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Preparing Children for First Communion in Soviet Lithuania

Abstract: The Soviet constitution discriminated against religious believers by not allowing any religious propaganda, while atheist propaganda was enshrined in law. Catechisation of children was forbidden and persecuted during the Soviet era. Religious classes were not allowed, and the organisation of such classes in the Catholic Church was forbidden. However, catechesis did take place: parents, priests, nuns, but it was not only the adults who taught the children who were persecuted, but also the children themselves. However, this persecution had little effect because the government's anti-religious activities were perceived as the workings of a government that was so disliked, ridiculed and embraced. Religious awareness was often linked to national identity and resistance. Of course, the religiousness of the people and the authority of the church and the priest, which was still quite high at that time, played a very important role in the attitudes of children and young people. It is important to mention that many priests, nuns and lay people were punished with imprisonment and other punishments for catechising children.

Keywords: Mary, Lithuania, Soviet era, children's catechesis, persecution.

The years of Soviet occupation in Lithuania can be divided into two periods. The first covers the period from the beginning of the occupation on 15 June 1940 until the beginning of the war on 22 June 1941, when the Red Army began to retreat and Lithuania was occupied by the Germans. The second period is the return of the Russian (Soviet) army in the summer of 1944. It lasted a long time – until 1990 when Lithuania's independence was declared. However, even after that, special squads were still on the rampage for some time, and it was not until 31 August 1993 (a few days before the arrival of Pope John Paul) that the entire Soviet army left Lithuania.

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This article will focus on this second period – the return of the Russian (Soviet) troops in the summer of 1944. This is not an easy task, as there are very few archival sources. Many of the facts related to this topic are recorded in the underground press of the time, specifically in the publication *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania*, or in eyewitness recollections. Therefore, the method of analysis will attempt to describe and evaluate the unique ways in which children and young people were prepared for First Communion (and confession), the responsibility of the people who prepared them, and the administrative and criminal proceedings carried out by the Soviet authorities. This is all the more so since the Soviet Constitution itself discriminated against believers by not allowing any religious propaganda, while atheist propaganda was enshrined in law. This is all the more so since the Russian Criminal Code was introduced in Lithuania as early as 1940, during the first Soviet occupation, and remained in force until 1961. Thus, people were tried and punished under Russian law.

Catechists are a family and religious sisters

Soon after the reoccupation of Lithuania, crosses were removed from schools and religious lessons were banned. Families still had old pre-war religious books and catechisms. The main catechism in Lithuania before the Second World War was the „Catechism of the Catholic Faith” by Bishop Kazimieras Paltarokas of Panevėžys¹. It was then published for the eighth time with a print run of more than 100,000 copies. This was quite a large quantity for Lithuania. Quite a number of booklets of this catechism remained undestroyed during the war and were used by people. Religious literature and catechisms were printed in a very simple way underground. Such literature was taken care of by the nuns² and priests³ and diocesan priests, as many of them had a library of religious books in the underground. This underground literature reached primarily young people⁴.

Although the active Catholic part of society was scattered, some in Siberia, others in prisons, it was still faithful, aware of the truths of the faith. And the education of children was very often carried out at home by parents and grandparents. However, if the parents were teachers or other civil servants, their preparation of the children for First Communion sometimes resulted in repression. For example, a teacher in Vilkaviskis, Ona Brilienė, was dismissed from her job in 1970 because one of her co-workers complained that she had seen a picture of Brilienė's children's First Communion⁵.

¹ K. Paltarokas, *Katalikų tikybos katekizmas (The Catechism of the Catholic Faith)*, approved for the dioceses of Lithuania, eighth edition, Kaunas 1933.

² A. Streikus, D.K. Kuzmickaitė, V. Šimkūnas, *Iš sovietinės patirties į laisvės erdvę: vienuolių Lietuvoje XX a. Antroje pusėje*, Vilnius 2015, p. 106.

³ Ibidem, p. 107.

⁴ Ibidem, p. 126.

⁵ *The Persecution of the Teacher O. Briliene*, LKBK („Lietuvos Katalikų Bažnyčios Kronika”), no. 3, 1972.

