



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC LETTER
SESCENTESIMA ANNIVERSARIA
OF THE SUPREME PONTIFF
JOHN PAUL II
ON THE OCCASION
OF THE SIXTH CENTENARY
OF THE "BAPTISM" OF LITHUANIA

*To my Venerable Brother Liudas Povilonis
Apostolic Administrator of Kaunas
and Vilkauskis
President of the Lithuanian
Episcopal Conference
and to the other Bishops of Lithuania*

1. THE SIX HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY of the "Baptism" of our Nation, which you are solemnly celebrating in this year of grace, is for you and your people an occasion for the deepening of faith, of prayer and of spiritual renewal, in which the whole Church is united with intense and fraternal participation. As I have recalled in various circumstances - and most recently in my homily at the Mass on 1 January last - the whole Church commemorates with you this very significant anniversary and with you gives thanks "to God for his inexpressible gift" (2 Cor 9:15). The Church in Rome and all the sister Churches throughout the world join you in the fervent prayer of thanksgiving that you are raising to the Lord for the inestimable grace of the "Baptism", for the welcome which it met among your people and for the benefits which it brought them, and for the strength and fervour with which your fathers preserved it and developed it amid the vicissitudes of a history six centuries long.

The universal Church is aware of and grateful for the great spiritual wealth which the Lithuanian Catholic community has brought and still brings to the ecclesial communion and recognizes in its centuries-old witness of fidelity to Christ tire action of the Holy Spirit, who "by the power of the Gospel makes the Church grow, perpetually renews her, and leads her to perfect union with her Spouse ".(1)

As you know, in order to manifest this universal communion with you, on 28 June next, simultaneously with the national celebration in Vilnius, I shall preside at the tomb of the Apostle Peter at a solemn concelebration, during which I shall have the joy of beatifying a great son and Pastor of your people, Archbishop Jurgis Matulaitis. At my side will be representatives of the Episcopates of the European continent their presence will express visibly our spiritual closeness to the Church which is in Lithuania.

2. The conversion of the Lithuanian peoples to Christianity took place some centuries after that of the neighbouring peoples of old Europe. Squeezed as in a vice between the East, from which the Slav peoples pressed close, and the West, from which came the powerful Teutonic Knights, your forefathers, already at the dawn of the thirteenth century, had consolidated the structures of an autonomous State, and were tenaciously committed to defending its independence and freedom. These specific political and geographical circumstances explain why the Lithuanians for so long resisted accepting the Cross from those who came against them with the sword and threatened to reduce them to subjection.

It was precisely in order to escape from external pressures that, in 1251, the Grand Duke Mindaugas decided to embrace the Catholic faith and placed himself under the special protection of this Apostolic See, obtaining from Pope Innocent IV the royal crown. The Pope at the same time erected the first Lithuanian diocese and decreed that it be subject solely to the Holy See. But the conversion of Mindaugas, which was not adequately prepared, met resistance among the people, who did not follow the example of the Grand Duke. Even before the year 1260 the Bishop had to withdraw and in 1263 the tragic death of Mindaugas put an end to that shortlived spring.

3. Over a century had to go by before the bright day of the "Baptism" shone forth. This was the work and merit of an illustrious son of Lithuania, the Grand Duke Jogaila, who in 1386 agreed to be baptized together with his subjects into the Catholic faith, and obtained the crown of Poland and the hand of Queen Jadwiga, the exemplary figure of a Christian woman, still venerated today in Cracow as Blessed. For the next four centuries, the history of Lithuania is marked by a singular identity of destiny - political and religious - with Poland. In 1387, the King - who had taken the name of Ladislaus II - returned to Vilnius, the capital of the Grand Duchy, and set in hand the conversion of the people, who received mass Baptism, thanks also to the personal dedication of the King. In that year the Diocese of Vilnius was founded and the Franciscan Andrew, who had already been a missionary among your people, was named as the first Bishop.

