

Times of Uncertainty: Rituals of Protection Against Natural and Social Disasters in Lithuania

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Abstract: Many factors in human life, such as illness, natural disasters, economic, social and political instability, and war and occupation, cause a feeling of uncertainty, both on an individual and on a communal level. In coping with various uncertainties that are present in everyday life, individuals and communities use various strategies. Faced with danger or a crisis, people traditionally looked to divine grace for protection and security. The article focuses on ways to cope with uncertainty by means of faith and religion, namely, making and fulfilling a promise, making votive offerings, building a cross and visiting sacred places. These practices formed a symbolic ritual of protection that created a sense of comfort and security. In addition, the role of religious imagery in protection rituals is highlighted. The question whether traditional forms of ritual still exist today, or whether people cope with danger or distress in other ways, is also highlighted.

Keywords: crosses, divine intercession, patron saints, religious imagery, votive offerings

Many factors in today's life, such as the Covid-19 pandemic and other serious illnesses, climate change, economic crises, social and political instability, and wars and occupations cause a feeling of uncertainty on an individual and

a communal level. Individuals and communities use various strategies to cope with the uncertainties present in their everyday lives.

The aim of this paper is to highlight ways of coping with the uncertainty caused by natural and social disasters (disease, epidemics, fire, war, occupation, etc.) on both individual and communal levels. I will discuss ways of coping with uncertainty by means of faith and religion mostly used in the early 20th century. The research object is the material expression of faith; in the case of Lithuania, it is the erection of crosses and the choice of certain religious images. I will also discuss whether traditional forms of ritual still exist today, or whether people cope with danger in other ways.

This article is based on fieldwork carried out in Lithuania since 2010, as well as an analysis of archival data and publications. During my fieldwork on the cross-crafting tradition, informants often told stories about God's grace and divine help in extreme situations, such as illness, fire, war or the Soviet occupation. When providing facts about crosses and shrines, informants consistently emphasised the specific reason for their construction – recovery from an illness, protection of the harvest or escape from a fire – and pointed to God's grace. While these narratives mostly cover the period from the first half of the 20th century, recent accounts from informants, especially those about recovering from serious illnesses, show that traditional methods for coping with uncertainty and distress are still used today, as narratives about divine grace continue to circulate.

The material was collected through semi-structured and unstructured interviews. Some of the data collected can be found in my monograph and articles on the cross-crafting tradition (Urbonienė 2011, 2014, 2015, 2016).

In Lithuanian historiography, the problem of coping with uncertainty can mostly be traced in articles that discuss the purpose and intention of erecting crosses and shrines (Milius 1992, 1995, 1997; Počiulpaitė 2001). They provide data on reasons connected with illness, epidemics or natural disasters. In aiming to discuss the topic from the point of view of uncertainty, I also look at the intentions behind building crosses, as well as at making individual or communal promises, and making offerings seeking divine intercession.

Some facts about erecting religious monuments, placing votive offerings at sacred sites and intentions of asking for divine grace in the face of serious illness or other disasters were presented in a publication of work by researchers from Poland, Hungary and Slovakia (Bedyński & Mazur-Hanaj 2011). The role of religious imagery in everyday life, in seeking security in the face of danger or a fundamental change in life (rite of passage), is discussed in the work of David Morgan (1998). Some aspects of using religious artefacts for seeking divine help are analysed by Colleen McDannell (1995).

FACING ILLNESS AND EPIDEMICS

Uncertainty is commonly experienced by many people during epidemics or when facing a serious illness. Such situations inflict a significant level of distress on an individual or a community (in the case of epidemics and pandemics). The recent Covid-19 pandemic caused great psychological distress to many people globally.

Nowadays, people cope with the distress caused by serious illness by using modern means of recovery: they go to medical institutions, search for information on the internet and use medicines. Some choose traditional ways, such as healing by natural means (herbs, poultices, heat). In cases where medicine and natural healing do not help, or in the case of prolonged illness, some people turn to their faith, and make vows or offerings when praying for divine help.

