

# Lithuania and the Vatican

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On 15 June 1940, when the Soviet Union invaded Lithuania, a small independent country on its Western borders, it transformed one of the Catholic strongholds of Europe into a "Soviet socialist republic". The population of Lithuania was overwhelmingly Catholic (94% in 1940). As in Poland, the Catholic Church had a privileged position within the State during the 1920s and 1930s and the Lithuanian government maintained a close relationship with the Vatican. But in June 1940 all this changed. The Church's position was radically altered when the new Soviet government declared its policy to be "separation of the Church from the State".

The Lithuanian experience demonstrates that "separation" in Soviet terminology in fact means "abolition of the power of the Church, so that it can be controlled by the State". As the authority of the Lithuanian Church was transmitted from Rome, the Soviet regime decided to sever the link with the papacy in order to reduce that authority. Thus, on 25 June 1940, before the elections for an assembly and only ten days after the invasion, the "separation" decree was promulgated. Five days later the Papal Nuncio was expelled from the country. Later, on 3 July 1940, the Concordat (signed originally on 27 September 1927) between Lithuania and the Holy See was abrogated by the Soviet Lithuanian government through the Lithuanian Ambassador to the Holy See. This was the first step in the campaign against the Church. The Church was immediately deprived of all state subsidies and pensions; most church property was confiscated, apart from 7.5 acres around each church and cemetery; the savings of the clergy and the bank accounts of all religious organizations were confiscated. Monastic orders were abolished and monastic buildings confiscated. A large number of monks, nuns and priests were among the thousands deported to Siberia.

Soviet plans to eliminate the influence of the Catholic Church in Lithuania were interrupted in 1941 by the German invasion. In 1944, however, when the Soviet army returned to Lithuania these plans were put into effect.

Catholic societies, publications, and educational work, which had been devastated during the pre-war year of Soviet occupation, did not recover during the period of Nazi rule. Diocesan administration was paralyzed by the arrest and deportation (sometimes the death) of the bishops. Unlike Hungary and the other countries of Eastern Europe, in Lithuania none of the bishops were tried, for by the time the stage was set for these show trials, the Lithuanian hierarchy had been decimated. By the end of 1946 three of the four diocesan bishops and one auxiliary bishop were in Soviet labour camps. Of these, only two survived the next ten years. Bishop V. Borisevicius of Telsiai was shot as a "bourgeois national leader" in 1947, despite the evidence given at his trial by Jewish witnesses whose lives the bishop had saved during the Nazi occupation. Archbishop M. Reinsys of Vilnius received a 25-year sentence and died in the notorious Vladimir prison in 1955. Some Lithuanian Catholics today believe that concerted world action at that time by Catholics, under guidance from their leaders, might have saved the lives of these bishops.<sup>1</sup> Some Lithuanian partisan groups did try to enlist the public support of the Vatican for their struggle against Soviet domination, but such appeals evoked no visible response.<sup>2</sup>

After the death of Stalin in 1953, many returned from the prison camps. Among these were Bishop P. Ramanauskas, who died soon after returning to Lithuania, his health broken by ten years in labour camps, and 80-year-old Bishop T. Matulionis. The return of Bishop Matulionis, his face marked by the suffering of the cross, was like a miracle to the faithful. Although he was not allowed to resume administering his diocese, he could say mass – a fact which the Soviet propaganda machine exploited to illustrate the "freedom" of religion in the USSR.<sup>3</sup> He never regained his health, but remained alive until 1963, a potent spiritual influence and sign of hope to his people to the end.

