



## KĘSTUTIS ŽEMAITIS

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# POGRINDŽIO KUNIGŲ SEMINARIJA LIETUVOJE SOVIETŲ VALDŽIOS METAIS: IŠŠŪKIAI IR VEIKLOS REZULTAI

Underground Seminary in Lithuania during the Years  
of Soviet Rule: Challenges and Activity Results

### SUMMARY

During the years of Soviet rule, the Church in Lithuania experienced the greatest constraints on its activities. The only Catholic seminary at that time was hindered from operating freely. There was a shortage of clergy in parishes. Under the initiative of more courageous priests, and especially of the leaders of some monasteries, an underground seminary was established. During its operation, dozens of priests were prepared not only for Lithuania, but also for missions in other republics of the Soviet Union. This underground priest seminary became an organization of resistance against the atheistic rule; it also helped develop Catholic spirituality and facilitated the activities of the official Priest Seminary in Kaunas.

### SANTRAUKA

Sovietų valdžios metais Lietuvoje Bažnyčia patyrė didžiausius savo veiklos suvaržymus. Tuo metu buvusiai vienintelei katalikų kunigų seminarijai buvo trukdoma laisvai veikti. Parapijose trūko dvasininkų. Drąsesniems kunigams ir ypač kai kurių vienuolių vadovams imantis iniciatyvos buvo sukurta pogrindžio sąlygomis veikianti kunigų seminarija. Per jos veikimo laikotarpį buvo paruošta keliasdešimt kunigų ne tik Lietuvai, bet ir misijoms kitose Sovietų sąjungos respublikose. Ši pogrindžio kunigų seminarija tapo pasipriešinimo ateistinei valdžiai organizacija, taip pat padėjo ugdyti katalikišką dvasingumą ir palengvino oficialiosios Kauno kunigų seminarijos veiklą.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: pogrindžio kunigų seminarija, studijos, dvasininkai.

KEY WORDS: underground seminary, studies, clergy.

## INTRODUCTION

The situation of the Church in Lithuania changed radically in 1940 since the occupation of Lithuania, loss of independence and beginning of the war against the Church. This war was primarily directed against the clergy and especially the only Kaunas inter-diocesan seminary of priests operating at that time. The shortage of clergy has led to the search for ways to address this problem. Leaders of the monasteries, namely the Jesuits and Marians, led underground training of priests. Although the teaching and education process was secret, it largely corresponded to the curricula of monastic education and the official seminary in Kaunas. The underground seminary, which had neither a specific seat nor a very clear structure, prepared several dozen priests for Lithuania and other republics of the Soviet Union. The underground seminary became a resistance to the atheistic government and forced it to reduce the restrictions slightly on the official seminary in Kaunas.

Theological studies and the training of Catholic priests relate to the beginning of the Christianization of Lithuania. Various challenges awaited this process at different points of time. This is due to wars, occupations, or political hostility towards the Church.

This work examines one of the unique historical moments of the Catholic Church in Lithuania when during the Soviet era, under the control of the only

remaining seminary in Lithuania and in an extremely drastic reduction of the number of priests, an underground training programme was created and implemented. This was a unique phenomenon at the time throughout the Soviet Union. This underground seminary of priests played a very important role in the survival of the Catholic Church in those years. The work pays special attention to the circumstances of the emergence of the seminary and the results of its activities.

The underground seminary of priests has already been widely discussed in various scientific publications in Lithuania. One of the rather detailed works is a compiled collection of documents and articles called "Pogrindžio kunigų seminarija" (translation: "Underground Seminary of Priests") (Vilnius, 2002) by Bishop. dr. Jonas Boruta and dr. Algimantas Katilius, as well as "Pogrindinė kunigų seminarija" (translation: "Underground Seminary of Priests") in the LKMA yearbook, vol. 12, (Vilnius 1998) by Boruta J., SJ and Katilius A. A detailed study of the situation of the Church in the descriptive period can be found in the monograph of dr. Arunas Streikus: "Sovietų valdžios antibažnytinė politika Lietuvoje (1944–1990)" (translation: "Anti-Church Policy of the Soviet Government in Lithuania in (1944–1990)", published in Vilnius in 2002 and in the works of other authors. However, the topic is not yet completed.

