

Pažaislis hermitage: History of the Camaldolese Monks

Summary

The Pažaislis Monastery was one of the seven Camaldolese monasteries in the Polish and Lithuanian province, as well as being the northernmost hermitage of the Camaldolese congregation of Monte Corona. Generally, it is the history of Pažaislis art that attracts the most attention. However, this art was not meant to surprise future generations, or to satisfy the selfish aesthetic desires of the artwork's patron. Representation was an important aspect of Pažaislis, but again it is only a piece of a larger story in this case. The Chancellor of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Krzysztof Zygmunt Pac (1621–1684), built a beautiful, luxurious and ornate monastery, but he was playing a certain type of Baroque game that involved surprising and impressing his contemporaries. It is obvious that even a small brick monastery to shelter the remains of the patron and allow him to say the prayers for his salvation would have sufficed to fulfil the patron's pious intentions and his religious aspirations. It would also be perfectly reasonable to assert that at least some of the luxurious details in Pažaislis would have made any of Pac's private palaces in the state's capitals (Krakow, Warsaw, Vilnius or Grodno) the subject of discussions throughout the state. But Pac combined these intentions into one. He built what was perhaps the most luxurious and the most expensive Baroque-style monastery in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in these woods, and then gave it as a place of residence to the Camaldolese monks who were known to practice a secluded lifestyle. This is where the story of this book begins.

It should be noted that Pac not only paid a great deal of attention to the appearance of the Pažaislis monastery. Before starting its construction, he made sure that a novitiate could be established at Pažaislis. This was an exception in the European history of the Camaldolese – as normally, there could be only one novitiate per province. Nevertheless, with the help of Pope Alexander VII, Pac made sure that the monastery would be allowed to teach novices. It is unclear if the Pažaislis monastery would have been decorated in this manner if its patron had not succeeded

in this goal. The result was a chance for the local young people to join the Camaldolese, thus ensuring a stronger continuity of the monastery. At the same time, it allowed the Pažaislis monastery to rise above older monasteries in the hierarchy of European Camaldolese monasteries – as a novitiate, it ranked immediately after the main monastery of Monte Corona and the central monasteries in other provinces. Various historical references reveal that the patron Pac continued to ensure that the Pažaislis monastery would meet all the requirements of the Camaldolese monks and would be suited to their way of life. He personally took care to ensure that the novices at Pažaislis received the proper training and he chose the leaders of the monastery himself, trying to attract monks with the greatest experience and abilities. In 1669, Father Jerome, the first head of Pažaislis, unexpectedly died on a trip to the Camaldolese monastery in Kahlenberg near Vienna. Afterwards, Pac expressed his grief in letters, describing Father Jerome as one of his helpers and among the biggest contributors to the Pažaislis patronage. He felt a great sorrow when he learned that he would not be able to bury his close companion at Pažaislis. Without a doubt, Pac's devotion to the monks, whom he entrusted with his remains after death as well as with constant prayers for his salvation, was not artificial. Pac funded the construction of a church with chapels and altars, a monastery, a guest house and auxiliary premises. Pac also made sure to set up an apothecary, which was necessary for the daily needs of the monks. The church is rich in iconographic motifs that were important to the Camaldolese featuring: St. Benedict, St. Romuald, the Five Brother Martyrs, Blessed Bogumil and St. Bruno. The pictorial narratives of their stories were not meant just for strangers to look at – they were created for the Camaldolese themselves as reminders of their origins, inspiring examples and as revered saints. Therefore, it should be understood that, besides all the attention given to representation and the attempts to surprise in the Baroque fashion, the patron Pac managed to pay careful attention to the successful establishment of the Camaldolese in Pažaislis.