In 1413 Jogaila, with his cousin the Grand Duke Vytautas, devoted himself to the evangelization of the Lithuanian population of Samogitia. A few years later, the Council of Constance designated for that region certain of its own Legates, in order to erect the Diocese of Medininkai, to consecrate the first Bishop, Matthias, and to bring to completion the conversion of the population. King Jogaila, a man of simple and noble heart, led an exemplary Life of Christian virtue, practising works of piety and mercy and with lively zeal concerning himself with the destiny of the Church. He adopted wise provisions for favouring the free dissemination and establishment of the Christian faith in all the territories of the Grand Duchy.

4. The "Baptism" made your Nation a part of the great family of the Christian peoples of Europe, in that "Christianitas" which profoundly marked the destinies of the continent and constituted its most precious common inheritance and the foundation for the construction of a future of peace, authentic progress and true liberty. Lithuania thus entered also into the great cultural transformation which was beginning in Europe in that century, a transformation permeated by Christian

principles and open to the exigencies of a new humanism which in the faith found its loftiest motivations and the cue for the promotion of the great values which have made glorious the history of Europe and made its presence beneficial in other continents.(2)

Lithuania drew from this new and promising membership an exuberance of spiritual energies, which progressively expressed themselves in different forms of culture, art and social organization. Little by little your land became covered with churches and religious houses which were at the same time centres radiating faith and civilization. For in the course of the centuries, and according to the variety of events, the work of evangelization was accompanied by provident initiatives of education and instruction of the people; schools grew up alongside the religious houses, and the life of faith was strengthened by the daily exercise of charity, through a thousand forms of activity for assistance and social promotion. I wish to recall the importance in this regard of the work of the Religious Orders: Dominicans and Franciscans, the first to arrive among your people, and then Benedictines, Franciscans of the new observance (popularly called Bernardines, after Saint Bernardine of Siena), and Basilians.

5. Other Religious Orders and Congregations, after the Council of Trent, gave a fresh impulse to the life of the Church in Lithuania, which after the Protestant Reformation was undergoing a period of languor and suffered numerous defections. Special mention must be made of the work done by the Society of Jesus, which particularly distinguished itself in the implementation of the reform promoted by the Council of Trent. In 1570, the Jesuits opened in Vilnius a famous College which nine years later became the first University of the Nation, a real forge of priests and men of learning.

The comforting revival of the Catholic Church was accompanied by the development of priestly and religious vocations. Initiatives on behalf of the people were promoted, such as libraries, the printing of religious books, houses for needy students, pharmacies for the poor, confraternities and associations, and schools of arts and crafts. But above all there was begun a well organized and intense apostolic activity among the very poor, in the countryside, where there existed particularly sad situations of dependence and indigence and where the need for the liberating message of Gospel charity was most urgently felt.

6. This untiring pastoral work was matched, in a consoling way, by the generosity of the Lithuanian people. Christianity was the true Gospel leaven of the Nation, permeating its daily life, establishing firm roots and becoming, so to say, its very soul.

The people willingly embraced the faith and bore strong and genuine witness to it even in the most difficult moments of its history, in the hour of suffering and sacrifice.

I would like to recall at this point some of the most eloquent expressions of this faith, which was tested like gold in the crucible (cf. 1 *Pet* 1:7). I refer, in the first place, to the ancient and fervent devotion of the faithful to the Passion of Christ, attested to by the innumerable crosses erected at the roadsides, by the frequent representations of the suffering Jesus, typical expression of popular art, by the places called "Kalvarija" with their stations of the "Via Crucis", which have earned for your land the name of "Land of Crosses".

And how could I forget, on this eve of the inauguration of the Marian Year, the great dove which the Lithuanian faithful

have for the Mother of God? The Blessed Virgin, Mother of Mercy, is particularly venerated and invoked at the Dawn Gate in Vilnius, as also in other much frequented shrines: at Siluva, at Zemaiciu Kalvarija, at Krekenava, at Pivasiúnai. For centuries, and still today, to these centres of faith and piety there have come together in pilgrimage the faithful of every diocese, with great fervour and often also with effort and sacrifice. They entrust themselves to her whom Christ on the Cross, in a supreme act of love, gave us as Mother and Mediatrix of Grace.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge before the Lithuanian Catholic community another eloquent sign of indefectible attachment to Christ and of ecclesial vitality: this is the intense love and complete devotion with which that community has always remained united to the See of Peter, to whom the Lord has entrusted the ministry of confirming the brethren and of keeping them united in the communion of his Church, establishing him as the Rock of the spiritual edifice; against which the powers of hell are powerless.