## THE LACK OF PRIESTS AND THE BEGINNING OF THE IDEA OF SOLVING THE PROBLEM

The situation of the Church in Lithuania changed radically in 1940 with the loss of Lithuania's independence. Until then, Bishop Vincentas Brizgys recalls that in Lithuania at that time: "<...> there were 84.1% Catholics, 717 parishes or missions, 1047 churches and chapels, 1450 priests, 37 men's monasteries, 85 women's monasteries, four seminaries of priests with 605 clerics, Faculty of Theology and Philosophy at the State University in Kaunas" (Brizgys 1977: 6–7). However, both the faculty and seminaries were closed, leaving only a single seminary in Kaunas which could operate. However, it soon introduced restrictions: a systematic reduction in the number of candidates admitted, dismissals from the seminary, arrests, and constant interference by the civilian authorities in the internal life of the seminary. The seminary was quite painfully affected by the demand of the civil authorities for a constant reduction in the number of students. As A. Streikus observes, this was a plan for the complete closure of the seminary, which took place in stages (Streikus 2002: 113). In 1946, 320 clerics from all the closed seminaries in Lithuania studied at the seminary. By 1953, only 75 clerics remained, and in 1965, the number was only 24<sup>1</sup>. Attempts have been made to curb such a policy of "extermination" of priests by various statements and requests by priests and the faithful to both the authorities and the bishops, although the latter could not change that much.<sup>2</sup> There was only one

solution left: to act illegally by creating an underground seminary.

However, the need for a secret seminary arose even earlier and was primarily related to the clergy fired from the seminary who were not allowed to complete their studies at the initiative of the civil authorities. As stated by dr. A. Katilius, the origins of the underground seminary must be sought among those who had been expelled from Kaunas seminary. They sought the opportunity to become priests despite their official dismissal. Some graduated in secret and were ordained priests. One of these was priest Vytautas Merkys, who was expelled from the last year of Kaunas seminary in 1959 (cf. Katilius 2002: 13), but later became a priest. Priest Merkys himself remembers: "In Daugeliskes I was ordained as priest during the celebration of St. Anne. It was the 1960. I took the bishop on a motorcycle for my ordainment; he arrived at Ignalina by train <...>. It was very secret, I was ordained by Bishop Vincentas Sladkevicius" (Boruta, Katilius 2002: 21). It should be mentioned at least that V. Sladkevicius himself was ordained as bishop in secret, in the chapel of Bishop Teofilus Matulionis in Birštonas rectory (cf. Kiskis 2008: 137).

V. Merkys was probably the first to become a priest in Lithuania underground. However, he was not the first Lithuanian to be secretly ordained. Alfonsas Svarinskas, a student of the Kaunas Priest Seminary, was arrested in December 1946 and sentenced to 10

years in prison and to 5 “without rights” for his relations with Lithuanian partisans. Along with this cleric, there were many educated people in the prison, including priests. There Svarinskas was preparing for the priesthood, and he received the ordinations from Bishop Pranciskus Ramanauskas, who was in the same camp: <...> Prepared for ordain-

ment to the priesthood, wearing the clothes of prisoners and surrounded by the spirit of close martyrs, he was ordained to the “Priesthood of Christ” (Antanaitis 2015: 123–124). After graduating studies and priesthood ordinances underground, priests were usually unable to legally perform their duties and be assigned to parishes.

## UNDERGROUND SEMINARY OF PRIESTS

The Soviet government had a goal of fighting the Church. As A. Streikus observes, both the repression used against them and the obstruction of the training of new priests was intended to reduce the number of clergy (cf. Strike 2002: 59).

Probably the issue of an underground seminary was under serious consideration as early as the summer of 1940, when the Soviet authorities in Lithuania tried to close the only seminary still operating in Kaunas.

Then its rector, Archbishop Vincentas Brizgys, the Archbishop of Kaunas, heard from the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Soviet government of uncertainty about the existence of at least this seminary. Bishop Brizgys replied, “We will not be left without a seminary. Now the clergy are on summer vacation. At the end of it, they will meet at the normal time that was announced at the beginning of the holiday. If anyone raises the question of the seminary, it will only be in the sense of whether the seminary will be public or secret. If the government were to ban it, which it had not done so far, the seminary would operate in secret” (Brizgys 1977: 25–26). Such a

practice already existed in the Soviet Union – several Catholic priests were secretly trained and ordained (cf. Boruta 1998: 201). However, the need for this secret operation was especially relevant after the war, when the number of clerics in Kaunas seminary was very small by the order of the government, and the control of the educational institution itself slipped out of the hands of bishops and other leadership.

