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Self-Education of Roman Catholic Priests in Lithuania During the Years of Soviet Occupation

World War II caused a great deal of moral and economic damage to Europe. Both the Bolsheviks and the Nazis disregarded the most basic human rights and especially hated religion. After the war, a relatively long Soviet occupation began in Lithuania. It was a difficult and long trial period. The communist government knew the great authority of the Catholic Church and its influence on society. Thus, the struggle with the Church became one of the most important goals of the Soviet ideology. Aggressive anti-church activities were used for this, and various Catholic organizations and the press were banned. Clergy (especially priests of the Catholic Church) had been persecuted since the beginning of the Soviet occupation. Underground activities were forming rapidly.

Many scientific papers have already examined the involvement of Catholic clergy in various underground activities, but the problems of self-education, organization of pastoral care, and distribution of the press have not yet been sufficiently studied and described, especially on the basis of witnesses. It is also worth taking a deeper look at the influence of the Polish clergy on Lithuanian priests, especially after the election of Pope John Paul.

The training of priests in the seminary was sufficient preparation for pastoral work, spiritual life, and education. However, pastoral work required both experience and continuous intellectual improvement. During the years of Soviet occupation, priests could not even dream of any conferences, seminars, or simply the necessary literature. Of course, older priests had preserved some books from pre-war times. After the occupation of Lithuania in 1940, the situation changed. The Nazis allowed few opportunities for improvement and the return of the Soviet army further constrained everything. However, priests in Lithuania did not abandon self-education even in the underground conditions. The difficult conditions and how it all took place will be addressed in this work.

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Why the Soviets forbade intellectual and spiritual improvement of the clergy?

The Soviet constitution in Lithuania itself differentiated the rights of citizens: “Citizens of the Lithuanian SSR are guaranteed freedom of conscience, that is, the right to profess any religion or not to practice any, to practice religious cults or to conduct atheistic propaganda”. The constitution did not allow religious propaganda. The underground publication *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church* reacted to this¹, clearly emphasizing the discrimination of believers in various fields². Other laws restrict the activities and even gatherings of believers: “General meetings of religious communities and groups of believers (excluding services) are held with the permission of the executive committee of the district, city (city subordinate) Council of Labour People’s Deputies”³. Such a statement means that it is almost impossible to obtain permission for either a larger or smaller gathering of believers outside the house of prayer.

The restriction of the rights of believers to religious education is also included in other articles of the above-mentioned document: “Religious associations do not have the right to organize special meetings for children and young people, as well as work, literature and other circles and groups that have no connection with the performance of the cult”⁴. This shows that young people are only “admitted” to churches. “The teaching of religion may be permitted only in spiritual schools which are opened in the prescribed manner”⁵. There were no such schools in Soviet Lithuania except for the Kaunas Inter-Diocesan Seminary of Priests. Therefore, the priests who finished it had to move into the underground. However, the clearest answer as to why any self-education is forbidden was received by priest Pranciškus Račiūnas while still at prison camp. He wrote this in his diary: “25.02.1958. Deputy Minister Colonel Kniazev visited us. I approached him for notes on religious content. He told me that it was time to give up religion and that every religious act was anti-Soviet”⁶. However, neither the intimidation of this Soviet official nor others was decisive. The clergy acted mostly in secret.

¹ The first and main editor of this publication was priest Sigitas Tamkevičius (bishop since 1991, cardinal since 2019).

² New LSSR constitution discriminates against believers / *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church* No. 33, 1978 5 31.

³ Regulations of Religious Associations, Art. 12 (approved by the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the Lithuanian SSR 28 July 1976 Order No.IX-748).

⁴ Regulations of Religious Associations, Art. 17 (approved by the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the Lithuanian SSR 28 July 1976 Order No.IX-748).

⁵ Regulations of Religious Associations, Art. 18 (approved by the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the Lithuanian SSR 28 July 1976 Order No.IX-748).

⁶ *Restless Priest* (Lithuanian “*Vienuolis nenuorama*”). Person and activity of priest Pranas Račiūnas, MIC in the light of documents and memories (compiled by Vaclovas Aliulis MIC) Kaunas 2015, p. 58.