Bishop Kazimieras Paltarokas of Panevezys did not meet the same fate as the other three diocesan bishops. Some say it was because of his old age. In fact, however, he was younger than Bishop Matulionis and lived on until 1958. Nor did he compromise with the atheists and break the unity of opposition to them. This is revealed in a recent document, published in the *samizdat* journal, the *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church*.<sup>4</sup> This is a letter written by Fr. Pranas Raciunas on 20 March 1974, replying to an attack against him earlier that month in *Kauno Tiesa* (Kaunas Truth). The letter demonstrates the failure of the regime to achieve its aim of cutting off contact between the leadership of the Lithuanian Catholic Church and the Vatican. Fr. Raciunas managed to go to Moscow and contact Fr. Laberge, Chaplain at the American Embassy, "to request that he obtain the Pope's permission to consecrate new bishops for Lithuania". He went "at the request of his spiritual superiors" because Bishop Paltarokas "could not consecrate new bishops

without the permission of the Vatican". This act earned Fr. Raciunas a sentence of 25 years, of which he served 16, without even being brought to trial.

After the purge of the church leadership under Stalin there came a brief respite. On 11 September 1955 Bishop Paltarokas consecrated Julijonas Steponavicius as Bishop of Panevezys and Petras Mazelis as Bishop of Telsiai.<sup>5</sup> The Pope authorized this step and the Soviet authorities did not oppose it. Two years later (25 September 1957) Bishop Matulionis consecrated Vincentas Sladkevicius as Bishop of Kairiadorys. Of these three, only Bishop Mazelis was able to exercise his office.

But this respite did not last long. In 1959 Khrushchev launched an anti-religious campaign. Bishop Steponavicius (born 1911) was one of its victims and in 1961 was exiled to the village of Zagare. At the end of 1971 a group of 134 priests from his diocese of Panevezys claimed that he had been removed because he had "carried out his pastoral duties as a shepherd without compromise".<sup>6</sup> In April 1972 he asked the Soviet government for permission to resume his duties, but Juozas Rugienis, head of Lithuania's branch of the Council for Religious Affairs (the government department dealing with church affairs) turned down the request.<sup>7</sup> Bishop Sladkevicius's term in active office was even shorter. He was consecrated in 1957 when only 37 by Bishop Matulionis, apparently in secret.<sup>8</sup> The authorities barred him from exercising his duties just over a year later (March 1959).

Lithuanian believers have written a number of appeals calling on the Soviet authorities to allow these four bishops to resume their official duties. For example, in July 1974 45 priests from the diocese of Bishop Sladkevicius appealed to the Soviet government. They asked in vain for their bishop to be allowed to exercise his episcopal duties.<sup>9</sup> According to official Vatican sources, however, Bishop Sladkevicius is still said to be in charge of his diocese although this is not true in practise.<sup>10</sup>

Neither the "soft line" of the mid-1950s nor the later, much tougher, atheist policy of Khrushchev won the gains against the Lithuanian Church for which the Soviet authorities had hoped. Of all republics of the Soviet Union, Lithuania remained the most united in its religious loyalties. The Council for Religious Affairs, having gained no advantages from acting against the bishops, adopted a new policy: the elevation of new church leaders who would act in the interests of the Council, while appearing to use their own authority and that of the Church. Such a policy had some success in the case of the Moscow church leadership, both Baptist and Orthodox in the early 1960s.<sup>11</sup> So the Council's policy was now "to divide and rule."

In Lithuania, however, this policy has been a conspicuous failure due to the unity among Lithuanian priests and believers. The conflict between Lithuanian believers and the Soviet authorities, and the resulting

dilemma for the Lithuanian hierarchy, was typified by the reaction to the so-called "Memorandum of 17,000". Between December 1971 and January 1972, over 17,000 Lithuanian Catholics signed a petition addressed to Mr. Brezhnev, protesting against restrictions on religious education, the imprisonment of priests for teaching children, the enforced exile of Bishop Steponavicius and Bishop Sladkevicius and against other forms of discrimination against believers. This "Memorandum" was sent to the UN. The UN took no action, but considerable publicity was achieved in the Western press. The Lithuanian *Chronicle*, which also first appeared in 1971, realized the importance of such publicity and stated: "World opinion supported the 17,000 Catholics who dared publicly to demand their rights. Pope Paul VI in his Easter address remembered the 'church of silence'."<sup>12</sup>