These practices of making vows and votive offerings were widespread in Lithuania in the first half of the 20th century; examples can also be traced during the Soviet era and even today. One way to fulfil a vow was to build a cross or a miniature shrine at a particular place, or to make votive offerings in vow-making sites or in places regarded as miraculous. Religious people believed that making such an offering would help them to obtain God's grace to recover from an illness and prevent other misfortunes.

In fulfilling vows to heal, people erected crosses before or after their recovery. This is evidenced by the case of a man with a wound in his leg that would not heal who, in the 1920s, erected a shrine with a statuette of St Roch, the patron saint of the sick and invalids and asked for the saint's help. As the story goes, after awhile the wound healed (Končius 1933: 47). Another example from the beginning of the 20th century shows that in the village of Kulūpėnai (Kretinga district) a father vowed to build a shrine and a cross if his daughter, who was seriously ill with scarlet fever, recovered. After the girl recovered, the father built a shrine and a cross at a crossroads in 1914 (LNM, Eneg 17966). Another example from the Soviet period, when it was not safe to build new religious monuments, shows that people fulfilling their vows usually repaired or rebuilt old crosses or shrines instead of building new ones. Such was the case of a villager from Zorūbai (Telšiai district), who in 1953 made a promise that if she recovered from a serious illness, she would rebuild the old shrine that stood at a crossroads near the village. When she received divine grace and recovered, she fulfilled her promise and rebuilt the shrine (Elena, personal communication, July 24, 2013).

In the first half of the 20th century, it was common to choose specific locations to erect a religious monument depending on the intention. In cases of vows for recovering from an illness, people used to site the cross or the shrine by the roadside, believing that the prayers of passers-by would reinforce their supplications and help them to seek God's intercession for a faster recovery (Antalkis-Mikalauskas 1991: 15). It was also believed that in asking God's help

to cure a serious illness, a person should erect a new cross in an old cemetery or in a holy place. According to ethnographic material, in the early 20th century parents who had lost babies or children would build a cross or a shrine in an old cemetery, hoping for God's grace in raising their surviving children (LNMMB RKR, F 165-13: 59, 78). This practice can be found on rare occasions in our day, too. I recorded several such cases during fieldwork. For example, one interviewee showed me a small shrine with sculptures of the Virgin Mary of Grace and an angel standing in the old cemetery in the village of Nevočiai (Šilalė district). It was built around 1990 by a father whose baby died shortly after birth, with the intention of seeking God's grace for the other children to grow up to be healthy (Jadvyga, personal communication, August 13, 2003).



Figure 1. A cross built in 2004 at a homestead in the village of Guostagalīs.

Photograph by Skaidrē Urbonienē, 2012.

Today, when building a cross or a miniature shrine for their health, people do not attach much importance to the place where the cross should be erected. They usually build it near their home or on their own land, so that they can visit it often and look after it. This was the case with an informant in the village of Guostagalis (Pakruojis district). In 2004, she erected a cross on her homestead seeking divine help for her husband who was seriously ill at the time (Figure 1). According to the informant, the cross now reminds her of divine help and presence during the difficult and stressful time of her husband's illness (Elena, personal communication, May 26, 2012).

Another way of seeking God's protection in the event of an illness was to go to a place that was famous for miracles and perform certain rituals there. It was believed that visiting such places could cure various diseases and wounds. Sick people often went to a specific spring or tree known for its miraculous healing power, or to a church or a local chapel with a miraculous image of a particular patron saint believed to cure certain illnesses. The images were usually of the Virgin Mary, or a patron saint of the sick, such as St Roch.

In the countryside, these miraculous images, mostly statues, were dressed in clothes and had all sorts of offerings placed near them, such as candles, mirrors, religious pictures, paper flowers, ribbons, scarves, beads, rings, needles, rosaries and other things. These objects were votive offerings made for a specific intention (usually a recovery), or in gratitude for grace received. In an ecclesiastical environment, people usually made votive offerings in the shape of the afflicted part of the body (such as silver plates in the shape of a leg, an arm, etc.) for the miraculous image. In rural culture, offerings were simpler, but made in a targeted way, according to the nature of the illness. For example, mirrors were offered to keep the eyes healthy, scarves and necklaces to prevent sore throats. Needles were offered against colic, and rings to ease pain in fingers. Ribbons were left to heal headaches and various wounds. Other offerings, like religious pictures, flowers and candles, were given for various intentions or as a sign of gratitude (Urbonienė 2011: 187–188). It was believed that making such an offering would help a person receive God's grace and be cured of an illness.