After the war, the issue of training priests in the underground was clearly ripe. The idea for this seminary certainly came from an existing experience. A circle of secretly prepared and ordained priests was an example. Even more, this way of training priests escaped the control of civil authorities. This was an important achievement, because in Kaunas seminary the atheistic government “ruled” the appointment of teachers, management, and the acceptance of clerics. Bishop Julijonas Steponavicius, who observed the situation, doubted the benefits of the existence of such a spiritual seminary (cf. Strike 2002: 245). Such circumstances made it even more worthwhile to look for a way besides the official seminary.

As early as the beginning of the seventies, the initiative to organize a secret seminary was taken by Fr. Juozas Zdebskis and Jonas Stasaitis, a former student of the Salesian monastery, who was also a cleric at the Kaunas Priest Seminary before, but like many, was fired due to the demands of the civil authorities to reduce the number of students. Priest J. Zdebskis consulted with Bishops V. Sladkevicius and J. Steponavicius (both exiled from their dioceses) and received their approval for underground training of priests. As early as 1971, several young people began to study at this seminary (cf. Boruta, Katilius 2002: 144–147). Still, this seminary of J. Zdebski prepared only a few priests. But this initiative did not go out. The idea of a secret seminary quickly matured in several male monasteries. Its activities were both organized and sponsored mainly by the Jesuits and Marians. Their leadership took care of both the studies and the spiritual education of the candidates for the priesthood.

Although the secret seminary was not like a normal school, its activities are still highly valued today. It was usually attended by those who were not allowed by the government to enter the official seminary. As the studies were provided by monasteries, the responsibility fell on the shoulders of their Provincials. As a result, this secret school did not have a rector, no archives, no specific address or seat, and no funding problems because it was not needed altogether. Students usually worked officially somewhere near a church, for example, as sacristans (cf. *Ibid.*, P. 14).

Studies in the underground seminary of priests were organized in a different

way than in the officially operating Kaunas inter-diocesan seminary of priests. Those who studied underground often did not even suspect who the other students of this seminary were because the studies were individual and often looked more like part-time studies, and secrecy required that everyone knew as little as possible about it. Meetings with teachers took place at the agreed time. As the theological literature was not officially published, and the old pre-war books were no longer suitable, the students of this seminary used notes lent by the clergy of the Kaunas Priest Seminary and specially prepared material. The studied subjects basically corresponded to the programme of the official seminary (cf. Zemaitis 2020: 2).

The underground seminary did not have a stationary study or conventional seminary structure. Learners studied by consulting with their teachers independently and by taking exams. A greater constant gathering for lectures could have attracted unwanted attention (cf. *Ibid.*, P. 2).

During the period of its operation, 63 persons studied in secret at the seminary, of which over 30 persons were ordained as priests. A similar number of priests were ordained after later studying in the official seminary. Priests were secretly ordained by bishops deported from their dioceses Julijonas Steponavicius and Vincentas Sladkevicius (cf. Boruta, Katilius 2002: 14). Other bishops and governors knew about this training of priests, saw the work of the consecrated, and simply accepted it as a fact.

This method of training priests caused the civil authorities to increase

the number of admitted candidates to the Kaunas Priest Seminary. The number of priests declined. In 1985, there were 680 priests in Lithuania and 146 churches no longer had a priest residing there (Catholic Calendar Guide 1985: 142), and three years later there were 666 priests; and 158 churches were served from elsewhere. But priests from Lithuania also went to other Soviet republics. So, they had to be allowed to leave even though they were very much needed in Lithuania itself. For example, in 1985, missionary priests worked in Karaganda (Kazakhstan), Gervechi, Indore, Vija (Belarus), Odessa, Hrecany (Ukraine), Dushambe (Tajikistan), Moscow (Russia) which accounted for a total of eight priests (cf. *Ibid.*, P. 213). However, according to the data of the same year, 29 clergymen had started the studies at Inter-diocesan Seminary of Kaunas, whereas there were only 19 students studying in the fifth year (cf. *Ibid.*, P. 142). So, the situation had started to improve. There was a brighter perspective. Some of those who were not allowed to join the seminary before, could start their studies in Kaunas. This is also partly the result of the secret training of priests. According to priest Robertas Grigas, who graduated from the same underground seminary, “part-time opportunity to prepare for the priesthood was a great help to both the Kaunas Priest Seminary and the Church of Lithuania. Soviet secret and public structures could no longer intimidate young people entering Kaunas Priest Seminary by saying if they were not “smart” and “cooperative”, they would never become priests.

