

FR. KĘSTUTIS ŽEMAITIS \*

## **Blessed Teofilus Matulionis – A Witness to the Faith of Modern Times**

On May 7, 2000, in Rome, St. Pope John Paul II led ecumenical worship services at the Colosseum in which witnesses of the faith of the 20th century were proclaimed. This list also included 114 persons from Lithuania. Beatification cases have already been initiated for some, and Archbishop Teofilus Matulionis was declared Blessed on June 25, 2017. The archbishop was born in 1873 in the parish of Alanta near Anykščiai, in the beautiful land of Lithuanian nature, studied at St. Petersburg Theological Seminary, ordained a priest in 1900 by Bishop Karol Niedzialkovsky of Mogilev, belonged to the archdiocese of Mogilev, worked in Latvian and Russian parishes. From 1923 to 1925, he was imprisoned for the first time as a zealous priest in a Soviet camp. In 1929 on February 9, the priest Teofilus was nominated Titular Bishop of Matrega by Pope Pius XI and secretly consecrated, authorized to lead the believers of the Leningrad region. Soon Matulionis was sentenced to another 10 years in prison as a bishop (although the Soviet authorities did not know it because the consecration witnesses kept a secret), but in 1933 the bishop returned to Lithuania after exchanging political prisoners between Lithuania and the Soviet Union<sup>1</sup>. When he arrived, he assisted the bishops, visited Vatican, the USA, worked at the Benedictine Convent in Kaunas as a chaplain, and in 1943 became the bishop of Kaišiadorys. From 1946 to 1956, Bishop Matulionis suffered the most severe pains – during the interrogations and in the Soviet camp he faced the greatest trials. In 1957, in exile in Birštonas parish (he was not allowed to live in Kaišiadorys and was not allowed to rule the diocese), he secretly conse-

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<sup>1</sup> See: A. Streikus, *Istoriniai arkivyskupo Teofiliaus Matulionio gyvenimo ir kankinystės kontekstai*, in: *Ištvėrimingas Tikėjimo liudytojas: Arkivyskupas Teofilus Matulionis*, ed. A. Streikus, A. Jurevičius, Vilnius 2017, p. 57-62.

crated priest Vincentas Sladkevičius, who was later awarded the title of cardinal by Pope John Paul II in 1988.

Bishop Teofilus Matulionis died in exile while living in the small parish of Šeduva in 1962. But in the very same year, while he was alive, the news came from Rome that this old martyr bishop was being nominated as archbishop. Thus, Pope John XXIII then appreciated the martyr's witness to the faith. And his martyrdom was officially recognized by Pope Francis.

Still, the question arises where from so much strength could a weak man have in order to withstand such extraordinary trials. How did this personality mature in virtues and what was his relationship to people, especially those on the opposite side of values and ideological beliefs?

### Testimony of Faith: Priest and Prisoner in Russia

Matulionis entered the seminary of priests in St. Petersburg in 1891, but when he doubted whether he would really be able to be *alter Christus*, he took a break from his studies. He returned three years later and was ordained a priest after graduation. This temporary withdrawal from the seminary was not a doubt as to whether or not to become a priest, but a desire to make sure that he would be able to follow Christ unconditionally. It was a sign of a deep vocation, of reflection, of experience. Being responsible to God and feeling a duty to become a priest, a witness to the faith, he realized the need for a deep spiritual life and the development of virtues first and foremost within himself. It had to be natural – not an artificial human posture. Therefore, Teofilus Matulionis, who chose the vocation and virtues of a clergyman, as noted by the researcher of the blessed life dr. Roma Zajančauskienė “practiced with the freedom, trust and joyful simplicity of a child of God”<sup>2</sup>, serving everyone regardless of nationality or social dependence<sup>3</sup>, although this could lead to reproaches<sup>4</sup>. The words of Christ were important to Priest Matulionis: “I am free from *all*, I have made myself a *servant to all*, that I might *win more of them*” (1 Cor 9, 22).

There was no shortage of suffering in the life of Priest Matulionis. He was sentenced three times to prison in Soviet camps for faithfulness to the Church<sup>5</sup>. For the first time in 1923, he, together with several St. Petersburg priests and Bishop John Ciaplek, served a real prison sentence in Moscow. Previously released, he learned an unexpected thing – he was nominated as a bishop. According to Matulionis' friend Prelate Stanislovas Kiškis, St. Father Pius XI cared for “Russian Catholics”. Through his personal representative Mons.