Needs and opportunities for improvement

Priests in Lithuania could gather in larger groups only in individual cases. Bishop Jonas Kauneckas⁷ testifies that priests gathered in the deanery for retreats and meetings, but there they secretly exchanged the books published in the underground (typewritten). The more active priests gathered separately in groups, discussing events and measures to fight for freedom of religion⁸. Priest Kęstutis Brilius⁹, who graduated from the underground seminary during the Soviet era, remembers the activities of self-education in the years of persecution. Most of them, due to exile, convictions in the past, belonged to the category of “disloyal to the government” and worked in remote rural parishes, had more time and conspiracy opportunities for such tasks. They conducted spiritual conversations, retreats for young people, for us - the clergy, selected literature, explained the basic issues of pastoral and spiritual life, shared pastoral and living experiences from their pastoral work¹⁰. But more than one of them suffered for it. In 1967, the pastor and dean of Šakiai, Juozas Žemaitis, organized retreats for priests. It was probably the first such retreat for priests that required courage and understanding that the Soviet authorities would issue a punishment for it. The retreats were led by the Jesuit priest Jonas Zubrus. Priest Žemaitis was castigated by the civil authorities for this event and warned that no more than 2-3 priests could gather in Lithuania¹¹.

There were such priests in various dioceses at that time which were secretly operating as monasteries. Stanislovas Dobrovolskis (Father Stanislovas), a former prisoner who was pastor in the very small parish of Paberžė, almost continuously had guests and people who were looking for retreats or just to spend the next day in prayer and with a good book¹². However, there was a great lack of literature. And its possession was not tolerated by the Soviet authorities. So where to get them? Bishop Kauneckas remembers: “There was a lot of secretly published literature in Lithuania. First of all, these are prayer books and catechisms. Practically, preparations for the first sacraments were happening in all parishes. If the more cowardly priests did not dare to organize

⁷ J. Kauneckas born in 1938, ordained as priest in 1977, consecrated as Bishop in 2000, as Bishop Emeritus of Panevėžys in 2013. Priest Jonas Kauneckas actively participated in the underground activities during the Soviet occupation, he was a fighter for the rights of the Church.

⁸ J. Kauneckas, *Priests and Their Activities in the Underground*, Panevėžys 2021, p. 1 (manuscript, personal archive of K. Zemaitis).

⁹ K. Brilius born in 1954, ordained as priest under the conditions of the underground in 1980, worked in the pastorate in Lithuania and other territories of the Soviet Union, persecuted by the authorities, a monk, Elder of Monastery of St. Mary the Blessed Virgin monastery in the St. George Province.

¹⁰ K. Brilius, *Self-education of Priests*, Kaunas 2021, p. 1 (manuscript, personal archive of K. Zemaitis).

¹¹ A. Vasiliauskiėnė, *70th Birthday of the Shepherd of Vilkaviškis*, Marijampolė 1996, p. 60.

¹² K. Žemaitis, *Remembering the Witnesses of the Faith*, p. 1 (manuscript, personal archive of K. Zemaitis).

such work, it was done by nuns and other women. In many places entire families were taught, and the priests only tested the knowledge of the faith. But it was necessary to have prayer books and catechisms”¹³. Priests received literature from certain individuals who fearlessly risked their freedom for purely religious literature¹⁴. “Such literature was secretly printed for five decades by priests, nuns and zealous Catholic fighters. Wrote up to 12 copies on primitive typewriters, printed on thin paper through copying lime”¹⁵. For example, priest of Vilkaviškis diocese Juozas Konstantias Matulaitis¹⁶ has translated more than five hundred books from German and after rewriting them several times by a typewriter, distributed them throughout Soviet-persecuted Lithuania. It is a unique contribution not only to the self-education of the clergy as a means, but also to the entire community of believers who were reached by those books¹⁷. The book deficit was somewhat mitigated by connections with other countries. The closest was Catholic Poland. “There could be no direct contact with Polish priests. After all, we were separated by an iron curtain. Some priests from Poland, especially in the Vilnius region, secretly received literature through Polish relatives and translated it into Lithuanian. The statements of Cardinal Višinskis were especially widespread” – Bishop Jonas Kauneckas remembers¹⁸. Priest Brilius also remembers this path of books to the readers’ home, especially to the rectory: “All the theological literature, textbooks, Catholic press that reached us at that time were either imported in small quantities and reproduced, distributed, or it was surviving literature from pre-war sources, further rewritten by hand and distributed”¹⁹. Books not only nurtured personalities but also brought together like-minded people²⁰. Priests of that time could also receive books from clergy who had studied at the Kaunas Interdiocesan Seminary of Priests. The clergy studied using texts prepared by teachers for various disciplines or translated from other languages, called “scripts” in the seminary. These typewritten texts, bound on fairly simple covers, looked like books. But their production was also illegal. Both students and transcribers could have been punished.

¹³ J. Kauneckas, *Priests and Their Activities in the Underground*, Panevėžys 2021, p. 1 (manuscript, personal archive of K. Zemaitis).