In order to be healed, people also tied ribbons or pieces of fabric to sculptures of Christ, the Virgin Mary and saints who were believed to be guardians against certain diseases. A ribbon or a strip of fabric was usually tied to the same part of the statue that was affected, for example, a leg, a hand, the neck, the head, etc. Moreover, in order to be healed, a sick person had to tie the ribbon around the sore spot and pray by walking three times around the shrine or church on his or her knees, and then leave the ribbon by the miraculous image (Almonaitis 1994: 34; Rūkštelė 1941: 3). There are many examples in ethnographic literature of people being cured after performing such rituals. These cases show elements of sympathetic magic, based on the principle of similarity: actions on one object can have a similar effect on another.



Figure 2. The spring near Lake Vištytis.

Photograph by Skaidrė Urbonienė, 2021.

Furthermore, some trees, stones and springs were revered as sacred places, imbued with miraculous healing power. Most often, this power was linked to local legends of miraculous recovery after using a spring's water or to the apparitions of the Virgin Mary on a stone or a tree, after which it gained the power of healing. These places became sites where various offerings were made in order to obtain divine intercession. It was believed that a sore spot had to be washed with water from a miraculous spring. Or a sick person had to touch a holy stone or tree, and rub the sore spot with the bark of the tree, or break a small piece from a stone and rub it on the sore spot. Today their power is still associated with the ability to restore health. This can be seen in places famous for miracles (by springs, trees and stones) where up until the present day, offerings like candles, rosaries and religious pictures are left. Also, crosses are erected near them as offerings, and small shrines and crucifixes are placed on nearby trees. For example, a spring near Lake Vištytis (Vilkaviškis district) is known to have healing powers, so people go there and erect crosses, or leave small crosses, coins and pictures, hoping to be healed (Figure 2). A stone in the village of Zigmantiškiai (Pakruojis district) is associated with an apparition of the Virgin Mary. According to a local legend, the Virgin Mary appeared to

shepherds on this stone, and her footprint is still visible. Informants say that even today locals pray by this stone, walk around it on their knees, and break pieces off and take them home to rub on aching parts of the body (Figure 3).



Figure 3. The stone in the village of Zigmantiškiai.

Photograph by Skaidrė Urbonienė, 2020.

Respondents who made votive offerings at miraculous sites confirmed that they felt the close presence of God in their lives.

Places famous for miracles are known in various Christian countries. They are mostly located near springs, trees and stones, and similar customs and rituals are performed there (Bedyński & Mazur-Hanaj 2011: 73–75, 83, 155, 200; Rancane 2015: 251–252).

If illness causes fear, distress and insecurity in the life of an individual, then epidemics are a particular adversity, a great threat to both the individual and the community. In the case of epidemics, it was the community, not the individual, that took measures to prevent the epidemic. In Lithuania, the common way of averting an impending disaster was for the whole community to build a double cross, known as a plague cross or a Caravaca cross.¹



Figure 4. A Caravaca cross with a miniature shrine and a statuette of St Roch in it, built in 1968 (renovated in 2001), in the churchyard of Sutkai church.

Photograph by Aloyzas Petrašiūnas, 2004. Photograph archive of the Lithuanian Culture Research Institute.