Thus, catechesis for children usually began at home. Many recall their preparation for First Communion in a similar way: „I was maybe in the fifth grade. My mother was very hard-working and devoted. She taught me the truths of the faith, the potions”⁶. „She taught me many things about the faith, how to make confession, how to receive Holy Communion and how to make the first sacrament. She taught me how to make confession, taught me how to take communion, took me to the parish priest. He asked questions, taught me more, and so I received the sacraments without much ceremony, in the presence of my mother. But it was a great event in my life”⁷. And so it was in many families.

Sometimes parents would ask more prepared people to teach their children. These were both nuns and lay people, but these people were really risking their personal lives. The Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania, secretly published by Fr Sigitas Tamkevičius⁸ in 1971, informed both Lithuanian and foreign publics: „On 13 January 1972, the People’s Court of Naujoji Akmenė heard the case of the seventy-year-old woman Kleopa Bičiūcaitė from Žagar. She had committed an offence against Soviet law by preparing children for First Communion. Twenty-seven witnesses, mostly children aged 7-14, were called to confirm her guilt. When, K. Bičiūcaitė herself confessed that she had taught the children potheria in 6 days in July 1971, these witnesses were not even necessary – they only hindered the smooth running of the trial, as they gave very contradictory testimony. Seeing that some of the children denied what the others said, the judge began to check the political awareness of the children: how many of them belonged to the Pioneer organisation. Only four said they were pioneers⁹. In his speech, the prosecutor recalled that the Constitution allows all citizens to freely practise any religion they wish or to be atheists. No one can restrict this freedom and no coercion is involved. But the Soviet system fights against religion and deception because it cannot tolerate religion deceiving its citizens¹⁰. According to the Constitution, the Church is separated from the State and the school from the Church. The defendant Biciucciate taught children in an organised way such poetry as Our Father, Hail Mary, I believe in God, Angel of the Lord, Ten Commandments. The Soviet system cannot allow this. It cannot allow anyone to teach children differently than they are taught in school”¹¹.

⁶ K. Žemaitis, *Praeities įvykių fiksavimas*, Marijampolė 2024, p. 2 (manuscript, personal archive of K. Žemaitis).

⁷ Ibidem, p. 3.

⁸ Tamkevičius Sigitas (1938 November 7 Gudonyse, Lazdijai District). Ordained a priest in 1962, consecrated a bishop in 1991, Archbishop of Kaunas 1996-2015, editor of the Chronicle of the LCWR, member of the Committee of the TGC, persecuted, imprisoned. Cardinal since 2019.

⁹ This fact shows that at that time, a large number of young people resisted and did not join communist organisations.

¹⁰ This clearly reveals the true Soviet freedom, the text of which was interpreted in the Constitution in a completely opposite way.

¹¹ *The trial of Kleopa Bičiūcaitė, from Akmenė, concerning the preparation of children for First Communion*, LKBK, no. 1, 1972.

In the first post-war decades, there was a rather religious generation. And it was forced to take care of the catechisation of young people, because it was considered a crime for a priest even to communicate with people, especially young people. The Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania recorded the following case: „On 3 December 1971 the pastor of Margininkai, Fr. Petras Orlickas was punished for violating Article 143 of the Criminal Code of Soviet Lithuania¹² – playing volleyball with children!”¹³. This is ridiculous nowadays, but in the Soviet era it was reality. So, we can see that the legal framework back then also created conditions where anyone could be punished just for speaking in public about religious issues. It was also written in the Soviet Constitution that a citizen has the right to believe, and only an atheist can spread his ideology¹⁴. On this basis, even parents could only teach their children about the faith in very private.

However, parents, grandparents and aunts were able to prepare children and young people for the sacraments. Sometimes strangers were approached who had the knowledge, the ability and the courage to take the risk of taking on the secret work of a catechist. Here the nuns helped. They were very important helpers since the beginning of the reoccupation, when it was forbidden for priests to teach religious subjects to children not only in schools but also in churches¹⁵. In 1969, on the initiative of Sister Gemma Jadwiga Stadalyte¹⁶ (Congregation of the Servants of Jesus in the Eucharist (Pontifical Rights)), the Movement of the Friends of the Eucharist¹⁷ was formed. This movement has touched thousands and educated young people. Its significance is described in more detail by Bishop Jonas Kauneckas, who was active in the Friends of the Eucharist at that time. The Movement became a very interesting and attractive not only for the worship of the Eucharist, but also a form of catechesis¹⁸. It was easier for the Sisters to find official employment in pre-

¹² Article 143. Violation of the Laws on the Separation of the Church from the State and the School – from the Church Violation of the Laws on the Separation of the Church from the State and the School – shall be punishable by deprivation of liberty for up to one year, or by correctional labour for the same period, or by a fine of up to one hundred roubles. Criminal Code of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic, adopted on 26 June 1961.

