

THE RESISTANCE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN LITHUANIA AGAINST RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

Summary of Doctoral Dissertation

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The situation of the Catholic Church in Lithuania presents a special case of great concern that should be of interest to the whole Catholic Church and all Christians. The Second World War brought the greatest tragedy of all times to Catholic Lithuania. Nazi Germany signed a secret agreement with the Soviet Union in Moscow on the 23rd August, 1939, the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact — to partition Eastern Europe and especially the Baltic States: Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. As the German troops marched into Paris on the 14th June 1940, the Soviet Union at that time sent an ultimatum to the three Baltic States and immediately the Red Army with thousands of its tanks, airplanes, other war machinery and Secret Police units invaded Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia on the 15th June, 1940.

The Catholic Church immediately lost its legal rights as the Soviet Communist government gradually introduced Soviet Russian laws concerning religious denominations. An Iron Curtain descended on Lithuania's western border. In an attempt to force the Soviet system and the tenets of Communism upon the Lithuanian people — both of which were unacceptable to them — a veritable storm of terror and violence was let loose. Arrests, tortures and executions, the sudden disappearance of leading personalities in public life without a trace became an everyday occurrence.

The first mass deportations were carried out June 14th-22nd, 1941, and 40,000 people were deported to northern Russia in Siberia behind the Arctic Circle. Most of the deportees were confined to forced labor camps. The deportations were to destroy a large part of Lithuania and to make territory for Russian colonists. On June 22nd, 1941, Germany attacked Soviet Russia. Lithuanians saw but one thing: a chance to overthrow the Communist Soviet yoke and to regain their independence. A spontaneous and general revolt against Soviet rule broke out throughout Lithuania 22nd-24th June, 1941, and the insurgents succeeded in taking full control of chief cities and provincial towns. The fleeing Communist Red Army and the Soviet Security police killed an additional 1,500 Lithuanians. Fifteen priests were tortured and crucified. A Provisional Government of Lithuania was formed and declared the restoration of independent Lithuania, even before the German troops reached the capital. The German Nazis boycotted the Lithuanian Government, suppressed its activities and instituted a German civil administration.

The Russian armies in 1944 swarmed over Lithuania again, subjecting the people to brutal treatment. Thirteen waves of mass deportations to Siberia were carried out between 1945-1950. According to Lithuanians and experts of other nations, the number of genocide victims comes to 1.1 million people, about 36 percent of all Lithuanian inhabitants. The majority of deportees perished as a consequence of inhuman conditions and bad treatment. Armed resistance was organized in Lithuania. The Freedom Fighters bitterly fought the war of liberation for eight years; they were willing to sacrifice their lives in order to regain freedom and independence; they deemed it better to die defending their countrymen than live as virtual slaves. One of their leaders fought his way to the West with another survivor, brought an Appeal to the Holy Father Pius XII from Lithuanian Catholics pledging their loyalty to the Apostolic See and asking consoling words and assurance of the Catholic world that their children shall no longer suffer in spiritual slavery.

When Soviet Russia occupied Lithuania, all publishing and printing houses were nationalized, millions of religious and history books were removed from libraries and sent to paper factories for repulping. What is the meaning of this destruction of a cultural Lithuanian Christian heritage? — It is the fear of truth, the desire to keep the new generation ignorant, the wish

to freely utter any lie which slanders the Lithuanian past. A total of 448 churches and chapels in Lithuania have been closed, with the remaining 574 still open. The faithful are permitted to use them upon payment of very high taxes.

Elections were sovietized and compulsory. A single communist electoral ticket is drawn up with the number of candidates exactly identical to the number of seats to be filled. So called elections are an attempt to fool the free world and to intimidate the voters so that they will obey the Soviet Communist regime.

Under Soviet Law in Lithuania, any form of religious instruction to children is forbidden. Instead, children are forced to join the atheist and Communist Youth organizations in schools. Those who do not wish to join are intimidated. Those who are forcibly enrolled in atheist organizations are forced to speak against their own and their parents' convictions. Children are persecuted for attending church.

One of the most detrimental facts to the Catholic Faith and morals of the Lithuanian people is the mass recruiting of people by all possible means to become informers for the KGB — such as bribery, blackmail, the threat of being discharged from work. These techniques are employed as attractive promises of higher education and furthering one's career. Those who do not agree to become informers are threatened with all sorts of punishments.

The treatment of Church administration.

