

ČTK | 29 December 2009

Prague, Dec 28 (CTK) - Hundreds of thousands of artifacts have been stolen from Czech churches and chapels and some 90 percent of the total of 5500 sacral facilities have been burgled since 1989 when the communist regime collapsed, Vladimir Kelnar, from the Prague Archbishopric, has told CTK.

The worst situation in this respect is in west, east, north and central Bohemia where many churches have been completely plundered and are practically empty now.

"About a half of Gothic and Renaissance works of art and roughly one-third of baroque artifacts have disappeared (from Czech churches) in the past 20 years," diocesan heritage preserver Kelnar told CTK.

He called it an irreplaceable loss of the nation's memory.

Experts say diocesan museums could help protect the remaining church sights.

However, only two of them have been in the Czech Republic so far - in Litomerice, north Bohemia and in Olomouc, north Moravia. The third museum is being built in Plzen, west Bohemia, and similar museums are planned in Hradec Kralove, east Bohemia, and in Brno, too.

Churches in cemeteries and pilgrim places are exposed to burglaries the most as they are not visited so frequently, and this is why the thefts are not reported in time.

In 2002 a total of 277 thefts of sandstone statues and other funeral architectonic elements from graveyards and pilgrim places were reported. Last year the police registered 144 such cases.

This crime rate has considerably increased in the country since 1989, among others in reaction to a rising interest of foreign traffickers in Czech art.

In 1989 the police dealt with 51 burglaries into facilities housing antiquities and artifacts, a year later the number increased to 611 and in 1991 it was almost 1000.

"Since then the number of thefts of church and cultural items has been gradually decreasing. On the contrary, the number of thefts of artifacts in flats and recreational facilities has increased," senior police officer Jaroslav Zahalka said.

However, in many churches there is nothing more left to be stolen and their administrators often do not report minor thefts at all as such cases are rarely solved, Kelnar pointed out. The church does not keep statistics of thefts and its artifacts were not sufficiently mapped in the past. The church started registering them only after 1990 and the register has not been completed yet.

Kelnar said the church would be able to protect its heritage itself, but it is problematic now in connection with the unresolved property settlement between the state and the churches. The church has annually had about one million crowns to protect its facilities, which would suffice for the purchase of electronic protection devices for four larger churches.

At present the police are fighting with organised gangs linked to foreign art traffickers that specialise in burglaries into sacral facilities. Their criminal activities have been facilitated by the Czech Republic's entry into the Schengen area of free movement of people within the EU borders in December 2007, Zahalka said.

The highest number of stolen church artifacts from the Czech Republic end up in the neighbouring Austria and Germany, and in Italy and the Netherlands.

Though Czech detectives in cooperation with Interpol have many times succeeded in tracing the stolen items their return to the Czech Republic is often complicated by a different legislation in the EU member countries.

Foreign law enforcement bodies, respecting the principle of "acquisition in good faith," often decide to return a stolen artifact to the person from whom it has been seized, Zahalka pointed out.

*Copyright 2009 by the Czech News Agency (ČTK). All rights reserved.*