On the contrary, the candidates now had a strong argument that intimidated the persecutors: if we are not admitted to the legally functioning Kaunas Priest Seminary, we will study and become ordained as priests in another way which is completely out of your control” (Valentukeviciene 2018: 4).

The underground seminary was in a way inconvenient for the Soviet government also because it could not influence the activities of already ordained priests, pastoral positions, missionary trips to other republics of the then Soviet Union. Priest Petras Naslenas remembers that during the 25 years of such “underground” priesthood he had to hold St. Mass both in a hotel in Moscow and, after visiting a young soldier in Belarus, in a forest with him and all those who came to pray, and to replace the more courageous priests in their parishes (cf. Boruta, Katilius 2002: 41–42). Thus, he and other such priests acted only with permission from their monastery or other superiors. And they had work not just in parishes or missions. Priest Jonas Boruta SJ (ordained as bishop in 1997), a candidate of physical sciences who worked at the Institute of Physics of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences, was secretly ordained as a priest in 1982 and, together with other priests, taught secret catechetical and theological courses for monks, and after the arrest of Sigitas Tamkevicius (ordained as a bishop in 1991 and as a cardinal in 2019), edited the underground publication *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church* (Zemaitis 2020: 1). Some “underground activists” such as Jonas Boruta, SJ, Kestutis

Brilius, MIC, or Justinas Algirdas Vaicunas, later participated in the training of the same priests themselves (cf. Boruta, Katilius 2002: 709). J. Boruta later became the Auxiliary of the Archbishop of Vilnius (consecrated in 1997) and finally the Bishop of Telsiai, and J.P. Lenga (consecrated in 1991) - the Apostolic Administrator of Kazakhstan and Central Asia (Boruta, Katilius 1998: 217).

Still, some of the graduates of the underground seminary wanted to receive the official ordainment by a bishop to a particular parish. As early as the 1980s, such an opportunity arose in principle. The authorities agreed to allow such priests to be assigned to parishes if they graduated the official seminary of priests. It was sort of a compromise. Some took advantage of it and, after studying in Kaunas for about a year, received appointments from bishops.

According to Bishop Jonas Boruta, SJ, the underground seminary was not only an informal institution for the prepara-

tion of priests for the Catholic Church, but also a phenomenon of a kind of resistance to the atheistic policy of anti-ecclesiastical civil government, which did not allow the control of the training of priests to be taken over by the same anti-ecclesiastical government that wanted priests to be loyal to it (cf. Boruta, Katilius 2002: 5).

The process of preparing priests in the underground began with the first people to study there, making it difficult to determine a specific date for the start of this activity. This process ended at the end of the existence of the Soviet government, when the closed seminaries of other dioceses began to recover, and the ecclesiastical leadership dared to not reveal to the atheistic government neither the names of the candidates nor the number of people admitted to studies.

In this way, the underground seminary played its part in solving rather difficult trials of faith and left opportunities for historians and theologians to examine its activities.

## CONCLUSIONS

In Lithuania, during the years of Soviet rule, both in 1940–1941 and 1944–1990, hostility towards the Catholic Church and restrictions on its activities were severe. One very sensitive area to Lithuanian Catholics was the training of its clergy at Kaunas Priest Seminary. As civilian authorities limited the number of entrants and the seminary leadership and bishops were unable to resist, there was a severe shortage of clergy. At that time, both diocesan priests and monks had the idea of establishing a kind of

seminary for priests underground. Throughout its existence, several dozen individuals were secretly prepared for the priesthood and were ordained by the bishops then exiled by the authorities from their dioceses. The underground seminary forced the government to make concessions to the official seminary to allow more young people to join. Underground seminary has become a kind of resistance to atheist civilian government in the fight for the inherent rights of the faithful.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Such a small number of students could not meet the needs of the Church when quite a large number of priests died each year and parishes were often left without their own priest.
- <sup>2</sup> In 1978, a group presented a letter to Bishop J. Matulaitis-Labukas, the apostolic administra-

tor of the Kaunas Archdiocese, expressing concern about the situation of the seminary of priests. Such attempts to rectify the situation did not yield tangible results. So, the solution to the problem lay in a kind of “catacombs” method – to act secretly, underground.