To all intents and purposes the KGB failed to prevent the collection of signatures for the "Memorandum", and as a result instigated a campaign to undermine the influence of the priests who they suspected had organized the enterprise. On 11 April 1972 Rugienis (head of Lithuania's branch of the Council for Religious Affairs) and a Moscow official of the Council called Orlov, summoned all the bishops in office and the administrators of the dioceses. In the opinion of the compilers of the Lithuanian *Chronicle*, the meeting was intended to frighten the church officials into signing a Pastoral Letter which slandered the organizers of the "Memorandum". Two and a half weeks later (30 April) all Lithuanian priests were to cancel their sermons and read the Pastoral Letter instead. The most controversial passage read:

Irresponsible individuals have recently appeared in some parishes. In the name of priests and the faithful they gather signatures near or even inside churches, or sometimes visit homes. They do this on sheets with – or even without – a text [ . . . ]\* Those who gather the signatures later change or add to the text and attach this to the collected signatures. This is fraudulent. We are very surprised that there are believers who sign without knowing the text and without considering the possible results. We must remember that the signing of irresponsible documents affects relations between Church and State and gives rise to misunderstandings. Such activities can bring no good to the Church.<sup>13</sup>

Most priests immediately recognized the hand of the State in such phraseology and, according to the *Chronicle*, few in the end read the full text of the Letter. Some did so under intimidation and others to keep their peace with the State. Some omitted the false passages, while others merely preached as usual. Later in May 1972, a group of Lithuanian priests issued a declaration expressing their disapproval of the Pastoral Letter.<sup>14</sup>

\* This denotes an omission in the text.—Ed.

The stand taken by the priests on this issue had an effect later when the Soviet authorities tried to force the Lithuanian bishops to condemn the Lithuanian *Chronicle*. These attempts failed. Bishop Labukas and Bishop Povilonis were praised in the pages of the *Chronicle* for taking a stand on this issue :

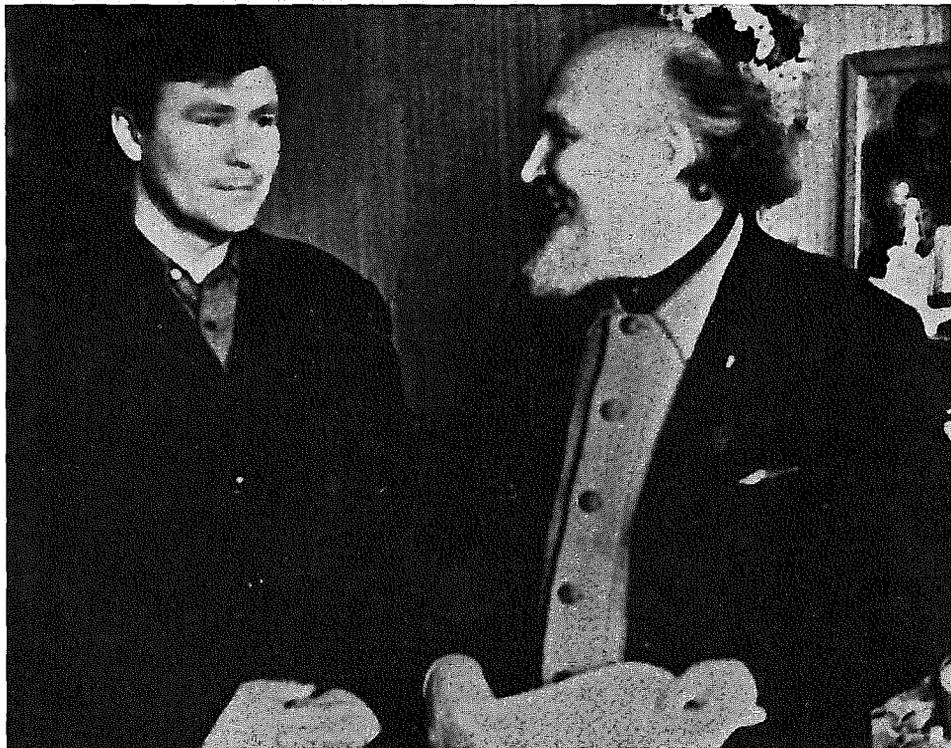
It is no secret that KGB officials came to Bishop Matulaitis-Labukas, Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Kaunas and Vilkauskis, with a demand that he should condemn the *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church* in a pastoral letter. The Bishop refused to satisfy their demands, explaining that such a step would compromise the pastors in the eyes of the faithful, as had already occurred with the attempt to condemn the "Memorandum" with 17,000 signatures [ . . . ] [ . . . ] At the beginning of September, Bishop Labukas and other diocesan bishops received an anonymous letter in the name of a "group of priests of the Diocese of Vilkauskis", in which the "reactionary" clergy of the diocese are criticized. It further contained the demand that when Bishop Labukas was in Rome he should go on Vatican Radio to censure those who were trying to "turn back the wheel of history". The priests of Lithuania do not exclude the possibility that the KGB might force Bishop Labukas to take this letter to the Vatican as evidence of what "real" priests think about the present position of the Lithuanian Catholic Church.<sup>15</sup>

