. Bernardine, which were closed and damaged by the Soviets. The Dominicans regained the Church of St. Philip and St. James the Apostles as well as part of the Convent in Lukiškės Square, while the Jesuits re-established themselves in the former premises of the Professed House near the Town Hall Square. The Church of St. Casimir, which had been turned into a museum for atheism during the Soviet era, was renovated and re-consecrated.

Some of the old monasteries and convents have been taken over by new communities – for example, the young Community of St. John the Evangelist, which moved from France to Lithuania, has established itself in the former Trinitarian monastery in the Antakalnis neighborhood. In the Trinitarian monastery in the Trinapolis neighbourhood, one can find the house of the Sisters of Christ the King, a congregation of diocesan right which was secretly established during the Soviet period, as well as an area for religious retreats.

A number of the churches of old monasteries are currently parish churches, while the pastoral care of some parishes is undertaken by monk priests – for example, the Salesians are active in the new parish of St. John Bosco in the Lazdynai neighbourhood.

Most of the orders working in Vilnius today have settled in the newer districts of the city. During the Soviet era, the members of orders that worked underground lived in high-rise apartment blocks or in the districts of Žvėrynas, Antakalnis and Naujoji Vilnia, where there were private houses. Such buildings, purchased in the name of one of the members of an order or of their relatives, became official monasteries and convents once they emerged from being underground.

It will be obvious that there are hardly any churches which were built in the 20th century. During the first half of the 20th century, when Vilnius was the capital of a Voivode of the Republic of Poland, the existing churches were sufficient for the needs of its inhabitants. They simply strove to renovate and remodel these churches, which had been subject to restrictions imposed on Catholic churches by the Tsarist Russian government.

The Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, designed by the talented architect Antoni Wiwulski, was the only church whose construction was commenced at the beginning of the 20th century. It remained unfinished due to the architect's death, and during the Soviet period was incorporated into a secular building.

After World War II, Vilnius began to grow rapidly. However, the Soviet regime, which persecuted religion, not only banned the building of new places of worship but also began to close those which had previously been built. It was only in 1991 that the first church built in Vilnius in the second half of the 20th century was consecrated, in the high-rise district of Viršuliškės. The church was dedicated to the Bishop of Vilnius, Blessed Jurgis Matulaitis.

Soon afterwards, the order of Salesians began to build the Church of St. John Bosco in the city district of Lazdynai. In Pilaitė, the newest and fastest growing micro-district of Vilnius, a plot of land had already been allocated for the future church. As of now, only the parish house and a chapel have been built, although funding is being raised for the construction of the church.

Alongside the spires of the Catholic churches, Vilnius' panorama also includes the cupolas of Eastern Christian churches, which in Lithuania are most often called Orthodox churches. Most of Vilnius' old Orthodox churches are situated in the eastern part of the Old Town, which was earlier inhabited by Belarusians and Ruthenians, between Pilies Street and the Vilnelė River.

The Orthodox Cathedral of the Theotokos stands in close proximity to the ducal palace, now known as the Palace of the Grand Dukes. According to legend, it was built in the 14th century by the Orthodox princess of Tver Juliana, who was the wife of Algirdas, the pagan Grand Duke of Lithuania, and the mother of Jogaila, the future king of Poland.

Along Pilies Street and Didžioji Street are the ancient Orthodox churches built during the Middle Ages – the Church of St. Parasceve, the Church of St. Nicholas and the Church of the Holy Trinity. The shape of the 17th century Church of the Holy Ghost resembles the Church of St. Casimir, which was very modern at the time of its construction.

The influence on Vilnius of the Russian Tsars' efforts to spread Muscovite Orthodoxy throughout the Empire in the 19th century is evidenced by two churches built on high hills in widely visible places at the turn of the 20th century – the Church of Our Lady of the Sign and the Church of St. Constantine and St. Michael in a district of the city near the present J. Basanavičiaus Street. There are other 19th century Orthodox churches in Vilnius, but they are not as visible as these two, which form part of the city's silhouette. There are no Orthodox churches which were built later than this.

Until the 19th century, Orthodox churches in Vilnius were built according to Western architectural fashion – the oldest were Gothic, while the Church of the Holy Ghost built at the beginning of the 17th century was Baroque. It was only in the 19th century that Orthodox churches began to be built in a "Russian" style. After this, the older Orthodox churches were rebuilt, giving them a clearer "Russian" or, to be more precise, Muscovite form, which makes it relatively easy to recognize Orthodox churches in Vilnius.

However, if you want to see the places of worship and cemeteries of the religious dissidents who fled the Muscovite state to

Lithuania, known as the Old Believers, you need to go farther from the city centre. This community, an integral part of the religious landscape of Lithuania, is little known in Central Europe but much more so in Western Europe.

It is markedly more difficult to find in Vilnius traces of the reformed Western Christians, the Evangelicals and Evangelical Reformers, known more commonly as Lutherans and Calvinists. This is not only because the Lutheran church is located in a courtyard off Vokiečių Street, while that of the Calvinists was built in the 17th century beyond the old city walls, on Pylimo Street.

Compared to other countries, where at the end of the 16th century and during the 17th century the Catholic Church remained the dominant church, the Reformed Churches and Evangelical communities in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania had enviable freedom. However, the modest location of both communities' houses of worship bears witness to the fact that freedom and total equality is not one and the same.

The Soviet regime, for its part, considered both communities as foreign, which is why they treated them particularly harshly – after 1944 the Lutheran and Calvinist churches in Vilnius were closed and their cemeteries were destroyed. It was only after 1990 that their communities had their buildings returned to them.

Today in Vilnius there are Evangelical Christian communities who arrived at a later date, including Methodists, Seventh Day Adventists and Baptists. However, their places of worship are modest and often not recognizable from the outside.