<sup>2</sup> R. Zajančauskienė, *Teologinių dorybių sklaida arkivyskupo Teofiliaus Matulionio kankinystės kelyje*, daktaro disertacija, Kaunas 2014, p. 127.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. S. Kiškis, *Arkivyskupas Teofilus Matulionis*, Vilnius 2008, p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. R. Zajančauskienė, *Teologinių dorybių sklaida...*, op. cit., p. 127.

<sup>5</sup> Priest Matulionis was punished during the reign of the tsar for baptizing a baby whose one of the parent was a Catholic and the other one was an Orthodox. Matulionis could not perform priestly duties in public at that time and had to live in a monastery.

D'Herbigny he sent benefits for starving Russian children. The mentioned representative travelled to the Soviet Union in the autumn of 1925 and in spring and summer of 1926. He was secretly consecrated as a bishop in Berlin and from nuncio of that time Eugene Pacelli<sup>6</sup> received a very important and totally secret mission – to maintain the Catholic hierarchy in the Soviet Union. To that end, he had to select the five best and most faithful priests, secretly consecrate them as bishops, and entrust them with the rights of apostolic administrators to govern the Catholics of the Soviet Union, first dividing the territory into five areas<sup>7</sup>. Thus, on February 9, 1929 (after receiving a secret message about Matulionis nomination through Bishop D'Herbigny), he was secretly consecrated by Bishop Maleckis. Only a few people knew about it<sup>8</sup>.

The coat of arms of the new bishop depicted three crosses. Perhaps it was a symbol of his three heavy imprisonments, about which Bishop Teofilus understood only last time sentenced.

According to Vidas Spengla, for the second time Matulionis (already as a bishop, although the authorities did not know it) was arrested and convicted. As Vidas Spengla argues, after the failure of the security services to recruit the bishop, he was arrested again on November 25, 1929<sup>9</sup>. Then the bishop was doing the hardest jobs, experiencing inhuman misery<sup>10</sup>. He was later put into prison in a solitary cell. It is unclear how his detention would have ended if there had been no agreement between Lithuania and the Soviet Union to exchange prisoners. Thus, the bishop returned to Lithuania with a group of the same exhausted prisoners. Only then did everyone know who he was. Probably Soviet officials regretted who they had released<sup>11</sup>. It should be emphasized that Bishop Matulionis refused to return to Lithuania because he had to perform his duties as a bishop in Russia, but according to his biography researcher Vidas Spengla, “his choice was ignored”<sup>12</sup>.

### Organizer of Spiritual Life

Bishop Matulionis, having visited Rome, the Holy Land, America, returned to Lithuania and was soon invited to work in Kaunas as the chaplain of Benedictine Sisters Convent. There he revealed himself not only as an incredi-

<sup>6</sup> Later Pope Pius XII.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. S. Kiškis, *Arkivyskupas Teofilus Matulionis*, op. cit., p. 47.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>9</sup> V. Spengla, *Atlikę pareigą*, Vilnius 1997, p. 101.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> If Bishop Teofilus had not been transported to Lithuania, he would probably have been shot in 1937-1938 in the forest of Sandarmok, like all the prisoners imprisoned with him in the Solofk Islands, concretely on the island of Anzer, because all the clergy were imprisoned here (Яковлева А. П. С.Л.О.Н. Соловецкие лагерь и тюрьма 1923-1939 годов: События. Документы. Палачи. Жертвы. Соловецкий: Издательство Соловецкого монастыря, 2015. p. 60-61).

<sup>12</sup> V. Spengla, *Atlikę pareigą*, op. cit., p. 103.

bly spiritual man<sup>13</sup>, but also as a spiritual guide. Sister Benedictine Aušra Vasiliauskaitė, a researcher of the biography of Bishop T. Matulionis, states: “Bishop T. Matulionis was a famous organizer of Lithuanian spiritual life”<sup>14</sup>.

From 1936 to 1943 Matulionis lived and worked at the *Convent of Benedictine Sisters in Kaunas*. Here he quickly had the thought of how to activate piety at the Blessed Sacrament. He himself “was a great worshiper of Saint Sacrament”<sup>15</sup>. Sister Gabrielė, a Benedictine nun, states: “the bishop constantly adored Saint sacrament, and the fact that from this adoration arose the virtues of humility and simplicity. Seeing such devotion of the bishop, the sisters grew spiritually, learning, strengthening in spirit, longing to pray as the main pastor himself prays. Thus, Bishop T. Matulionis not only pushed the sisters into deeper prayer, but also, it can be said, began the obvious “Silence Pastoral Care” at the *Convent of Benedictine Sisters*, which the sisters continue to this day”<sup>16</sup>.