¹⁴ K. Žemaitis, *Remembering the Witnesses of the Faith*, p. 2 (manuscript, personal archive of K. Žemaitis).

¹⁵ J. Kauneckas, *Priests and Their Activities in the Underground*, Panevėžys 2021, p. 1 (manuscript, personal archive of K. Zemaitis).

¹⁶ J.K. Matulaitis born 1912, ordained as priest in 1935, dead in Šunskai in 2000.

¹⁷ K. Žemaitis, *Remembering the Witnesses of the Faith*, p. 1 (manuscript, personal archive of K. Zemaitis).

¹⁸ J. Kauneckas, *Priests and Their Activities in the Underground*, Panevėžys 2021, p. 1 (manuscript, personal archive of K. Zemaitis).

¹⁹ K. Brilius, *Self-education of Priests*, Kaunas 2021, p. 4 (manuscript, personal archive of K. Zemaitis).

²⁰ J. Kauneckas, *Priests and Their Activities in the Underground*, Panevėžys 2021, p. 1 (manuscript, personal archive of K. Zemaitis).

The most common works were: PeschkeKarl, Christian Ethics, works of Cardinal J. Racinger, future pope, ideas by K. Rahner and H.U. von Baltazar. Priest Česlovas Kavaliauskas²¹ translated and distributed Church History by Eusebius, the bishop of Caesarea. This book was later printed legally and reached new readers²².

Self-education depended on individual efforts, but it was possible to rely on the rules proposed by individual leaders. Priest K. Brilius testifies that fathers of the Marian convent Pranciškus Račiūnas²³, Vaclovas Aliulis²⁴, and Viktoras Šauklys²⁵ who had great influence on it, emphasized not only deepening in theology, but also language learning, continuous studies, and called for the latest knowledge in other sciences and thus to prepare for in another humanitarian profession such as history, psychology, pedagogy, literature. They argued that a priest must be educated, interested in science, speaking several languages, and wise in his social and political life²⁶.

Self-education of priests was also taken care of by the more educated and patriotic laity of the Church. An example of this could be the Brazauskai family and later their school²⁷.

Thus, the Catholic Church in Lithuania saw its spiritual leaders and their efforts to lead by example and to proclaim their faith orally based on excellent knowledge of theology and general education. In this way a priest became an authority in the realm of both religious and national consciousness.

Secret Schools of Spirituality

The need for spiritual and intellectual improvement was not merely a path of self-seeking in the life of every priest. During the long years of Soviet occupation, certain schools were formed to provide assistance to the priests of the persecuted Church. Such schools became secretive communities - monasteries. During the Soviet regime, there were still quite a few priests in Lithuania who

²¹ Č. Kavaliauskas born in 1923, died in 1997, priest, theologian, poet, translator of Scripture and other books.

²² K. Žemaitis, *Remembering the Witnesses of the Faith*, p. 1 (manuscript, personal archive of K. Žemaitis).

²³ Račiūnas Pranas was born on 28 March 1919 in Marijampolė, died on 24 August 1997, ordained as priest in 1943, a Marian monk, provincial, Church and public figure, imprisoned for almost 17 years during the Soviet rule.

²⁴ Aliulis Vaclovas (born on March 14, 1921 in Krekštėnai, died in Krokialaukis parish – on 26 May 2015 in Marijampolė) – ordained as priest in 1944, a Marian monk, publicist, thinker, public figure.

²⁵ Šauklys Viktoras (was born in 1908 – died in 2003, buried in Marijampolė), a priest, Marian monk.

²⁶ K. Brilius, *Self-education of Priests*, Kaunas 2021, p. 4 (manuscript, personal archive of K. Žemaitis).

²⁷ R. Labanuskas, *Reception of Pierre Teilhard de Charden's Ideas in Lithuania: the Brazauskai School (1975-1993)*, Yearbook of the Lithuanian Catholic Academy of Sciences, Vilnius, 2018, vol. 41, p. 200.

had matured for monastic life in independent Lithuania. They were characterized by a fairly high level of education, ability to lead a community, and also competence for individual spiritual leadership. Already after the Second World War, these monks could become spiritual leaders not only in their monasteries, but also for diocesan priests. In this way, the strongest monasteries of men, the majority members of which were priests, were highlighted in this activity. Today, it would be difficult to accurately reproduce their lists due to the secret circumstances of the time, but the Marian monk K. Brilius testifies: “They were all carriers of the pastoral and spiritual traditions of their monasteries, and in the pastoral and self-educational realms they conveyed the same doctrine of spirituality with the characteristic accents of their own monasteries”²⁸. Among these monasteries, perhaps the most active were the Marians and the Jesuits, who even organized a secret seminary, which prepared several dozen priests²⁹. The emergence of this seminary was conditioned by the Soviet government constantly “narrowing the gates” to the officially functioning seminaries of priests in Kaunas and Riga, and due to the steady number of vocations and determination to seek the priesthood. There were two main ones in Lithuania – next to the Jesuit and Marian monasteries³⁰.