Rural people believed that a contagious disease (such as the plague) was brought by individuals arriving from elsewhere, or that the plague itself walked in the form of a man; therefore, Caravaca crosses were placed on high ground or at crossroads, so that the plague would see this protective sign from afar and would stay away from villages and towns when travelling (Milius 1995: 298). To increase protection, a statue of St Roch, the saviour from infectious diseases, was sometimes placed in a miniature shrine on the trunk of a Caravaca cross (Urbonienė 2015: 155, 268). In the early 20th century, when an epidemic of dysentery swept across Lithuania (in 1913, 1917 and 1919), a number of Caravaca crosses were erected, but the tradition of building Caravaca crosses to ward off epidemics began to wane from the 1920s (Surdokaitė 2008: 40). The decline in the demand for the construction of Caravaca crosses was determined by the improvement of living and sanitary conditions, and the development of medical science and education. Only isolated cases of erecting such crosses are known in the second half of the 20th century (Surdokaitė 2008: 40), and their intentions moved away from protection from contagious diseases towards protection from all kinds of illnesses. An example is the Caravaca cross in the churchyard of the church at Sutkai (Šakiai district), built in 1968 (Figure 4). A statuette of St Roch has been placed in a miniature shrine attached to the trunk of the cross, and an inscription appeals to the saint to protect patients and help them in sickness (Smilingytė-Žeimienė 2007: 488).

Although these crosses were traditionally built to protect people from the plague and other epidemics, their function was expanded to protect against natural disasters (storms and hail) that could destroy crops and cause famine, as well as various other major disasters, such as war and the misfortunes it brings. Ethnographic material and fieldwork show that at the beginning of the 20th century the idea that the Caravaca cross protected against three great catastrophes, plague, war and famine, was still prevalent (LNMMB RKR, F 165-13: 33-34).

The protective power of the Caravaca cross is still remembered today when people seek protection against diseases such as AIDS or Covid. A Caravaca cross erected in 1990 in the churchyard of the church at Plungė is dedicated to the protection of people from the disease of AIDS, as well as from war, plague and famine (it bears the dedication "From war, famine and plague, and the disease of AIDS, save us, Lord").

During the Coronavirus pandemic, the well-known Lithuanian folk sculptor Adolfas Teresius made a Caravaca cross and erected it at the Šiluva-Tytuvėnai road junction (Raseiniai district) in 2020 (Figure 5), thanking God for protection and asking for blessing during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. To reinforce the notion of the cross as protection from pandemics, the craftsman depicted St Roch, a saint who safeguarded people from infectious diseases, and the Eye of Providence, symbolising the all-seeing, all-protecting, omnipresent God. Moreover, following the additional concept of the Caravaca cross as protection against war and famine, Teresius incorporated these two notions in the inscription carved on the cross, and added a request for help against fire.



Figure 5. A Caravaca cross carved by Adolfas Teresius in 2020, at the Šiluva-Tytuvėnai crossroads.

Photograph by Adolfas Teresius, 2020.

FACING FIRE AND OTHER NATURAL DISASTERS

In a rural community, natural disasters, such as fire (mainly from lightning), which destroyed people's homes and possessions, as well as drought, hail and storms, which were a great threat to harvests, caused a state of uncertainty, insecurity and distress.

In the first half of the 20th century, wooden buildings dominated Lithuanian villages and small towns, so the risk of fire was great, as flames from one building could spread quickly to other buildings, and even to the whole village. Fire was a major threat not only to individual families but also to a whole community.



Figure 6. The monument to St Florian built in 1894 (renovated in 1990) in Plungė.

Photograph by Skaidrė Urbanienė, 2021.

In order to avoid this disaster, and to extinguish the fire as quickly as possible, people turned to God and to saints that protected against fire, such as St Florian and St Agatha. A community would raise money and erect a monument with a statue of St Florian. It was believed that if a fire occurred several times in the same place, a monument with a statue of St Florian should be erected in the village, town or homestead. According to this belief, after several fires damaged many settlements at the end of the 19th and in the early 20th century, monuments to St Florian were erected in the towns of Plungė (Figure 6), Tirkšliai, Plateliai, Alsėdžiai, Varniai, Švėkšna, Kvėdarna, Utena and Tauragnai, and in the villages of Milgaudžiai, Balsiai, Būdviečiai, et cetera (Urbonienė 2015: 265). Monuments to St Florian were also erected by individual families to thank God that the fire had passed their house by.

Thus, until the first half of the 20th century, the main way of protecting against fire in villages and towns was faith in a form of prayer and the erection of a monument with a statue of a saint. Indeed, a monument with a statue of St Florian or St Agatha was an offering in expectation of protection or in thanksgiving for grace that was to come or that had already come. This way of protecting from fire was also practised in other countries, such as Poland (Mironiuk-Nikolska 2010: 59), Slovakia (Kovačevičová & Schreiber 1971: 27), Austria (Wieninger 1976: 8, 10, 22) and Hungary (Bedyński & Mazur-Hanaj 2011: 116), etc.