The years of the first Soviet occupation were quite difficult for the bishop. Bishop Vincent Brizgys writes: “In 1940, the Russian occupation destroyed all life”<sup>17</sup>. Vytautas Vitauskas assessed the Soviet era that began in 1940 and its influence on the Catholic Church as follows: “From 1940 to 1989 the policy pursued by the Soviet government with regard to the Lithuanian Catholic Church could be divided into several stages, where different aspirations of the government, the means used and the reaction of the Church itself could be seen. The main goal of the Soviet government remained unchanged throughout its reign – to eliminate the Church and religion from Lithuanian state life, to reduce or eliminate its influence on people’s private lives, and to educate a “Soviet citizen” – an atheist who got rid of so-called “religious prejudices” and who blindly believed in bright tomorrow of communism”<sup>18</sup>. The major part of the nation did not believe in that light of communism. Bishop Matulionis was “warmed” by it in Soviet camps. However, all this had to be endured and under such conditions witness to the faith proclaimed by the Church. “I don’t have grounds to boast that I preach the Gospel since it is my necessary duty, and I were in trouble if I did not preach the Gospel!” (1 Cor 9, 16). Bishop Algirdas Jurevičius writes: “In times of persecution, a prominent and clear testimony of faith is always significant. We can rejoice that throughout the period of Soviet occupation, God enriched us with resolute witnesses of faith and martyrs. The names of all of them are not even known, but this does not

<sup>13</sup> Cf. R. Zajančauskienė, *Dievo Žmogus – Arkivyskupas Teofilus Matulionis*, in: *Išvermingas Tikėjimo liudytojas: Arkivyskupas Teofilus Matulionis*, ed. A. Streikus, A. Jurevičius, Vilnius 2017, p. 87-126.

<sup>14</sup> A. Vasiliauskaitė, *Vyskupas Teofilus Matulionis kapelionas martyrium bendruomenėje*, “Soter” 64(2017), p. 29.

<sup>15</sup> S. Kiškis, *Arkivyskupas Teofilus Matulionis*, op. cit., p. 73.

<sup>16</sup> A. Vasiliauskaitė, *Vyskupas Teofilus Matulionis...*, op. cit., p. 30.

<sup>17</sup> V. Brizgys, *Gyvenimo keliai*, Vilnius 1993, p. 93.

<sup>18</sup> V. Vitkauskas, *Lietuvos Katalikų Bažnyčios dvasininkų verbavimas NKVD/KGB agentais sovietmečiu*, LKMA, vol. 26, Vilnius 2000, p. 237.

diminish their significance. As an example of enduring martyrdom, I would like to give an example from the life of respectful Archbishop Teofilus Matulionis (1873-1962). He had to endure sixteen years in prison and suffered various forms of humiliation<sup>19</sup>.

When Bishop Teofilus Matulionis lived in a Benedictine Sisters Convent, the war broke out. The very first months of the Nazi occupation were marked by the killing of Jews. He appeared there as a brave saint, risking his life together with sister nuns saved the lives of the Jews<sup>20</sup>.

Bishop A. Jurevičius argues: “During the persecution, one very important aspect of martyrdom became clear – missionality”<sup>21</sup>. This activity arose from the deep spiritual vocation of the bishop. As R. Zajančkauskienė states: “The priesthood is the highest vocation for T. Matulionis, which manifests itself in love for people and willingness to sacrifice for their spiritual needs (...)”<sup>22</sup>.

As early as 1941, Bishop Matulionis applied to the Apostolic Throne for permission where possible to take care of Catholic pastoral care in the German-occupied lands of Belarus and Russia<sup>23</sup>. Churches were closed there, priests were arrested, and believers were still there.

Meanwhile, quite a lot of pastoral worries arose in Lithuania as well - quite a large community of deportees and refugees gathered, people who had lost their homes, relatives, sometimes even hope and faith. “They were like sheep without a shepherd” (Mk 6, 30-34). Bishop Matulionis cares for people – Catholics from other countries, even non-Catholics<sup>24</sup>.