This book discusses the main liturgical and economic aspects of life at Pažaislis. The key aim is to present not only the most important stages of Pažaislis history, and the events that led to the biggest turning points, but also to reveal the typical daily life of the Camaldolese – how they lived in Pažaislis and what they lived for. Their liturgy was closely connected to that of the other monasteries based on the Rule of Saint Benedict, although they had their own traditions and certain differences. The methods of how the novices were accepted and how they were taught are described

in this book. The surviving material on the Pažaislis Monastery 1717–1757 provides more details about those who wanted to become Camaldolese monks, how they fared and the difficulties newcomers faced. Upon their arrival, newcomers were introduced at a chapter meeting, where their abilities were evaluated and they were allowed to experience life in the monastery for a little while. After this, the candidates were admitted to the novitiate (if they were not refused), but under different statuses. The eternal vows were given by the “father monks” (initially clerics) and “brother converts”, while the “brother oblates” were accepted without making the eternal vows but by assuming similar conditions to those of the other monks in the hermitage. According to the statistics from the Polish and Lithuanian Camaldolese province, the absolute majority of members consisted of father monks and clerics (who could become father monks after spending 5 years in the monastery), while the number of brother converts and brother oblates was significantly lower and totalled less than a third of all the monks. In total, about a quarter of all the novices in the province were accepted to Pažaislis, while a larger majority were accepted to the Camaldolese monastery of Krakow.

Upon entering the monastery, the Camaldolese renounced their secular life and dedicated themselves to following a new course. Before being admitted to the monastery, they had to settle all their legal and economic affairs. Upon entering the monastery, they received a new monastic name. As the book reveals, the names of the monks were chosen according to different traditions: some of them dated back to hermits from the early ages of Christianity, as these sainted hermits who travelled to deserts to seek complete asceticism were important figures for the Camaldolese. However, the monks were also given the names of the saints related to St. Benedict or St. Romuald and their followers. There was also a unique tradition that was not followed elsewhere: the monks of the Camaldolese provinces of Poland and Lithuania were often given the names of missionaries (the Five Brother Martyrs, Bruno, Boniface and Bogumil) or of local revered saints (Florian, Hyacinth, Stanislaus and Wenceslaus).

The Camaldolese monks were not bound to one monastery for a long period of time. They could be transferred to another hermitage if the elders or the monk himself so requested. This allowed better chemistry to be maintained among the monks as those who were dissatisfied or unable to fit in could be transferred elsewhere. The most important positions – such as hermit priests, masters of the novices or supervisors (since the middle of the 18th century) – were appointed during the

General Chapter Meetings in the hermitage of Monte Corona. The lesser duties (sacristan, archivist, librarian, novice examiner, brother instructor, cook, baker, nurse of the sick, gatekeeper and others) were appointed in the local hermitage. This practice was established in the Rule of Saint Benedict, making it a very old tradition. Likewise, there were established customs when it came to caring for the sick and burying the dead. Discipline and the observance of rules were supervised in the monastery with the help of visitors. Once a year (and every two years, since the middle of the 18th century), the Vicar General (who holds a position similar to the heads of the provincial monasteries) visited all the provincial monasteries with his two assistants, interviewing the monks and writing down his comments. They were very different, which shows that the routine lives of the monks often included various customs and habits that contradicted the Rule of Saint Benedict and the Camaldolese Constitutions. The greatest controversy occurred in the monastery in 1754, when Father Tiburcia was sent to visit from Italy due to endless complaints. He recorded a number of violations in the province. It is also important to note that, after the Third Partition of the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania in 1795, the Camaldolese of Pažaislis lost a large part of their land (on the left side of the Nemunas River) and became separated from the other Camaldolese monasteries. As a result, they were no longer visited, and it became almost impossible for the monks to be transferred from Pažaislis to other Camaldolese monasteries in the province. This led to a deterioration in the Pažaislis Hermitage, with increasing internal conflicts and violations. The monastery was assigned to the Vilnius diocese, but visitors rarely came and when they did these visitors were not able to solve the internal conflicts. In 1808, the Bishop of Vilnius allowed the monks to eat meat and reduced the other requirements of asceticism, thus distancing the Camaldolese of Pažaislis from their fundamental principles.