In Lithuania, monuments to St Florian were usually tall, and stood in the village or town square, as it was believed that St Florian had to see all the buildings. If a monument with a statue of St Florian stood on the edge of a village, the statue faced the village or the town, so that the saint could see the whole settlement (LNMMB RKR, F 168-39: 22; Vyšniauskaitė 1993: 78-79).

St Agatha was also considered to be a guardian against fire. She was believed to have the power to banish fire from a village or a town. For this reason, monuments to her were usually erected on the outskirts of a settlement, and her statue was placed so that it faced the opposite side of the village or town, because it was believed that in the event of a fire, the saint would drive the fire out of the settlement (Počiulpaitė 2001: 650). One such monument with a statue of St Agatha still stands at a crossroads on the outskirts of the town of Raguva.

Bread was (and still is) blessed in churches on St Agatha's Day, and it was believed that so-called Agatha's bread could extinguish a fire, heal people or animals, safeguard a person during travel, save people in war, et cetera (Vyšniauskaitė 1993: 25). Similar beliefs are found throughout Europe (Jöckle 1997: 14-15).

Two ways of extinguishing a fire with St Agatha's bread are recorded in ethnographic material (Balys 1998: 19). One way is to run around a burning building with the bread and throw it into the middle of the fire. The bread will then draw the fire into the centre of the burning house, and it will not spread sideways. This method was used when there were other buildings in close proximity

around the burning building. The second method is to run around the building with the bread, and then to run to the side with no buildings, so that the fire follows and goes away. This method was advisable if there was an empty field on at least one side of the burning building. The second method testifies to the concept of St Agatha's power to drive fire out of a village or a town.

Today, many communities in villages and small towns have renewed or restored their old St Florian monuments. They now serve as a decoration of the town or the village, a testimony to a vanishing religious tradition, but no longer as a place to seek God's help from fire. In the modern world, this disaster is managed and controlled by modern means. The monuments and their surroundings also serve as a place where firefighters celebrate the day of their profession, which is 4 May, the feast day of St Florian, the patron saint of firemen.

Farmers used similar methods to ensure the protection of crops against drought, hail and storms as in the case of fire. They erected monuments to certain saints, such as St Isidore, the patron saint of ploughmen. He was believed to protect crops from natural disasters (drought, hail, heavy rain) and pests, and to promote the germination of grain (Končius 1965: 58; Vyšniauskaitė 1993: 49). According to this concept, monuments with a statue of St Isidore were erected near cultivated fields.

To protect livestock, especially horses, farmers turned to another saint, St George. Monuments with a statue of St George were usually erected in pastures where the saint could watch over cattle. In folk piety, St George was assumed to be not only the patron saint of cattle but also of crops.

Some rituals performed in the 19th and early 20th century on the feast of St George (23 April) are mentioned in ethnographic literature, such as praying and singing at crosses with an image of St George (Buračas 1939: 378), driving animals around crosses standing in cultivated fields (Balys 1993: 160), or walking around the fields in prayer (Jucevičius 1959: 199). These rituals had the aim of protecting the crop and the livestock from danger. In addition, eggs, butter, meat products and money were offered in churches on St George's Day to ask St George to protect farmers' main assets, their livestock and crops (Vyšniauskaitė 1993: 73). Similar customs can be found across a wide section of eastern and northern, and part of western, Europe (Hiemäe 1996).

The tradition in Lithuania to protect fields, crops and cattle from danger by planting religious monuments has not survived to our days. It is evidenced by the memories of local people and by records in ethnographic literature and archival material, and is shown in photographs.

FACING SOCIAL DISASTERS (WARS, OCCUPATIONS)

War is one of the greatest disasters affecting individuals, families, communities and societies. Therefore, when war was imminent or already under way, people sought protection in their faith: praying, making offerings and building

crosses. We can still find crosses in Lithuania erected in the first half of the 20th century by soldiers returning from the First World War. They often have inscriptions explaining why the cross was erected. The reasons were mostly promises made by young men leaving for the war, who vowed to build a cross if God helped them to return home safely.