The Bishop, whether or not he was forced to take the letter, did not carry out the demand when he visited the Vatican in 1967. And he may have been influenced by the *Chronicle* itself. The anonymous letter was published in full in the *Chronicle* and then refuted in detail by four letters. These replies denounced the anonymous letter as an attempt to misinform world opinion and the Holy See. They also criticized so-called "progressive" clergy who "collaborate with the KGB, travel to various conferences organized by the communists and proclaim abroad that Lithuanian believers enjoy full freedom of religion".<sup>16</sup>

In an earlier issue of the Lithuanian *Chronicle*, the editors had already referred to such "subservient" clergymen and had expressed some barely veiled criticism of the Vatican for approving the promotion of priests regarded as government pawns :

The faithful of Lithuania have no doubt that it is not out of love that the atheists want to push through for bishoprics candidates lacking credibility among the believing public or among priests. The wishes of the faithful of Lithuania are best expressed in the words of Fr. Stasys Yla : "We want to see a bishop, not a puppet in bishop's robes, but a human being, father and teacher". [ . . . ]

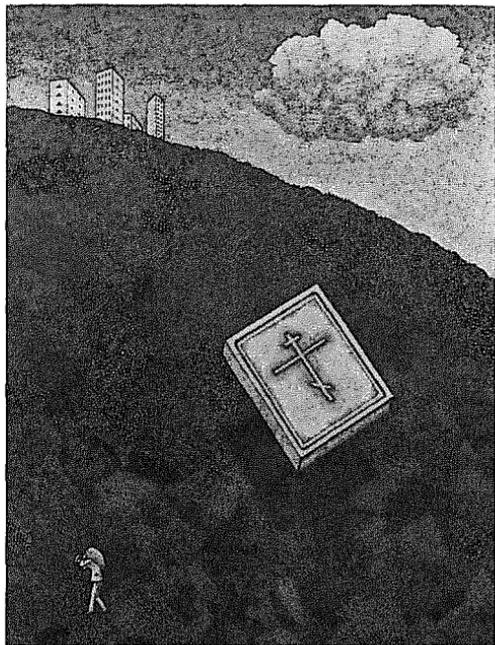
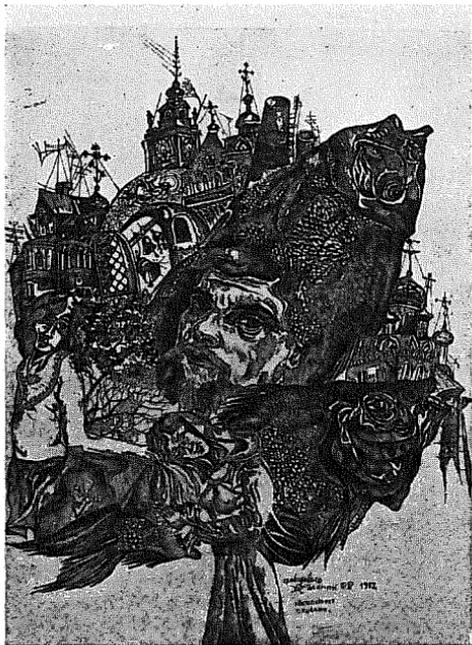
[ . . . ] There is no doubt that the bishops barred from exercising their office have been no less deserving than the bishops who are at their