Nevertheless, among the Camaldolese of Pažaislis and throughout the province belonging to Poland and Lithuania, there were still a number of bright, educated, well-organised and hardworking monks who strove to be examples to others. Unlike other monasteries, the Camaldolese housed recluses, i.e. monks who voluntarily shut themselves in a cell for a year or longer, seeking to achieve even greater separation and asceticism. Pažaislis had a cell for a recluse as well, which was inhabited by one monk or another from time to time. Some of the monks in this province only lived in Pažaislis for a short time, but some stayed for longer, eventually holding various managerial positions and making important achievements. Some of these monks still rest in the burial

vaults under the chapter room. The biographies dedicated to sharing their knowledge and commemorating these monks are another integral part of Camaldolese history.

The maintenance of each monastery was determined not by liturgy, nor by piety, and not even by the observance of the Rule. Each monastery received certain lands and assets that needed to be used to create added value – i.e. income. The Pažaislis Monastery was not an exception. It owned the land that surrounded the Pažaislis Monastery on both sides of the Nemunas River where folwarks were established, and the inhabitants of the villages on this land were obliged to perform certain duties. The Camaldolese also held large holdings of the Varda near Alytus, and even larger lands of the Dusmenys in Trakai County. The hermitage members had to carry out a lot of economic activities including hiring administrators, participating in the harvest and sowing, supervising that the land was being used properly and taking care of their subordinates in adverse situations (famine, low yields or plague). A considerable part of the monastery's land consisted of forests, which also required maintenance and protection. If properly cultivated, this land could provide additional income for the hermitage. In fact, the monastery received its most important consumables (milk, eggs, cereals and flax) from the surrounding land. The income and expenditure registers from the Pažaislis Monastery reveal the sources of its income and the projects it funded. Although the Camaldolese themselves did not eat meat, they raised cattle, sheep and poultry, which they sold or used for wool. However, the biggest source of profit for the Camaldolese were crops, and the barley, rye, wheat, oats, peas and other crops were consumed in the kitchen of the hermitage as well as being sold. Nonetheless, most of the cereal grains were used to brew beer and vodka – these products were sold in taverns or during fairs at the Pažaislis Monastery, which accounted for the largest share of its income. The Pažaislis Camaldolese did not eat meat (until 1808) but they enjoyed a wide variety of fish. It is known that fish such as pike, bream, tench and perch were transported from the lakes that belonged to the monastery, but the monks also bought fish from the Nemunas fishermen. In addition to the species already mentioned, fish such as salmon, trout, eel, catfish, vimba, asp and zander were bought in large quantities. The Pažaislis Camaldolese also ate vendance caught in Lithuanian lakes, lampreys caught in the Nemunas River at the end of winter, and also enjoyed (albeit less often) the luxury sturgeons. Although turtles were not raised in Pažaislis, turtles were sometimes bought that ended up in the cooking pots of the hermitage. The kitchen also received goods from the gardens and orchards growing on the lands

of the hermitage. Pears and apples are known to have grown in Pažaislis, but there are records of rarer plants as well, such as grapes and walnut trees. In the summer, the church was decorated with locally-grown flowers. There are sources indicating that, in the first half of the 18th century, the Camaldolese also ordered various types of goods from Konigsberg that were transported by the Pregolya and Gilge Rivers and then up the Nemunas River to Pažaislis. Some goods were bought in Konigsberg because they were cheaper, while some were simply unavailable in the town of Kaunas. Herring and wine, dried sea cod, various spices (such as cinnamon and saffron), rice, raisins, sugar and even tobacco were transported to the monastery in barrels from the coast of the Curonian Spit. The variety of goods that reached Pažaislis from Konigsberg, as well as those acquired locally, reveals that life in the hermitage was far from monotonous. Therefore, when we think about Pažaislis, it is best to remember that the history of monastery is enriched not only by the decorations, but also by the colourful history of the Camaldolese.