One of several examples recorded during fieldwork in northern Lithuania is the story of a cross standing in the fields of the village of Barvainiai (Pakruojis district) on the site of a former homestead (Figure 7). It was built in 1934 by a man who fulfilled a vow he had made in 1915. The man promised to build a cross on his homestead as an offering if God helped him to return home safely from the war. He returned safely and kept his promise in 1934. Later, during the Soviet occupation, this man and his family were exiled to Siberia, and when they returned from exile, they found the cross still standing on their homestead. The family members believed it was a sign that God had protected them in exile in Siberia, just as God had protected the head of the family during the First World War (PRVB, Materials III: 119).

Similar cases of crosses being built in the 1950s and 1960s to thank God for His protection during the Second World War have been recorded as well. Figure 8 shows a wooden cross built in 1947 to thank God that all the men of the family returned safely from the Second World War.

There were also some utilitarian intentions and requests, such as the protection of buildings during wars. One such promise was made by a resident of the village of Vozbutai (Jurbarkas district), who promised to put up a cross if his house was not destroyed during the Second World War. The house remained intact, and the man put up a cross in 1946 (LII BR, F 73, neg. 37339).

War is a fearful time for the whole family, faced with family members leaving for the war. To cope with this danger, people often tried to reinforce the hope for safety by giving gifts to those who were leaving home. These gifts were usually religious images of the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ, or a particular patron saint. In many cases, it was also a piece of St Agatha's bread, as it was believed that holy bread provided divine protection not only from fire, but from many great disasters, including war (Vyšniauskaitė 1993: 25). Leaving home for war has the meaning of a parting ritual, a rite of passage. As David Morgan put it,

in essence all rites of passage are designed to safeguard the individual during the critical period of transformation. The purpose of the gift given on the occasion of leave-taking or any other fundamental change in the familiar patterns of life is to preserve the sense of divine presence that is manifested in the rite of passage itself (Morgan 1998: 175).



Figure 7. A cross built in 1934 in the village of Barvainiai.

Photograph by Oksana Stegvilaitė, 2019. Juozas Paukštelis Public Library of the Pakruojis District.



Figure 8. A cross built in 1947 in the village of Kareiviškis (Pakruojis district).

Photograph by Romas Čepulionis, 2019. Juozas Paukštelis Public Library of the Pakruojis District.

The Soviet occupation was also a major disaster in Lithuania, adding to the difficulties of the Second World War. The first postwar decade and the Soviet occupation were a particularly difficult and dangerous time for most of the population, bringing fear of the present and uncertainty about the future. During this difficult period, a number of crosses were erected as offerings to God, praying for protection from repression and exile to Siberia. An example is a still-standing cross with an inscription in the village of Mančiagirė (Varėna district), erected in 1948 by the village community in the hope of divine protection in the face of the hardships of the postwar period and Soviet repressions (Figure 9).



Figure 9. A cross built in 1948 (renovated in 2009) in the village of Mančiagirė.

Photograph by Skaidrė Urbonienė, 2021.

RELIGIOUS IMAGERY IN RITUALS OF PROTECTION

As was witnessed by many respondents, religious imagery plays an important role in the Catholic faith and rituals. Respondents recalled miraculous experiences with a particular image of the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ, or particular saints. Some were healed after fulfilling a vow to build a cross or a shrine to a certain saint, or received a favour after praying before a particular image; others were saved from fire or protected during the war by a picture of a saint or a symbolic object (such as a piece of St Agatha's bread). Small pictures of saints and objects such as St Agatha's bread had the character of talismans, as they were believed to have a protective power. In the words of Colleen McDannell, "people need objects to help establish and maintain relationships with supernatural characters, family and friends" (McDannell 1995: 272).