Vladimir Osipov (*left*), a prominent neo-slavophil, talks to Fr. Dmitri Dudko (*right*).



Igor V. Ogurtsov, leader of the All-Russian Social-Christian Union (1964-67), who was sentenced to 15 years in 1967 when the organization was discovered. (See the article on the neo-slavophiles, pp. 20-26.)



ABOVE LEFT. *Self-Portrait with Fish* (1972) by Vyacheslav Kalinin. Television aerials on the houses seem to echo the crosses on the churches.

ABOVE RIGHT. *Flying Gospel* (1967) by Alexander Kharitonov. The flying gospel, like the cloud moving towards the modern city, brings refreshment to modern man with his burden.

*Self-Portrait* (1970) by Valentina Kropivnitskaya. Behind the half-human beast and the icon of the Mother of God is a Russian village with its churches.



*In Winter* (1973) by Konstantin Bokov. Christ and His Mother rise from the grave in a cemetery dominated by Christ Crucified.

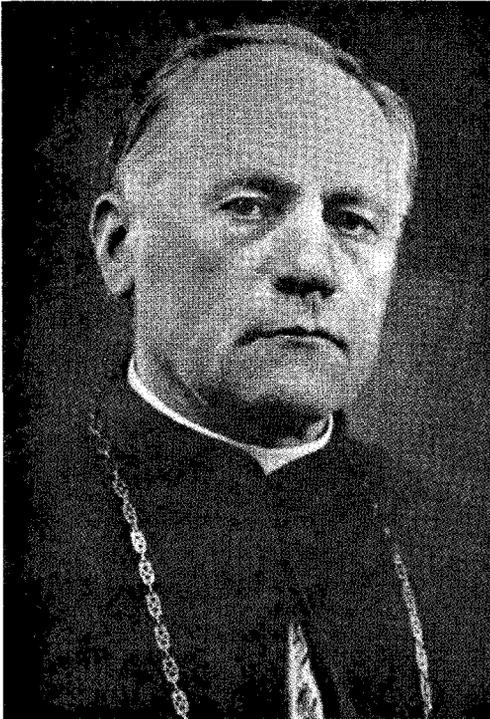
Lithuanian priests return from Siberian prisons to Lithuania. (See article pp. 4-11.)



The same group in clerical dress.

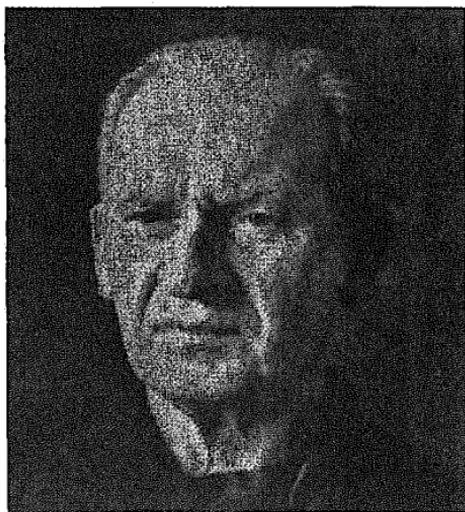
BELOW LEFT. Bishop Matulionis, who lived until 1963, is described as "a potent spiritual influence and sign of hope to his people" (see p. 5).

BELOW RIGHT. Bishop Matulionis in Siberian labour camp.