The decade 1944-1954 must be considered the most horrifying in the entire 1,000 years of Lithuania's history. Had the same policies continued in effect for a longer time, not only religion would have been wiped out, but the Lithuanian nation itself would have been annihilated. Nearly every priest in Lithuania was required to present himself for interrogation at one of the 480 centers of terror set up throughout the country. At these centers, the Soviets demanded that each priest sign a loyalty oath, a promise to spy on his own people and to make reports to the police. He was also required to help organize The Living Church, which was to be independent of Rome and loyal to the government of Soviet Russia. As a result of these terror acts, the Bishop of Telšiai, Vincentas Borisevičius, was shot by the firing squad, 100 priests were imprisoned and another 180 priests and three bishops were deported to the concentration camps in Siberia.

The main attack came in the form of great moral pressures, since physical terror only seemed to strengthen and unify the faithful. The Church was the chief obstacle in the view of Moscow's plan to merge and submerge little Lithuania into the giant Soviet Russian empire. It was the Church, said the Communists, which fused the national and religious view into a single ideological battle-front. It is the priests, in the eyes of the Communist Party, who are incorrigible reactionaries and deadly enemies of Soviet order. It is the priests, who bear the greatest responsibility for the failure of the atheistic propaganda to achieve its desired objects. A sermon on even the most innocent religious topic is offensive to the Communists, for they regard the sermon as an aid to spread and perpetuate religious superstitions which Communism strives to eradicate.

Legal resistance, harassment of seminarians.

In December 1971, a group of Catholics took the initiative for the most organized and massive Memorandum yet written by Lithuanians signed by 17,054 Catholics, and sent to the United Nations General Secretary about religious persecution in Lithuania. The Soviet regime was outraged by the Lithuanian Catholics for defending religious freedom and the fact that they gained the world's admiration.

Frequent petitions to the Soviet government emerge spontaneously. They are not answered, but people continue writing against officials of the regime who destroy order and violate human rights. In these circumstances an underground journal **The Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania**, came into being March 19, 1972, which publishes texts of statements by believers and clergy, protesting against religious discrimination and suppression, court proceedings against the clergy and laymen for religious activities.

Communist government restrictions have driven one part of the Church into the underground such as the convents, the nuns, the friars, the preparation of theology students, even some ordinations.

The seminaries at Vilkaviškis, Telšiai, and Vilnius were closed, while the seminary in Kaunas was permitted to operate on a very limited scale. The KGB continues with every effort to recruit seminarians as agents. Applicants to the seminary are screened by the KGB and told: "If you do not work for us, you will not be admitted to the seminary." Seminarians are compelled to give written pledges to provide the information required by the security police. The recruiting of seminarians and priests for the subversion of the Church is one of the worst crimes of the KGB.

For the Soviet atheist, the struggle against religion is not a goal in itself, but the most suitable means for consolidating and extending Russian imperialism as it most clearly appears in the occupied Baltic States: Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, incorporated into the Soviet Union.

The ranks of the clergy were depleted by the deportations, arrests and normal deaths. Today, 600 of 700 priests in Lithuania have been in Soviet jails and concentration camps in Siberia. Persecution of religion, waves of arrests, mock

trials and imprisonment hardened rather than weakened the determination of the priests and faithful. Priests defend the rights of believers as well as those of their bishops and their own colleagues.

The Committee for monitoring the Helsinki Agreement

was formed in Lithuania in November 25, 1976, and sent a series of documents to the West detailing various violations of human rights in Soviet-occupied Lithuania. The Soviet authorities became furious. How dare their slaves reveal Soviet perpetrated persecutions? Members of the Committee were arrested and put on mock trial and sent to concentration camps for 10 and 15 years.

The Catholic Committee for the Defense of the Rights of Believers was created on November 22, 1978. The Committee acted publicly by publishing about 50 documents, but did not seek any political goals. They are invaluable weapons in the struggle for religious freedom. The Soviet government silently tolerated the activity of the Catholic Committee, but later lost its patience and began to terrorize the members of the Committee. Two members of the Committee, Father Alfonsas Svarinskas and Father Sigitas Tamkevičius, were summoned in 1983 and sentenced to seven years in concentration camps and three years in Siberian exile.

Our concern of solidarity is with the Catholic Church in Lithuania under the atheistic Communist regime, which is seeking to completely paralyze religious activity and to destroy religion. Catholic and Christian news media should report facts of persecution, write commentaries, treatises, suggest prayers, letters to the persecutors, diplomatic efforts, etc.