### The Last Cross – the Most Difficult

In 1943, Bishop of Kaišiadorys Juozapas Kukta died. Teofilus Matulionis was appointed in his place<sup>25</sup>. And here the bishop sought solace in prayer. He urged believers to pray to the Immaculate Heart of Mary<sup>26</sup>. Matulionis was a warrior of Christ, sincerely devoted to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. He was brave: he fought for the Church with both the Nazis and the Bolsheviks, whose atrocities were felt not only by the clergy, but by all the inhabitants. Perhaps he drew his strength from other martyrs of his fellow Lithuanian bishops, such as

<sup>19</sup> A. Jurevičius, *Kankinystė ir tikėjimo liudijimas neatskiriami*, “Naujasis židinys – Aidai” 2004, no. 4, p. 171.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. A. Vasiliauskaitė, *Vyskupas Teofilus Matulionis...*, op. cit., p. 35.

<sup>21</sup> A. Jurevičius, *Kankinystė ir tikėjimo liudijimas neatskiriami*, op. cit., p. 170.

<sup>22</sup> R. Zajančkauskienė, *Teologinių dorybių sklaida...*, op. cit., p. 127.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. S. Kiškis, *Arkivyskupas Teofilus Matulionis*, op. cit., p. 74.

<sup>24</sup> T. Matulionis, *1944 metų sausio 14 d. bendraraštis kaišiadorių vyskupijos gerb. dvasiškieji*, in: *Arkivyskupas Teofilus Matulionis laiškuose ir dokumentuose*, ed. J. Boruta, E. Neniškytė, A. Katilius, Vilnius 2002, p. 40-41.

<sup>25</sup> S. Kiškis, *Arkivyskupas Teofilus Matulionis*, op. cit., p. 82.

<sup>26</sup> T. Matulionis, *1944 metų sausio 2 d. bendraraštis Kaišiadorių vyskupijos gerb. dvasiškieji*, in: *Arkivyskupas Teofilus Matulionis laiškuose ir dokumentuose*, ed. J. Boruta, E. Neniškytė, A. Katilius, Vilnius 2002, p. 40-41.

Vincentas Borisevičius<sup>27</sup>, Pranciškus Ramanauskas<sup>28</sup> or Archbishop Mečislovas Reinys<sup>29</sup>. They were all in a whirlwind of terrible events, presented by Vidas Spengla, who studied the relationship between the Church and the Soviet authorities in some detail: “During 50 years of Soviet occupation the people of Lithuania experienced a great deal of sufferings: they were intimidated, interrogated, imprisoned, deported and killed, and their consciences were broken. A particularly brutal physical genocide of the nation was in the post-war years of Stalin’s rule (1944-1953). The clergy of the Lithuanian Catholic Church did not escape it either. According to MGB<sup>30</sup> documents, 270 priests were convicted of anti-Soviet activities in Lithuania during this period. MVD<sup>31</sup> documents state that in 1952 in total of 364 priests were repressed in Lithuania. In the spring of 1953, 754 priests lived and worked in Lithuania. Thus, in the post-war years, 33% of Lithuanian priests were repressed, i.e. every third clergyman. The Lithuanian episcopate was touched even more severely. As the Soviet army approached Lithuania, 3 bishops left for the West: Archbishop of Kaunas Metropolitan Juozapas Skvireckas, his auxiliary Bishop Vincentas Brizgys, and auxiliary Bishop Vincentas Padolskis of Vilkaviškis Bishop. In the post-war years, Bishop Antanas Karosas of Vilkaviškis died, and Bishops Vincentas Borisevičius, Teofilius Matulionis, Pranas Ramanauskas and Archbishop Mečislovas Reinys were repressed”<sup>32</sup>.

Already in 1946, Bishop Teofilius Matulionis was arrested for refusing to become a traitor – to cooperate with the Soviet authorities. The bishop was imprisoned in Orsha, Vladimir prisons, and was eventually housed in a home for the disabled in Mordovia. And only after 10 years he could return to Lithuania, but he was accommodated in the parsonage of Birštonas parish. Although he took over the administration of the diocese from the then governor, he was soon deported to Šeduva. It was not easy for the bishop in prisons. For everything, the

<sup>27</sup> Borisevičius Vincentas (1887-1946). He was born in Šunskai parish, Vilkaviškis county. After graduating from the Seyny Priest Seminary, he studied at the University of Friborg in Switzerland. He was ordained a priest in 1910. 1940 prel. V. Borisevičius is appointed the title bishop of Lizija and the assistant bishop of Telšiai. After the death of Telšiai Bishop J. Staugaitis, he was appointed Ordinary Bishop of Telšiai. 1945 February 5 was arrested a second and last time. Brutally interrogated and tortured. Shot in Vilnius in 1946, October 12.