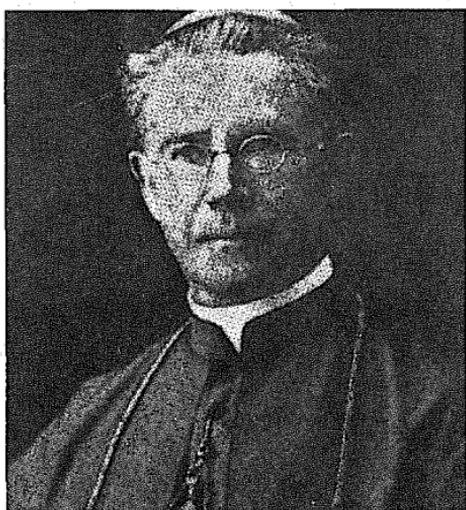




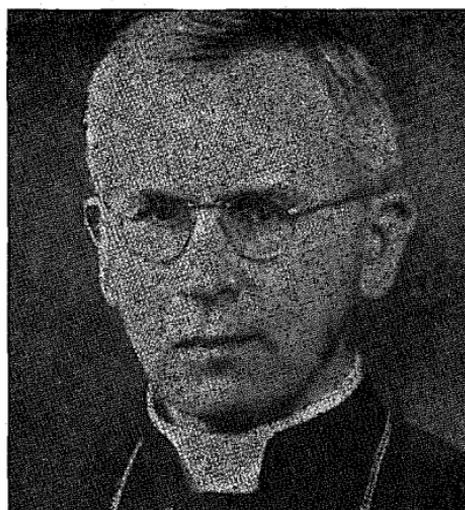
Bishop Ramanauskas who spent ten years in a labour camp.



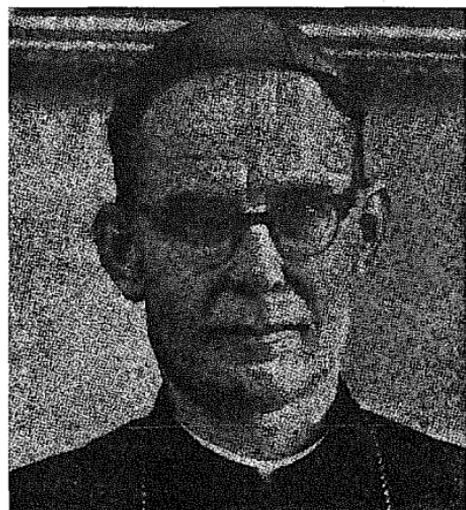
Bishop Ramanauskas returns from the camp, his health broken (see p. 5).



Archbishop Reinius of Vilnius, sentenced to 25 years' hard labour, died in Vladimir prison in 1955 (see p. 5).



Bishop Borisevicius who was shot as a "bourgeois national leader" in 1947 (see p. 5).



Bishop Steponavicius (b. 1911), consecrated in 1955, was exiled in 1961 (see p. 6).



Bishop Sladkevicius (b. 1920), consecrated in 1957, was prevented from exercising his ministry in 1959 (see p. 6).

posts. It would be an irreparable blow to the prestige of the Catholic Church in Lithuania and to the Vatican if the bishops who are esteemed by the faithful were to be pushed aside. [ . . . ]

[ . . . ] The priests and faithful of Lithuania therefore humbly beseech the Holy Father and the Roman Curia :

(a) not to appoint new bishops subservient to the atheists;

(b) in appointing bishops, to ascertain the worth of a candidate by checking with the bishops in exile, or with priests duly authorized by them. This would be possible if the Vatican announced the names of candidates no less than six months prior to their nomination;

(c) to make no diplomatic concessions, based on trust in their good faith. No concessions can be expected from the atheists through bargaining – the Catholics of Lithuania will have just as much freedom as they win for themselves.<sup>17</sup>

The authors of the Lithuanian *Chronicle* appear to believe that the Vatican is genuinely misinformed about the situation in the Soviet Union. So one of the *Chronicle's* aims has been to provide accurate information for the leaders of the Catholic Church to act upon. When the Synod of Catholic Bishops (1974) declared their support for the persecuted Church, the Lithuanians were quick to show their gratitude :