¹³ *Punishment of Margininkai pastor Petras Orlickas for playing volleyball with children*, LK BK, no. 1, 1972.

¹⁴ Citizens of the Lithuanian SSR are guaranteed freedom of conscience, i.e. the right to profess any religion or none at all, to practise religious cults or to conduct atheist propaganda. Incitement to discord and hatred in connection with religious beliefs is prohibited. The Church in the Lithuanian SSR shall be separated from the State, and the school from the church. (Constitution of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic. Article 50 Basic Law) Adopted at the extraordinary ninth session of the ninth convocation of the Supreme Soviet of the Lithuanian SSR on April 20, 1978 (Official Gazette of the Supreme Soviet and the Government of the Lithuanian SSR, 1978, no. 11-130).

¹⁵ R. Laukaitytė, *Lietuvos vienuolijos*, Vilnius 1997, p. 153.

¹⁶ Congregation of the Sisters of the Handmaids of Jesus in the Eucharist (papal rights).

¹⁷ A. Streikus, D.K. Kuzmickaitė, V. Šimkūnas, *Iš sovietinės patirties į laisvės erdvę...*, op. cit., p. 45.

¹⁸ J. Kauneckas, *Prieš visus vėjus*, Vilnius 1922, p. 191.

school institutions, as the Sisters of the Sorrowful ones did in Utena¹⁹, influencing the children in their care, while at the same time laying at least some foundations for the reception of the sacraments.

Punishments of priests for teaching children

There were many brave priests in Lithuania. Many of them were already hardened by imprisonment, exile and persecution. „During the 50 years of Soviet occupation, the people of Lithuania suffered a great deal: they were intimidated, interrogated, imprisoned, deported and killed, and their consciences broken. The physical genocide of the people was particularly brutal during the post-war years of Stalin's rule (1944-1953). It did not bypass the clergy of the Lithuanian Catholic Church. According to MGB²⁰ documents, 270 priests were convicted for anti-Soviet activities in Lithuania during this period. „MVD documents state that in 1952 a 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 Episcopate of Lithuania was hit even harder. In the post-war years, Bishop Antanas Karosas of Vilkaviškis died, and Bishops Vincentas Borisevičius, Teofilus Matulionis, Pranas Ramanauskas and Archbishop Mečislovas Reinys were all subject to repression. In 1947, only one bishop remained in Lithuania – Kazimieras Paltarokas. (...) Vincentas Borisevičius was shot in 1946, Archbishop Mečislovas Reinys died in prison”²¹. After such repressions, there was not much left to be frightened of. Therefore, priests quietly, secretly or openly took up catechesis for children. Those who taught the faith publicly in churches and prepared for First Confession and First Communion were punished. This clash between the courage of the priests and the arbitrariness of the Soviets was especially evident around 1972²² when the nation as a whole began to see bolder protests against the government and the rise of the underground press. But then the terror against the Catholic Church began again and priests were punished with imprisonment. And now priests find themselves in prison for teaching children the truths of the faith. The underground press announced: „In the large parish of Prienai, about 300 children are prepared for First Communion every year. On July 16, 1971, the children and their mothers gathered in the Prienai church for catechisation. Fr. While Zdebskis was explaining and questioning the children, a group of officials broke into the church. They took photographs of the children, asked for their names and staged the act. There was a commotion in the church”²³. Fr Zdebski did not

¹⁹ St. Congregation of the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary (papal rights).

²⁰ MGB – Ministry of State Security (Russian: Ministerstvo gosudarstvennoj bezopasnosti).

²¹ V. Spengla, *Atlikę pareigą*, Vilnius. 1997, p. 9-10.

²² V. Spengla, *Bažnyčia, „Kronika” ir KGB voratinklis*, Vilnius 2001.

