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## DECLARATION BY THE PRIESTS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN LITHUANIA DATED AUGUST, 1969.

EDITORIAL NOTE: This 1969 document is reproduced here because of its significance. The editors feel that it is of great importance in the whole issue of religious freedom in the USSR. The Declaration reflects one of the first official steps taken by the priests in Lithuania toward bringing the problems of religious freedom into public view. The editors will in future issues publish a series of current documents that indicate the degree and intensity of the struggle since these documents of 1969 for religious freedom in Soviet Occupied Lithuania.

To:  
The Chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers

Copies to:  
1. The Chairman of the Lithuanian SSR Council of Ministers,  
2. Catholic Church leaders in Lithuania

### DECLARATION

*by the Priests of the Catholic Church in Lithuania*

In his article "To the Country Poor," Lenin, generalizing the tasks of the social democratic party, wrote: "Social democrats demand that every person must have full liberty to freely profess any religion" (*Writings*, vol. 6, Vilnius, 1961, p. 364).

By criticizing the government of the czar and the means it used against those who had different beliefs, Lenin wrote: "Every person must have full freedom not only to profess any religion he wants, but also to publicize and change his faith... this is a matter of conscience and let no one dare to interfere in these matters" (*Writings of Lenin*, vol. 6, Moscow, 1946).

The USSR Constitution guarantees to its citizens freedom to practice any religion. The laws of the Soviet Union will defend the rights of the faithful to practice their religious rites. Article 143 of the Penal Law speaks about the penalties, if anyone interferes in the exercise of these rights. But in reality it is not so. The laws which protect the rights of the faithful are broken without consideration. The Catholic Church in Lithuania is condemned to die. The facts speak about this. If in 1940 there were four seminaries for priests in Lithuania and about 1,500 priests, then after 1944 there was only one seminary left, in Kaunas. About 400 seminarians used to flock to it from all the dioceses. In 1946, in the very midst of the school year, only 150 seminarians were permitted to stay. During the last few years, in all the five courses in the seminary, the limit is 30 seminarians. If a seminarian leaves or gets sick, no one is allowed to take his place. About 30 priests die in Lithuania every year, but only 5-6 are ordained. This year (1969) only three new priests were ordained. Already, at this time, many priests have to serve in two parishes. There is a good number of parishes where the pastor is 70 years old. Even invalids have to serve as pastors, for instance, in Turmantai.

Young people who want to enter the seminary meet many more difficulties than those who intend to go to other schools of higher education. The candidates are not chosen by the representatives of the Church, but by the officials of the government. This is not normal. What would we say if candidates for music would be selected by veterinarians or other specialists?

In January of 1969 the priests of the diocese of Vilkaviškis addressed themselves to the Chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers concerning this abnormal situation in the interdiocesan seminary in Kaunas. During the month of February of the same year they contacted the still active bishops and administrators of the dioceses about this same matter. Because of these moves, two priests, Rev. S. Tamkevičius ir Rev. J. Zdepskis, lost their work certificates. They had to seek other work, they cannot perform their priestly duties.

In 1940 there were 12 bishops in Lithuania, today there are only two left: bishop Matulaitis-Labukas, born in 1894, and bishop J. Pletkus, born in 1895. Two still effective and able bishops: J. Steponavičius (for 9 years) and V. Sladkevičius

(more than 10 years) have been deported to far away parishes (house arrest, tr.). Although according to Articles 62-69 of the Penal Code deportation is foreseen only for five years and that for grave offences, but what have our shepherds done, without any court action or proven guilt, to be punished for an indeterminate time?

From time immemorial Vilnius has been the center of religious life, but today this city is not allowed to have its bishop, even though other smaller religious communities, for instance, the Orthodox, have their bishop, and others some equivalent religious leader.

According to the Church Canon Law, the capitular vicars are only temporary administrators who are chosen when a bishop dies or leaves the office. The archdiocese of Vilnius and the diocese of Panevėžys now have been administered by capitular's vicars for 9 years, and that of Kaišiadorys for 23 years.

It is not always, even for those who have official authorization, that the bishops and administrators are permitted to visit the parishes and confer the Sacrament of Confirmation according to the canons of the Church. In the diocese of Panevėžys this sacrament has been conferred only once since 1961. In other dioceses it is permitted to be conferred only in the centers, for instance, in Vilnius, Kaunas, but very rarely in the regional cities. Those who want to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation have to travel from distant places, endure all the hardships with their small children. Thus great pressures and difficulties are created.

The pastoral work of the priests is being hindered in a number of ways: one is not allowed to help the neighboring parishes in religious services nor to invite the necessary number of priests on special occasions of devotion. The faithful who want to confess have to wait for a long time, suffer inconvenience and lose much of their precious time. On special days of devotion in some churches about 1000 people come for confession. If only three minutes would be given to each penitent, one priest would have to hear confessions for 50 hours, and this is impossible.

Specialists in all fields come together for conferences to perfect themselves and learn from the experience of others. The Church Canon Law also requires that the priests should make a three day retreat at least every three years. Such retreats at this time are forbidden not only at the diocesan centers, but also in the deaneries: even priests of one deanery are not permitted to get together.

Official representatives of the government (the Delegate\* of the government for religious affairs, leaders of the regions and districts) give various directives to the priests only by word of mouth. It happens that these orders contradict one another. For instance, a representative of the executive committee's chairman of the Varėna region forbade the pastor of Valkininkai to accompany the burial procession to the cemetery, while an agent for religious affairs instructed that the priest can go to the cemetery, but he cannot do the same from the home to the church. On April 15, 1969 an agent for religious affairs in Švenčionėliai, in the presence of government officials and the members of the church committee, told the pastor that when there is a priest in the procession of the deceased no hymns are allowed, but this can be done without the priests. If a person is buried with religious rites, an orchestra is not permitted; collective farms and organizations cannot help materially.