In following on the radio the Synod of Bishops which took place in Rome, we were overjoyed that some Fathers of the Synod – Cardinal Iosif Slipyj, Cardinal Stefan Wyszynski, Cardinal Bengsch and others – so bravely defended the persecuted Catholics in Eastern Europe. In the best possible way they also represented us, the believers of the Lithuanian Catholic Church.<sup>18</sup>

The editors of the *Chronicle* expand on this subject in a long letter to Cardinal Bengsch (see issue No. 19, 1975). His visit to Lithuania on 22-26 August 1975 is said to have been concealed from Lithuanian priests and believers by the authorities; and access to him during his visit was restricted. The letter contains information about their situation and a large part is devoted to refuting the Soviet government's "misinformation". The Apostolic See and the world "are led astray about the real situation of the Church in Lithuania even through high Lithuanian church dignitaries, who are then simultaneously compromised in the eyes of the priests and of the believers". Some priests are allowed to travel abroad "for propaganda purposes". Lithuanian clergymen going to Rome receive "comprehensive instructions" from the government authorities "and must give a written account upon their return".<sup>19</sup> The diary of the late Canon J. Stankevicius reports :

. . . We used to travel to the Vatican. The main instruction here was as follows: the whole business must be conducted in such a manner

that the Soviet Union would profit from it, and the Catholic Church be harmed . . . We had to provide proof every time, directly or indirectly, of how we had helped the Soviet Union and what harm we had inflicted on the Catholic Church.<sup>20</sup>

The letter to Cardinal Bengsch continues:<sup>21</sup>

Because of the persecution of religion, part of the pastoral work is done under catacomb-like conditions, and the Soviet government, unable to control it, has good reason to fear it. [. . .] The priests, influenced by the government, try to depict this underground pastoral work as "harmful and destructive of the unity of the Church and of the Church's normal relations with the State". But if the Catholic Church in Lithuania had not adjusted itself to catacomb conditions at this time, it would be threatened with the fate of the Orthodox Church in Russia, which is being suffocated. [. . .]

[. . .] The Soviet government makes efforts to have the Apostolic See approve the tactics of the priests who make concessions to the government. The priests of Lithuania are convinced that only on the basis of erroneous information could the Apostolic See have appointed as monsignors almost all the individuals who try to please the authorities: Fr. P. Baksys, Canon Barauskas, Canon Krivaitis, and others. In this manner, zealous priests who are wholeheartedly devoted to the Church have been psychologically disarmed. [. . .]

[. . .] The (Soviet) tourists who have visited Rome assert that the officials of the Apostolic See advise them that conflicts with the Soviet government should be avoided. We do not know if the Apostolic See really thinks that way. But if we adhered to that principle, we would have to renounce essential pastoral work, e.g., the catechisation of children, and to enter, as "servants of the cult", into a perennial conflict with our conscience – something that the Soviet government desires. [. . .]

[. . .] We believe that the diplomatic activity of the Apostolic See is based on a sincere desire to help the persecuted Church. Yet, because of ignorance of the true circumstances, the Apostolic See may in some instances serve atheist interests. Therefore, we dare to utter a warning. Do not trust the promises of the Soviet government, because they will not be fulfilled. Do not trust those who come from the Soviet Union in an official capacity – all of them are more or less obliged to carry out the tasks of the Party and of the State Security Service (KGB).<sup>22</sup>

Finally the letter ends with this plea to the publishers of the *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church*: "Please convey our cry for help to the Church, the world, and all people of goodwill."<sup>23</sup>

*Chronicle* No. 20 is as forthright as No. 10 in voicing its fears about Vatican compromise with the Soviet authorities. The editors feel that a

proposed visit by Archbishop Casaroli to Lithuania might be exploited to the detriment of the Church and used to prove that religious freedom exists.<sup>24</sup>

The writers of the *Chronicle* do not fear open dialogue with the atheists when there is a guarantee of goodwill and toleration on both sides, but they warn sternly against trusting the promises of Soviet government representatives, if this involves accepting diplomatic silence about the suppression of religion in the USSR.<sup>25</sup>

[See also Documents, pp. 44-47.]