7. The Church was so immersed, and I would say identified, with the reality of the Nation that in every age your forefathers stood firmly together around her, especially in times of trial; in the dark, sad hours which even in recent times have marked the history of your land.

In the Church, in her teaching, in her evangelizing and sanctifying work, in her service of unity and truth, your people always found the meaning of their own history, their particular identity, their reasons for living and hoping. I am happy to repeat here what I said to a group of Latvians who came to Rome to celebrate the Eighth Centenary of the Christianization of Livonia, a region near to you: "Where the word of God, even in the midst of obstacles of every sort, penetrates into the depths of a people's consciousness and is accepted, it forever determines the awareness this people has of itself and of its history. In hearing the word of God, the people recognizes its true identity".(3)

It is all the more significant that, next to the Church, the other defensive bulwark for Lithuanians was the family: yes, the Christian family, the true "domestic Church",(4) solidly anchored to the values of the faith, and living in love, sacrifice and in mutual giving. In your native country the Christian family has always succeeded in remaining faithful to its vocation to receive, preserve and transmit to its children the precious gift of the "Baptism", thus becoming, in the beautiful expression of the Second Vatican Council, "a school for human enrichment" (5)

The Church and the family, despite many impediments and obstacles, keep faith and culture alive. It is thanks to them that the nation has not lost its own identity and self-awareness. And still today, even though in many respects the times are no more favourable than in the past, Church and family remain the custodians of that sacred and inviolable heritage, the shrine of great human and Christian values: freedom of conscience, the dignity of the person, the heritage of the forefathers, the cultural tradition and the store of moral energy which they contain and in which reposes the hope for the future.

8. Lithuania's six hundred years of Christian life include countless testimonies to the uninterrupted action of the Holy Spirit, who has adorned your Church with his fruits (cf. *Gal* 5:22), raising up a multitude of men and women worthy of recognition as true disciples of Christ. I would like to recall with you some of the sons and daughters of Lithuania who have left in the hearts of the people the indelible mark of their virtues and apostolic zeal.

Our thoughts and prayers of intercession turn, first of all, to Saint Casimir, whom Pope Urban VIII declared Patron of Lithuania as early as 1636. Three years ago, you solemnly commemorated the five hundredth anniversary of his death, and those jubilee celebrations, with which I deeply associated myself, together with the whole Church, were a great moment of grace for your ecclesial community.

A descendant of the glorious line of the Jagellonians, Prince Casimir was singularly graced with virtue and was "perfected in a short time" (*Wis* 4:13). In less than a hundred years, he was the mature fruit of the "Baptism" of his people. He was buried in Vilnius, at the heart of the nation, which for five centuries has venerated his relics with unaltered devotion, and it is significant that the jubilee celebrations will reach their climax at his tomb.

A shining example of purity and charity, of humility and service to others, Casimir placed nothing before the love of Christ and earned from his contemporaries the eloquent title of "defender of the poor". Pope Pius XII proclaimed him special Patron of Lithuanian youth and pointed to his " noble and steadfast example" for the generations growing up amid so many adversities and snares.(6)

9. I also wish to recall the Bishop of Samogitia, *Merkelis Giedraitis*, a true apostle of the Tridentine Reform, whom on the three hundred and fiftieth anniversary of his death my venerable predecessor Pope John XXIII proposed as a model especially for the pastors of the Lithuanian Church.(7) A man eminent for piety and priestly virtues, strong and wise, Bishop Giedraitis showed in his intense apostolate "what it means to fight for the Catholic Faith and defend it with all one's strength".(8)

In accordance with the teaching of the Apostle Paul to Timothy, he "waged the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience, since by rejecting conscience, certain persons have made shipwreck of their faith" (1 *Tim* 1:18-19). In the face of spreading heresy and the persistence in certain areas of ancient pagan customs, Bishop Giedraitis became the promoter of authentic spiritual renewal, taking care over the formation of the clergy, building new churches, and doing everything possible, personally, for the catechesis of the people in their native language.