Catholics in Lithuania cannot avail themselves of the freedom of the press for their religious needs. They cannot make use of the radio and television, of movie theaters, schools, lectures. We do not possess even the most elementary religious textbook, prayerbook or other religious writings. During the Russian occupation not even one catechism was printed. Only in 1955 and 1958 a Catholic prayerbook was printed and in 1968 a liturgical prayerbook. But both of the editions had a very limited number of copies so that only a few families could acquire them. Besides, the liturgical prayerbook was supposed to include a short explanation of the truths of the faith, but the delegate for religious affairs would not allow this to be printed. The priests and the churches received only one copy of the Roman Catholic Ritual and documents of Vatican II were available only for the priests, one copy each. The faithful did not even have a chance to see these books.

Although the USSR Constitution guarantees freedom of conscience, and parents do want and request that their children would be educated in a religious spirit, the priests and the catechists, however, are forbidden to prepare children for their First Communion. The Delegate for religious affairs allows the children to be examined only individually. Those who do not follow this unwritten law are severely punished. For instance, the government officials have fined Rev. J. Fabijanskas for catechization; Rev. M. Gyls and Rev. J. Zdepskis were sent to a forced labor camp. In Anykščiai, Miss O. Paškevičiūtė prepared children for their first confession. For this she was deported to a forced labor camp, where there followed her over-exhaustion, sickness and death. Parents themselves have the right to prepare their children, but they have no means to do so: they are not prepared for this job, have no time or religious books. In like manner, during the czar's reign, workers and serfs could not make use of the right: to give their children higher education.

Children who frequent the church experience much abuse. They are made fun of, wall bulletins write about them. In schools, children are constantly taught that religious parents are backward, have no knowledge and can give them no directives. Thus the authority of the parents is destroyed. When children cease to respect their parents, it is difficult to control them both in the school and outside. Besides, religiously minded children are not allowed to take active part in the liturgy, sing in the choir, participate in processions, serve Mass. Thus the rights of the faithful children and parents are severely violated. They are harshly discriminated, coerced and forced to compromise others. For instance, on the 26th of December, 1967, the secondary school principal Baranauskas and other teachers in Švenčionėliai kept the II - VI class

students for two hours and a half until they forced them to write letters against the local pastor Rev. Laurinavičius. For one of those youngsters, J. Gaila, an ambulance had to be called because of the threats. Second class student K. Jarmalis was sick for a couple of months because of fear. The pastor, who allowed the children to serve Mass and participate in a procession, was removed from Švenčionėliai. The offended parents of those children turned to Moscow. How much time was lost, expenses incurred, health impaired? Just recently Rev. A. Deltuva was fined 50 rubles because he allowed the children to serve Mass.

According to the law, the convictions of one who believes and one who does not should equally be respected, but the practice goes its own way. In many hospitals, for instance, in Vilnius, Utena, Pasvalys, Anykščiai, even when sick people ask to receive the sacraments, their request is refused. In 1965 a driver, K. Semėnas, and Miss B. Sudeikytė married in the Church. By this act they lost their previous grant of a piece of land where they were going to build a house. Notwithstanding the fact that all the material was bought for the construction, they were told: "Let the priest give you land."

In Pasvalys, Anykščiai and other places, even taxi-cabs cannot bring the witness of the marrying couple to the church. There is much suffering for the intellectuals who secretly baptize their children, marry or attend Mass in the church. These facts are brought up at their work, often they are reprimanded or even lose their jobs. For instance, in 1965 Miss P. Cicėnaitė, a school teacher in Daugėliškis, was released from her work by the school director because she would not forsake the church. When the school officials told her to leave, she, wishing to have her book "clean," wrote a request to be released from work. Often the faithful are released from work or are punished because of their convictions, covering this fact with some other motives.

In 1956 the Pension Act bypassed the servants of the church. Organists and sacristans can only dream about pensions. For instance, Mr. P. Pagalskas joined a collective farm when the Soviets came to Lithuania. As all other citizens, he delivered his horse and farming tools to the authorities. He was working in the office of a collective farm as an accountant, on Sundays he used to play the organ in the church. When he had the misfortune to get sick and became an invalid and could not work in the office, he became a night watchman on a collective farm. When he reached old age (b. in 1889), he applied to the Social Welfare Office of the Ignalina Region. An answer came back from this office that organists do not receive any pension.

Many of the churches are not allowed to ring bells, use loudspeakers or any other technical means. Materials are not allotted for the upkeep of the churches. The cities are growing, but since 1945 only two churches have been built in Lithuania (one of which, in Klaipėda, has been turned into a music hall), many older churches are serving as storage places, museums and so forth.

These and many other painful facts which we have mentioned here show that the priests and the faithful are discriminated against and they cannot fully use those rights which the USSR Constitution guarantees them.

Consequently, we have dared to address ourselves to you, Mr. Chairman of the USSR Ministers, hoping that you will correct this unnatural situation of the Catholic Church in the Lithuanian SSR and see to it that we, the Lithuanian priests and faithful, as all other citizens do, will be able to exercise the rights as they are foreseen in the Constitution.

Signed by the Priests from the archdiocese of Vilnius: 40 signatures

August, 1969

*\* The Delegate for religious affairs is something like a commissioner who supervises all religious activities in occupied Lithuania. Ed.*