The martyred Archbishop Teofilus Matulionis, who secretly consecrated the priest Vincentas Sladkevičius, who was later nominated as cardinal by Pope John Paul II, and many monks and diocesan priests. As a result, the Soviet authorities were defeated by the Catholic clergy that was so fiercely persecuted and despised in every way. Here is the 1982 May 10 Juozėnas, Deputy Representative of RRT³¹ at Vilnius University Marxism-Leninism, gave a lecture to future propagandists on the topic – “State and Religion”: the RRT deputy representative suggested to propagandists to forget the term “dark-minded” applied to the clergy quite often: The Vatican has 17 higher education institutions in Rome and 45 Catholic universities in Europe. There are over 10 members of the Jesuit Order in our republic, Juozėnas explained. How they became Jesuits is usually kept secret - neighbouring Poland is thought to have played a major role. In general, in the words of Juozėnas, Poles have a great influence on Lithuania, especially Vilnius and its region”³². Pope John Paul II, to whom Lithuanian Catholics turned, also strengthened determination: “We hope that in your

²⁸ K. Brilius, *Self-education of Priests*, Kaunas 2021, p. 1 (manuscript, personal archive of K. Zemaitis).

²⁹ K. Žemaitis, *Underground Seminary in Lithuania During the Years of Soviet Rule: Challenges and Activity Results*, Logos, vol. 107, p. 1-8.

³⁰ K. Brilius, *Self-education of Priests*, Kaunas 2021, p. 5 (manuscript, personal archive of K. Zemaitis).

³¹ A Look at the Church through the RRT Window / LKB Chronicle No. 55 1982 11 01, p. 12 (typewriting).

³² The Council for Religious Affairs, under the Council of Ministers of the USSR, carried out the persecution of the Church, interfered in the internal affairs of the Church, and operated until 1990.

person, both Lithuania and other nations where the faith is persecuted will receive strong support and a zealous defender of the rights and freedoms of man and believers, so that the gospel of Christ can reach every heart that desires truth and love”³³. And indeed, this pope had a great influence on the Lithuanian clergy and the entire Lithuanian nation.

Thus, the collapsing system of atheistic propaganda and coercion acknowledged its defeat, and Catholic priests “passed the test of persecution” and remained leaders in their communities and promoters of national consciousness in their enslaved nation³⁴.

Conclusions

Aggressive atheist politics with a rather refined repressive structure hostile to the Catholic Church did not frighten Roman Catholic clergy or turn them into uneducated and unspiritual servants of the church cult and at the same time forced them to seek opportunities for self-education in the underground. Thus, among the like-minded people, and especially in the shelters of the monasteries, many priests found the opportunity to perform retreats and share pastoral experiences. Persecuted priests learned to print and distribute books underground. Their rather unique achievement was the underground seminary.

Soviet atheist propaganda that wanted to turn priests into people without higher education and introduce them as such to society was defeated. Priests in the eyes of the people remained witnesses of the faith and qualified preachers of the word of God.

The election of Pope John Paul II gave quite a lot of inspiration to Lithuanian clergy. Priests became even more interested in Catholic literature published in Poland and tried to transport it to Lithuania in various ways.

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Self-Education of Roman Catholic Priests in Lithuania During the Years of Soviet Occupations

Summary

After the end of the Second World War, a rather long Soviet occupation began in Lithuania. This was a difficult period of trials for the entire Lithuanian society, and especially for the Catholic Church. Any possibility of permanent training of clergy was then forbidden. In this way, Catholic priests in Lithuania learned to act underground. The need for spiritual and intellectual improvement

³³ Greeting to Pope John Paul II / Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church, No. 35, 16 November 1978, p. 1 (typewriting).

³⁴ K. Žemaitis, *Remembering the Witnesses of the Faith*, p. 3 (manuscript, personal archive of K. Žemaitis).

was not just an individual affair. During the long years of Soviet occupation, certain schools were formed to provide assistance to the priests of the persecuted Church. Such schools became secretly operating monasteries.

Lithuanian priests drew courage from the personality of Pope John Paul II, as well as new ideas from underground publications and books imported from abroad, especially from Poland. Soviet atheist propaganda, which persecuted priests and wanted to turn them into people without higher education and present them as such in society, did not achieve its goals.

Keywords: priests, self-education, Soviet occupation, books, theology.

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