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Ideas of Franciscan Observancy in the Wall Paintings of the Church of Sts Francis and Bernardino in Vilnius at the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century

Since its foundation in 1469, the convent of Vilnius was not only the first, but also the most important centre of the Friars Minor Observants (in Lithuania commonly called Bernardines). Initially, it was the centre of the vicarage and later became the centre of the separate Lithuanian Bernardine Province. The surviving cycle of the Gothic wall painting in the Church of St Francis and St Bernardino is the only sixteenth-century cycle wall painting of this size in the country, which has been well preserved. The article brings to light the links between the wall painting and the spiritual activities of the Franciscan Observants which are reflected in their localisation in the church interior and the content.

The paintings on the northern wall of the church are divided into three parts corresponding with the vertical wall segmentation (on the lower part of this wall, there are the remains of old Gothic confessionals – the testimonies to the Bernardine soul curing activities). Each part consists of several compositions arranged in sections. Ideas of the *Apostolation* and the fight for Christ's Church are expressed by showing St George and St Christopher themes in the first section of frescoes. In the upper section of the second (central) part of paintings is a rather explicit scene featuring the preparation of the cross for the *Crucifixion of Christ* and the act of crucifixion itself. This section is intended as a contemplation of the sufferings of the Saviour. In the centre of the lower section *St. Francis embraces the cross*. On his right, there are four great saints of the Order: St Bonaventure, St Louis of Toulouse, St Anthony of Padua and St Bernardino of Siena. The third part of the wall decoration is divided into three horizontal sections that, in turn, are vertically split up into separate scenes. In the upper sections are painted scenes *The Dream of Pope Innocent III* and *St Francis and St Dominic, Propitiators of the Wrath of God*; the middle section of this part is also composed of two scenes. They tell of the approval for their activities that the Friars Minor received from Christ and the Church. The left scene unites three episodes related to the stigmata: *St Francis Receives the Stigmata*, *Ecstasy of St Francis* and *The Apparition to Gregory IX*. The right scene depicts *The Confirmation of the Rule*. The bottom section of this part of the wall painting is divided into two sections. On the left side two scenes are composed in a similar way: *St Francis Presents the Rule to the Third Order* and *St Francis Presents the Rule to the Poor Clares*. In the right side of this section, the five first Franciscan martyrs (murdered in Marocco in 1220) are portrayed. The belief in the effectiveness of the apostolic work of the Franciscan friars embodied in the frescoes was based on the understanding of St Francis as the most perfect of Christ's followers, which was fostered by Franciscan theologians from the beginning of the history of the Order of the Friars Minor. The painted scenes also disclose the relationship between the wall painting and the issues which were vital for the Franciscan Order of that time: the interpretations of the Rule, the division of the order into the Observants and Conventuals and their unity, the issue of the Franciscan identity. The frescoes manifest clearly the ideas of the unification of the two branches of the Order of St Francis, Conventuals and Observants, and the consolidation of the observant reform.

The most important aspects of Franciscan theology and spirituality are revealed in the wall paintings: their devotion to Christ, the cults of the sufferings of Christ and of the Blessed Virgin Mary, as patroness of humankind, the understanding of the evangelisation mission of the mendicant orders (first of all, the Franciscan and Dominican orders) as well as the cult of the saints and martyrs. An important feature of the Franciscan evangelical life was its universality expressed in the dissemination and work of its three orders (friars, nuns and lay men and women). The subject of the three orders is clearly seen in the frescoes of Bernardino Church in Vilnius where St Francis is presented as the founder of the three orders. The early sixteenth century frescoes in the church are original and interesting in the context of the art of Europe from an iconographic aspect. The imagery in the wall painting has been identified, their literary

sources partly established (as well as part of the original graphic images), which disclose a close link between the frescoes with Franciscan literature and German woodcuts. Although most of the compositions are based on the original imagery of woodcuts, the common ideological programme which they create is unique and closely connected with concrete time and local reality. It is a rather valuable document of the Franciscan missions in Eastern Europe.