Following in his footsteps as his successor in the Diocese of Samogitia, in the last century, was *Bishop Motiejus Valancius*. His pastoral government coincided with sad and dark times for the Nation which saw its civil and religious identity being threatened. Amid such perilous difficulties, Bishop Valancius was not only the untiring and provident shepherd of the Lord's flock but he also became a true moral guide for his people. Still famous are his vigorous appeals to priests and Christian parents to be aware of their responsibility to pass on to the younger generation together with the faith of their forefathers all the treasures of the Nation's cultural and religious tradition.

At the same time, Bishop Valancius undertook a difficult and praiseworthy reform of the religious fabric of the people, through catechesis and instruction organized secretly and at great risk. At their mothers' side, the children of the time learned to read and write from the texts of the catechism. The wisdom and great heart of Bishop Valancius, which found a generous and courageous echo in your forefathers, ensured that even in those difficult times the seed of God's Word was not lost, that Word around which the unity of the Nation was formed.

10. On June 28 next I shall have the joy of raising to the honours of the altar another most worthy son of the Lithuanian

Church and Nation, the Servant of God *Archbishop Jurgis Matulaitis*, who died barely sixty years ago. A true "servant and apostle of Jesus Christ" (2 Pt 1:1), he was in Vilnius the far-sighted and caring Pastor of all his children, even the most remote. Faithful to his episcopal motto: "Conquer Evil with Good", he faced many serious difficulties in the exercise of his ministry, making himself "a slave to all, that he might win the more" (cf. 1 Cor 9:19) and caring only for the good of the Church and for the salvation of souls.

Many pastoral initiatives remain associated with his fruitful ecclesial service, among which I wish to mention the works of lay apostolate and the dissemination of the Church's social teaching, whereby he sought to alert the faithful to their responsibility to restore all things in Christ. We also owe to him the reform of his Congregation of Marian Clerics and the foundation of the Congregation of Sisters of the Immaculate Conception and the Congregation of Handmaids of Jesus in the Eucharist.

Named by Pope Pius XI Apostolic Visitor to Lithuania, this Servant of God worked with prudence and zeal, thus enabling the Pope to establish the Ecclesiastical Province of Lithuania with the Apostolic Constitution *Lituanorum Gente* (4 April 1926). Catholic life experienced a notable revival in the area of catechetics, priestly and religious vocations, Catholic Action activities and various cultural expressions inspired by the Gospel.

The good seed sown so generously by Archbishop Matulaitis produced a hundredfold, and the Church experienced a new spring. But he himself wished to become a seed which dies in the earth so as not to remain alone but to bear much fruit (cf. Jn 12:21), and this is evident from this touching invocation which he left as a kind of testament in his spiritual diary, and which I wish to repeat with you today: "Jesus, grant that I may immolate myself for your Church, for the salvation of the souls redeemed by your Blood, so that I may live with You, work with You, suffer with You, and, as I hope, also die and reign with You" (9)

11. Finally, I would not like to conclude without also mentioning the numerous bands of the sons and daughters of your land who during these six centuries have openly and courageously professed the faith received in the "Baptism" and whom no trial, however severe, has ever been able to separate from the love of Christ (cf. Rom 8:35). They include bishops, priests, men and women Religious, catechists, and simple faithful, who faced humiliation, discrimination, suffering, sometimes persecution and even exile, imprisonment, deportation and death, rejoicing to suffer dishonour for the name of Jesus (cf. Acts 5:41).

They bear witness to the grace that the Lord promised to his Church "so that moving forward among trial and tribulation, in the weakness of the flesh she may not waver from perfect fidelity, but remain a bride worthy of her Lord; that moved by the Holy Spirit, she may never cease to renew herself, until through the Cross she arrives at the light which knows no setting".(10) Through them the Spirit has spoken and continues to speak to your Community and to the entire holy Catholic Church. Their cross, embraced in union with the redemptive suffering of Jesus, has become an instrument of grace and sanctification.

There is an elect band of confessors and martyrs, for which today you are giving thanks to the Lord, feeling justly happy and proud of them. I exhort you and your faithful to assimilate their shining example: for an ever more convinced and logical life of faith, for an apostolate ever more committed and fruitful in works of charity, for a prompt and clear-sighted

acceptance of the will of God, manifested in the vocation proper to each one.