<sup>28</sup> Ramanauskas Pranciškus (1893 m. – 1959) – Telšių vyskupas, profesorius, teologijos mokslų daktaras, kankinys. Ramanauskas Pranciškus (1893-1959) – Bishop of Telšiai, professor, doctor of theology, martyr.

<sup>29</sup> Reinys Mečislovas was born in 1884, February 5, in Daugaugiai parish, Lithuania. In 1907 ordained a priest, 1940 consecrated as bishop and appointed coadjutor of the bishop of Vilkaviškis, in 1944 nominated as archbishop and appointed coadjutor of the archbishop of Vilnius. M. Reinys – professor of the university, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania, diplomat, archbishop, political prisoner of the USSR, martyr died in 1953, November 8 (Vladimir Prison in Russia).

<sup>30</sup> MGB – Ministry of State Security (rus. Ministerstvo gosudarstvennoj bezopasnosti).

<sup>31</sup> MVD – Ministry of Internal Affairs (rus. Ministerstvo vnutrennich del).

<sup>32</sup> V. Spengla, *Atlikę pareigą*, op. cit., p. 9-10.

authorities bothered him. Even because of a photo found at his home in which he had been photographed with prisoners returning from a Soviet camp in 1933, Matulionis was under long interrogation<sup>33</sup>. It was not easy for the deported in Lithuania both in Birštonas and Šeduva. An eye was constantly kept on him, his place was searched, and he was even prevented in his priestly duties.

Bishop Teofilus Matulionis has always, and especially in the most difficult years of his life, in the prisons of Orsha and Vladimir, been a deep witness to faith, hope and love<sup>34</sup>. “There is no testimony without witnesses, so it’s important that there has never been a shortage of persevering witnesses”<sup>35</sup>. The bishop was a joyful witness. For him, a sense of humour is a sign of joy and hope in martyrdom<sup>36</sup>. And he was forgiving since love is revealed in martyrdom through forgiveness<sup>37</sup>. The archbishop, the blessed Teofilus Matulionis<sup>38</sup>, who left the example of a good shepherd, lived holy and died sanctified by the spirit of holiness as a martyr and a witness to the faith of the modern times.

### Conclusions

In the twentieth century, the Catholic Church in Lithuania had quite a number of martyrs. One of them was Archbishop Teofilus Matulionis. As a priest in the Archdiocese of Mogilev, he served Catholics living in Russia. Both as a priest and later consecrated as a bishop, Matulionis, as a zealous pastor, suffered persecution, but remained faithful to his vocation and matured in virtue.

After returning to Lithuania, Bishop Matulionis served as a chaplain at Benedictine sisters Convent in Kaunas. There he revealed himself as a very spiritual man. Not only piety but also the works of love to everyone close were in harmony in the person of this holy man.

At the end of the war, and especially in the years of the second Soviet occupation, already as the Bishop of Kaišiadorys, Teofilus Matulionis suffered the most fierce persecutions, the most severe tortures in prisons and exile. Even now, however, he remained firm and faithful to the vocation, especially matured in the virtues of faith, hope, and love.

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## Blessed Teofilus Matulionis – A Witness to the Faith of Modern Times

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *Lietuvos vyskupai kankiniai sovietiniame teisme*, ed. Streikus, LKMA, vol. 5, Vilnius 2000, p. 505.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. R. Zajančauskienė, *Teologinių dorybių sklaida...*, op. cit., p. 127.

<sup>35</sup> A. Jurevičius, *Kankinystė ir tikėjimo liudijimas neatskiriami*, op. cit., p. 172.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. R. Zajančauskienė, *Teologinių dorybių sklaida...*, op. cit., p. 37.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. S. Kiškis, *Arkivyskupas Teofilus Matulionis*, op. cit., p. 150-152.

## Summary

The twentieth century in the Catholic Church was the age of martyrs and witnesses to the faith. One of such witness is Archbishop Teofilus Matulionis, who was born in Lithuania, worked in Russia for a long time and spent many years in Soviet camps. The bishop was a man of prayer and a great organizer of the spiritual life, faithful to his vocation, obedient to the Apostolic Throne, and scarifying. Although Theophilus Matulionis did not lack for suffering in his life, he was always a witness to the Gospel, matured in the virtues of faith, love, and hope. His life and deeds were appreciated by Pope Francis declaring him blessed.

**Keywords:** Archbishop Theophilus Matulionis, Martyr, Witness, Blessed.

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