Towards a Theology of Persecution.

The Lithuanian experience of religious persecution under the Soviet Communist occupational regime and its heroic struggle for religious freedom could lead theologians toward a new understanding and formulation of a Theology of Religious Persecution. Theologians of our time, like the prophets of the Old Testament, are supposed to be beacon lights in the darkness that envelops human existence today. They should, among other things, manifest and express the vital reaction of faith to people without faith. Theology today, if it is to maintain a grip on concrete reality, needs to focus carefully upon the crucial problems of religious persecution. Our great concern is with the Catholic Church in Lithuania. This concern needs to be adequate to the reality of persecution, as it is experienced in Lithuania.

Technical concepts of a Religious Persecution theology are necessary if a science is to develop, because accumulated experience can only become fruitful after the achievement of an exact understanding. This scientific theology can then be available for further use by formulating a determined concept.

Theology of Religious Persecution therefore could be defined as a science by drawing from the principles of religious freedom, human rights and man's dignity and investigating the reliable facts of Christian persecution, exposing instances of religious suppression and promoting Christian solidarity to defend the Church and in its struggle for religious freedom against the persecutors.

The Theology of Religious Persecution must also seek to deal realistically with the evil and injustice in the world, and not to compromise with the persecutors. Ultimately, it may turn out to be the theology of action if it is to be effective. It must be founded in facts and must speak for those whose right to believe is threatened. Nothing is more dangerous to mankind than ignorance of evil and violence.

The Second Vatican Council published a series of important documents. Its **Declaration on Religious Liberty** states the general principles of Religious Freedom, then indicates Religious Freedom in the light of Revelation, exhorts Catholics and directs an appeal to all men to consider with great care how necessary religious liberty is, especially in the present condition of the human family. It was also a great historical event of deep theological significance, when on December 10, 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted and proclaimed the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights and of Religious Freedom**.

Communism in theory and practice has been the subject of many papal documents and statements. Pius IX solemnly condemned it in 1846, because from the beginning, Karl Marx with his collaborator Friedrich Engels, in the **Communist Manifesto**, began to spread their materialistic doctrine. Pope Leo XIII dealt with Communism at length in the encyclical **Quod Apostolici Muneris** in 1878 and defined it as the deadly plague which is tainting society to its very core. Pope Pius XI carefully analyzed the fundamental errors of Communism in his encyclical **Divini Redemptoris** in 1937, and stated that "Communism is intrinsically wrong." The first encyclical of Pope John Paul II, **Redemptor hominis** is very important, because in it he gives the answer to the Communist Manifesto and emphatically declares that the Redeemer of man is Jesus Christ and not Communism.

In a State where Communist anti-Christian forces are set up against God, for world-domination and the extermination of Christ and his Church, Lithuanian Catholics, priests and laymen courageously defend the truth, the human rights. Christ is their radiating center. Lithuanian resistance and the affirmation of universal principles of rights and duties are applicable not only to Christians but also to all human beings. For that reason, all men of good will should support them.

Father P. Dauknys, in his dissertation, has described and analyzed the martyrdom of the Catholic Church in Lithuania under the atheistic Communist Soviet Union's occupation regime. He wrote of the great danger of resolved annihilation of the faith, the Russification of the Lithuanian Catholic nation, and he described its resistance, its heroic struggle for religious freedom, human rights and its survival.

Since the election of Pope John Paul II, who firmly supports the persecuted Church, there has been an extraordinary response provoked by Catholics and non-Catholics. The Soviet Communist regime is reluctant to crush those who are receiving continued media attention in the West.

The Catholic Lithuanian nation's struggle for freedom during the past and present, the enormous sacrifices and sufferings undergone have demonstrated to the world the resolve of the Lithuanian Christian spirit to maintain its identity under any circumstances, at any price. It is tragic that to this day Lithuania has hardly received even moral support from the countries of the world.

The Decree **Christus Dominus** of the Second Vatican Council urges the bishops of the entire world to show particular love and concern for those priests, who suffer various persecutions for Christ. It urges bishops to assist persecuted priests by prayer and support. Moreover, it urges all the faithful, especially those in higher positions, to boldly defend the faithful, who are being persecuted. Lithuanian Catholics are waiting for those decrees to be zealously put into practice.