I wish to address myself in a special way to your young people: in their hands they bear the destiny of the Nation, which they will carry into the new Millennium of the Christian era. Young people of faithful and generous Lithuania! Joyfully and trustingly take up the heritage of your fathers! Accept into your hearts the witness, the sometimes heroic witness, which they have bequeathed to you, of love for Christ and the Church! Make this priceless treasure your own, and be worthy of it! In you, may it become the seed of a great hope.

12. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood, men and women Religious, and all of you brothers and sisters of a Church that is far away, yet near to me and especially dear to my heart, sons and daughters of a most noble Nation! I, the Bishop of Rome and Pastor of the universal Church, kneel with you before the relics of Saint Casimir, with you I give thanks to God, the Giver of all good things, for the gift of your "Baptism", and for you I pray that he "may make you worthy of his call, and may fulfil every good resolve and work of faith by his power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him" (2 *Thess* 1:11-12).

In the name of the whole Church, I entrust to God your Nation's heritage of faith, and I implore him: preserve and bless the work you have accomplished in these six centuries!

Almighty Father, be propitious to these your children, whom you have led from darkness into the splendour of your truth. Pour into their hearts your Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, the Counsellor, so that they make present in their Nation the fruitfulness of your Son's Paschal mystery.

Grant to the Pastors of this people, which is your people, piety and wisdom, that they may lead the flock to the pastures of life. Grant, Almighty God, that they may be able to fulfil with serenity and in full freedom their sacred ministry.

Pour your light and your strength into the hearts of those whom you have called to consecrate themselves to you, that they may be persevering and may give themselves without reserve. Increase the number of those who answer the call to the priesthood and to the religious life, sustain their generous resolve and grant that they may go forward without hindrance on the path of your divine service.

Turn your gaze, O Lord, to the families which live united in your love. Grant that they may welcome with joy and responsibility the gift of life. Enable them, by your grace, to grow in mutual love. May parents give their children the gift of faith, together with the concrete testimony of authentic Christian living.

Turn your eyes with particular Love, O God, to the youth of Lithuania. They bear in their hearts a great hope: make them strong and pure, so that with confidence they may build their future. Grant that in freedom they may be enabled to receive the gift of their ancestors' faith, that they may accept it with gratitude, that with generosity they may make it grow.

You are the Lord of the peoples and the Father of all humanity. I invoke your blessing upon this, your Lithuanian family. In harmony with its conscience, may it be able to follow the voice of your call along the paths made known to it for the first time six centuries ago. Let no one consider that its membership of your kingdom of holiness and life is contrary to the

well-being of the earthly homeland. May it be able always and everywhere to give you the praise that is your due, and freely and serenely bear witness to truth, justice and love.

Lord, bless this Nation, may your face shine upon it and grant it your peace!

And now, in a spirit of entrusting, I turn to you, sweet Mother of Christ and our Mother, joining my voice to that of your Lithuanian children who pray to you with confidence in your intercession. Mother of Mercy, this people has recourse to you, placing itself under your protection: do not reject its pleas in its necessities, save it from peril, lead it to your Son.

O Mother, you are the memory of the Church. You ponder in your heart the affairs of individuals and of peoples. To you I entrust the memory of the six hundred years of Christian life of our Lithuanian brothers and sisters, and I ask you to help them to be now and forever faithful to Christ and to the Church.

To you, venerable and dear Brothers, to your faithful people, to all Lithuanians throughout the world, with an outpouring of affection I impart my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 5 June 1987, in the ninth year of my Pontificate.

JOHN PAUL II

(1) *Lumen Gentium*, 4.

(2) Cf. *Atto europeistico a Santiago de Compostela*, in «Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II», V, 3 (1982), p. 1260.

(3) *L'Osservatore Romano*, English ed., 18 August 1986, p. 8.

(4) *Lumen Gentium*, 11.

(5) *Gaudium et Spes*, 52.

(6) Cf. *AAS* 42 (1950), pp. 380-82.

(7) Cf. *AAS* 52 (1960), II, pp. 40-43.

(8) *Ibid.*, p. 43.

(9) *Diary*, 17 August 1911.

(10) *Lumen Gentium*, 9.

©Copyright - Libreria Editrice Vaticana