²³ *Juozas Zdebskis, priest of Prienai, case in 1971 on catechisation of children*, LKKB, no.1, p. 1, 1972.

escape jail²⁴. Other priests also tasted prison bread. Here, „P. Bubnys, the parish priest of Girkalnis, told the congregation that parents should bring their children to the church for inspection. The parents did so, until one day a group of representatives of the Raseiniai District Executive Committee broke into the church. When the representatives found the children waiting for the priest in the church, they began to capture them and drag them through the town to the firemen's headquarters, where they forced them, by threats and intimidation, to write declarations stating that the priest, Bubnys, had taught them the truths of faith. The children were so frightened that they even cried, and some of them even fell ill afterwards”²⁵. Already in 1945, priest Bubnys was arrested and imprisoned in Siberian camps. After his return to Lithuania, he continued to be brave and zealous. In 1971-72 he was again imprisoned for catechising children.

There were other punishments for priests: „Fr. A. Šeškevičius was sentenced by the Molėtai District People's Court to one year's imprisonment in a harsh regime camp for religious teaching of children on 9 September 1970. On 9th of September, 1971, after finishing his sentence, he appealed to the governor of the Kaišiadorys diocese, asking to be appointed to a parish. The representative of the RRT²⁶ refused to give him a registration certificate²⁷ and ordered him to work in a different specialty on the grounds that he had not complied with the Soviet laws”²⁸. This often happened to priests.

Priests were often punished by being transferred to another parish. It was not on the initiative of the bishop or the diocesan governor that such a priest was transferred to some small and distant parish, but at the request of the Soviet authorities to the curia. Of course, this was done unofficially, simply by forcing the bishop or governor to act against his will. Disobedient bishops were expelled from the diocese, and physical and psychological terror was used against them²⁹. The Seleucid priest Dumbliauskas Petras is an example of such a crackdown. He was pastor of Šunskiai in 1972. He describes his efforts to prepare children for First Communion: „When the preparation of children for First Communion began, at the same time new troubles and hardships began,

²⁴ The priest Juozas Zdebskis was arrested in 1964 and 1971 for catechising children and imprisoned both times for one year each.

²⁵ The case of Fr Prosper Bubnis, pastor of Girkalnis, 1971, concerning the catechisation of children.

²⁶ The RRT, the Council for Religious Affairs, has not only controlled but also obstructed priests in the performance of their duties. Once a priest's work certificate was taken from him, he could not carry out his priestly ministry in his place of assignment and had to look for work elsewhere. Here are priests Juozas Zdebskis and Sigitas Tamkevičius (bishop since 1991, cardinal since 1919).

²⁷ A bishop could not appoint a priest without the permission of individual officials of the Soviet government.

²⁸ Rev. The persecution of Antanas Šeškevičius, from Molėtai, in 1970-1971 after he had already served his sentence.

²⁹ S. Kiškis, *Archbishop Teofilus Matulionis*, Vilnius 2008, p. 142; K. Žemaitis, *Blessed Teofilus Matulionis – A Witness to the Faith of Modern Times*, „Studia Elckie” 23(2021), no. 1, p. 89-96.

because the catechising of children was strictly forbidden. When I was teaching the children the truths of the faith, a trustworthy woman would stand guard outside and, if she saw anything suspicious, she would give a sign, and I would kneel before the altar and say the Rosary, and the children and their parents would speak with me. When the authorities came to the church, they would stand and look at me and there was nothing to do but leave the church. Of course, they knew that I was teaching, but when they saw such a sight, there was nothing they could do, but you can't outsmart the Chekists"³⁰. However, the enemy forces of the church were greater and the priest fell for it. He remembers: „They set up an ambush, somehow they arrived unnoticed, hid somewhere and when the children came to the church, suddenly they appeared. Then they found about 45 children, parents and of course me. Six of them came in. (...) They wrote a report, counted the children and noted that there were catechisms on the pews. Clear proof that children were being taught religious subjects before Soviet law. Again I was dragged around the government offices with warnings and threats. Rumours were started that if it was the day of First Communion, a festival, trucks would come and take away both the children and the priest, but they didn't say where they would take them... The celebration of First Communion was beautiful, harmonious, without any disturbances or any unpleasantness"³¹. However, Pastor Dumbliauskas was moved to a small parish in Liubavas, in the border area, where people were not allowed to enter without special permission. He was thus isolated from the wider society for an extended period of time³².