*Photographs of Lithuanian clergy (between pp. 8-9) are reproduced from J. Savasis: The War Against God in Lithuania, Manyland Books, Box 266, Wall Street Station, New York, N.Y. 1005) 1966.*

<sup>1</sup> *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church* (hereafter CLCC) No. 10 (English translation) New York, 1975, pp. 12-13; Lithuanian in *Lietuvos Kataliku Baznycios Kronika* (hereafter LKB Kronika) Vol. 2, Chicago, 1975, p. 121.

<sup>2</sup> M. Gelzinis: *Christenverfolgung in Litauen*, Königstein, pp. 39-53.

<sup>3</sup> W. Kolarz: *Religion in the Soviet Union*, London, 1961, p. 208.

<sup>4</sup> CLCC No. 10 (English translation) New York, 1975, pp. 36-40; Lithuanian in LKB Kronika Vol. 2, Chicago, 1975, pp. 150-155.

<sup>5</sup> J. Savasis: *The War against God in Lithuania*, New York, 1966, p. 31.

<sup>6</sup> CLCC No. 1 (English manuscript) p. 49; Lithuanian in LKB Kronika Vol. 1, p. 65.

<sup>7</sup> CLCC No. 5 (English translation) New York, 1974, p. 4; Lithuanian in LKB Kronika Vol. 1, p. 212.

<sup>8</sup> CLCC No. 14 (Russian manuscript) p. 13; Lithuanian in LKB Kronika Vol. 2, pp. 324-5.

<sup>9</sup> CLCC No. 14 (Russian manuscript) p. 1; Lithuanian in LKB Kronika Vol. 2, p. 307.

<sup>10</sup> CLCC No. 1 (English manuscript) p. 26; Lithuanian in LKB Kronika Vol. 1, p. 46.

<sup>11</sup> The case for this was made in M. Bourdeaux: *Religious Ferment in Russia* (Macmillan, 1968) – on the Baptists – and *Patriarch and Prophets* (Mowbrays, 1969) – on the Orthodox.

<sup>12</sup> CLCC No. 2 (English manuscript) p. 6; Lithuanian in LKB Kronika Vol. 1, p. 80.

<sup>13</sup> CLCC No. 2 (English manuscript) p. 76; Lithuanian in LKB Kronika Vol. 1, p. 81.

<sup>14</sup> *Catacombes* No. 4, 1974, pp. 13-14.

<sup>15</sup> CLCC No. 12 (Russian manuscript) pp. 1-3; Lithuanian in LKB Kronika Vol. 2, p. 209.

<sup>16</sup> CLCC No. 15 (Russian manuscript) p. 11; Lithuanian in LKB Kronika Vol. 2, pp. 368-9.

<sup>17</sup> CLCC No. 10 (English translation) New York, 1975, pp. 6-14; Lithuanian in LKB Kronika Vol. 2, pp. 113-122.

<sup>18</sup> CLCC No. 15 (Russian manuscript) p. 1; Lithuanian in LKB Kronika Vol. 2, p. 358.

<sup>19</sup> CLCC No. 19 (Russian manuscript) p. 7; also ELTA 2/76, pp. 3-5 (in English).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p. 8; also ELTA 2/76, pp. 3-5.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p. 8; also ELTA 2/76, pp. 3-5.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 8-11; also ELTA 2/76, pp. 3-5.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p. 12; also ELTA 2/76, pp. 3-5.

<sup>24</sup> CLCC No. 20 (Lithuanian manuscript) pp. 38-39; shortened extract in ELTA 2/76, p. 12.

<sup>25</sup> This article uses material from Michael Bourdeaux's forthcoming book, *Land of Crosses*.