Even today, people choose a symbolic sign of protection, such as sculptures of the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ, particular saints, and especially angels, and place them inside or outside buildings (Figure 10). One wood carver said that in 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine and the war began, statuettes of angels were in great demand at St Casimir's Fair in Vilnius. He sold almost all his angels in the first two days of the fair. In his opinion, with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, people began to look more intensely for signs of symbolic security, so a sculpture of an angel seemed to be a very relevant object, both as an interior decoration and as a symbol of protection. According to the craftsman, an angel is associated with goodness and spirituality, so it is natural that people want to have an image of an angel in their home. At the 2023 fair, he noticed almost the same demand for sculptures of angels as in the previous year, because the war in Ukraine was still going on, and, being close to Russia, Lithuanians felt insecure (personal communication, March 6, 2022; March 4, 2023).

From the cases described in this article, it is evident that in rituals of protection, many objects, regardless of their size, weight and shape, were used as votive offerings. It could be a large outdoor cross or a small crucifix, a statue of a saint, a religious picture, a rosary, beads, ribbons, flowers, candles, money, etc. The practice of making votive offerings is found in all religions. As stated by Ittai Weinryb, "votive offerings are made to signify through matter the hopes, dreams, desires, and anxieties of a devotee within the structures of any religion" (Weinryb 2017: 102). Making vows and votive offerings were designed to solve a particular, mostly very practical, problem. As David Morgan pointed out, "votive practice is very practical in its efforts, focusing on pledging devotion in return for assistance with a difficult situation or thanking the saint for his help at a dire moment" (Morgan 2017: 110).



Figure 10. A sculpture of an angel on the wall of a house in the village of Modžiūnai.

Photograph by Skaidrė Urbonienė, 2023.

CONCLUSION

Uncertainty is a universal human experience, whether it is caused by the unpredictability of natural forces, economic, social or political conditions, or incomplete knowledge of how to deal with these factors. As this study has shown, during times of crisis in Lithuania, such as epidemics, fires, war and occupation, individuals and communities have historically found consolation in faith. The tradition of erecting crosses and shrines, and making votive offerings, is an act of devotion. It is also a material expression of hope, and a ritual of protection, providing stability and comfort to individuals and communities in times of crisis or danger.

Although people today deal with danger in different ways, mostly using modern technology, advanced medicine and scientific knowledge, this research demonstrates that traditional coping methods have not disappeared. Instead, they have adapted. The contemporary erection of Caravaca crosses to ward off diseases such as AIDS and Covid-19, and the increased demand for angel sculptures during the war in Ukraine show that people continue to seek a sense of symbolic security through tangible, faith-based acts. These practices are living traditions that evolve to address new anxieties, whether arising from a new virus or a geopolitical crisis. The persistence of these practices in an increasingly secular world also suggests that modern anxieties about illness, war and instability can drive people back to familiar, time-tested religious rituals that provide comfort and a sense of security.

This analysis reveals that religious rituals, both old and new, and their material expressions are adaptive strategies for managing uncertainty. They testify to the human need to find security through faith, and that tradition continues to play a significant role in the modern world.

NOTE

- 1 The name 'Caravaca cross' is derived from the town of Caravaca de la Cruz in Spain, where, according to a legend, in 1231 a double cross carried by two angels appeared miraculously on the altar of a church. As news of this miraculous crucifix spread, many people travelled to see it, and a multitude of miracles were attributed to it. It gained a reputation for healing and being powerful protection against danger (Galitzin n.d.). When an epidemic of plague spread in 1546 in Trent city (Italy), the miraculous cross from Caravaca de la Cruz was recalled. People turned to the cross to seek divine help. The cross safeguarded Trent city, and the news spread across Europe. As epidemics of plague raged in Europe, by the 17th century the concept of the Caravaca cross as protection against the plague gained widespread recognition throughout Catholic Europe, and people began to build Caravaca crosses in the open air (Surdokaitė 2008: 31). From then on, this form of cross was believed to be protection not only against the plague but against other epidemics (cholera, typhus, dysentery) as well.

ARCHIVAL SOURCES

LII BR – Manuscripts of the Library of the Lithuanian Institute of History

LNMMB RKR – Department of Rare Books and Manuscripts of the Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania

LNM – National Museum of Lithuania

PRVB, Materials III – Juozas Paukštelis Public Library of the Pakruojis District, Materials of the local history expedition III, 2019: 1–565.

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