However, many priests have done their duty at risk. In his diary in 1970, Cardinal Sigitas Tamkevičius (then Vicar of Simnas) wrote: „After the votive Mass, I prepare the children for their first confession and Holy Communion"³³. S. Tamkevičius took a long risk. The authorities took their revenge. The Cardinal was interrogated for half a year in Vilnius Prison, and then, from 1983 to 1988, he was imprisoned in the Soviet camps of Perm and Mordovia.

Soviet officials did not shy away from attacking even bishops. For example, Bishop Vincentas Sladkevičius of Kaišiadorys³⁴, who was exiled by the Soviet authorities to a completely different diocese, settled in the parish of Nemunelis Radviliškis near Latvia, was performing the duties of a parish priest. He was catechising children and was attacked. A district prosecutor, a policeman, a correspondent and other officials came to the church. The bishop was

³⁰ *Memories of Fr Petras Dumbliauskas SDB from Šunskiai parish*, Marijampolė 2008, p. 2 (manuscript, personal archive of K. Žemaitis).

³¹ *Ibidem*.

³² K. Žemaitis, *Praeities įvykių fiksavimas*, op. cit., p. 3.

³³ S. Tamkevičius, *Priespaudos, kovos ir nelaisvės metai 1968-1988*, Vilnius 1992, p. 33.

³⁴ Vincent Sladkevičius (1920 August 20 – 2000 May 28 Kaunas), 25 December 1957. Secretly consecrated bishop, exiled by the Soviet authorities, allowed to return to Kaišėdoris in 1982 to govern the diocese. In 1988, Pope John Paul II appointed the new Bishop of Lithuania. In 1989 he was appointed Archbishop of Kaunas.

examining the children. Although the parents of the children were also present in the church. The bishop was interrogated in the prosecutor's office³⁵.

Children's posture

Not only the adults who taught the children, but also the children themselves were harassed: called names, had their behaviour evaluated less and were posted on „shame” boards³⁶. However, such persecution had little impact, as the anti-religious activities of the authorities were perceived as the workings of a government that was so disliked, ridiculed and embraced. In this case, the pupils were more respectful of their (more or less) religious parents than of the leaders of the pioneer organisation or other functionaries. Here in the parish of Lukšių (perhaps three thousand Catholics) in 1982, the pupils gathered bravely and solemnly for the celebration of First Communion. And these were mass events in many parishes, people were becoming more courageous and the authorities were already „tired”. The Brezhnev era was „coming to an end”³⁷. Even the children, when interrogated, stood firm and wise and did not betray their catechists. Sister Elzbieta in Marijampolė used to teach the children, preparing them for their first confession and First Communion. A group would gather in the homes of some parents and then others. Sister Elzbieta was arrested, interrogated, and the children were also interrogated, but she did not betray her teacher, and defended³⁸. Cardinal Sigitas Tamkevičius also testifies to the consciousness of the youth of that time³⁹.

What has driven this awareness and sometimes militancy among young people? In the Soviet era, there were still very vivid memories of the post-war period, of the partisans who fought, of the crimes of the Soviet government. Many families were involved in the Siberian deportation, the expropriation of private property without compensation and other injustices. Patriotic feelings contributed to the resistance against the occupying power and its brutal ideology. The Church was the main resistance institution at that time. Religiousness, the authority of the church and the priest, which was still quite weak at that time, played a very important role in the attitude of children and young people. These factors educated and hardened interwar society.

Conclusions

During the Soviet occupation, the Catholic Church was persecuted and it was difficult to keep archives of various events. Today, we can find information

³⁵ S. Tamkevičius, *Priespaudos...*, op. cit., p. 57.

³⁶ K. Žemaitis, *Praeities įvykių fiksavimas*, op. cit., p. 2.

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 3.

³⁸ *The Monastery of the Poor Sisters of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, Kaunas 2012, p. 196-197 (compiled by A. Pajarskaitė).

³⁹ S. Tamkevičius, *Priespaudos...*, op. cit., p. 107.

about the crimes of the authorities of that time in the underground press or in the literature that is currently appearing, mostly in memoirs. In the Soviet era, the catechisation of children was forbidden and persecuted. There were no religious classes, and it was not allowed to organise such classes in churches, so the truths of the faith were usually passed on to children in the family by their parents or other close relatives. The preparation of children for the sacraments of Confession and First Communion was done by people who were more prepared for it, especially nuns. A number of nuns were persecuted and punished for catechising children. The priests did most of the work in catechising children. Most of them were sentenced to prison terms. However, the believing people resisted atheisation.

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