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VINCENTO BORISEVIČIAUS MARIJAMPOLĖS PERIODAS: NUOPELNAI ŠVIETIMUI IR SAVIVALDAI

Vincetas Borisevicius' Marijampole Period:
Imput to Education and Local Government

SUMMARY

After the restoration of independence of Lithuania, not only State institutions were formed, but also self-government was organized. One of the active characters of self-government in Marijampole in 1920–1921 was the priest Vincetas Borisevicius. In this period, he was the chaplain of Marijampole Gymnasium and a member of the City Council representing the Christian Democratic Party. It was not easy for him to work both in the gymnasium, where anti-church sentiment prevailed, and in the municipality, when the state was just being formed and the society was going through many problems. However, Vincetas Borisevicius proved himself to be a great and bright personality in this period.

SANTRAUKA

Lietuvai atkūrus nepriklausomybę, buvo ne tik formuojamos valstybės institucijos, bet ir organizuojama savivalda. Vienu iš aktyvių savivaldos veikėjų 1920–1921 metais Marijampolėje laikytinas kunigas Vincetas Borisevičius. Tuo laikotarpiu jis buvo ir Marijampolės gimnazijos kapelionas, ir miesto tarybos narys, kaip krikščionių demokratų partijos atstovas. Tiek gimnazijoje, kur vyravo antibažnytinės nuotaikos, tiek savivaldoje, valstybei dar tik kuriantis ir visuomenei išgyvenant daugybę problemų, dirbti buvo nelengva. Vis dėlto Vincetas Borisevičius šiuo laikotarpiu išryškėjo kaip svarbi ir ryški asmenybė.

INTRODUCTION

In inter-war Lithuania, it is quite normal and common to see clerical participation in politics. Already in 1918 four priests sign the Act of February 16th.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: Borisevičius, gimnazija, Marijampolė, miesto taryba.

KEY WORDS: Borisevicius, gymnasium, Marijampole, town council.

Later, Catholic priests are involved in public service as members of the government. They are also present in the parliament then. All these activities of the clergy have been extensively studied. However, the contribution of priests in the work of local government is very little known. The problem addressed in this article is the involvement of the future Bishop Vincentas Borisevicius¹, then chaplain of the Gymnasium, in Marijampole local governance. This is an interesting and topical subject, as even the Apostolic See is interested in the life of Vincentas Borisevicius (the beatification procedure was launched). However, the work faces the problem of sources. Borisevicius was a priest of the diocese of Seinai until 1926, when he was sent to the newly established diocese of Telsiai. After the 1919 occupation of Seinai diocese, the documents of Seinai diocese remained in Poland and were moved to Lomza, but Borisevicius' file is no longer there. The documents of the diocese of Vilkaviskis (including Seinai from 1919 to 1926) have disappeared. Thus, the sources for the period of Borisevicius in Marijampole from 1920 to 1921 are very poor, especially the ones that relate to his pastoral work. The minutes of Marijampole Council (14 January 1920 – 15 Janu-

ary 1921) found in the OČAL (Office of the chief Archivist in Lithuania) considerably fill in the gaps. Additional knowledge is provided by Bishop Brizgys in his reminiscences (Brizgys 1993), prelate Justinas Juodaitis (Juodaitis 2006).

The work on the period of the life of priest Vincentas Borisevicius (bishop since 1940, arrested by NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs), convicted, and shot in 1946) in Marijampole is similar to a mosaic of small pieces. Thus, the problem of this work is not so much to reveal the little-known biography of the future Bishop Vincentas Borisevicius, but to show the work he accomplished during the short period of his life in Marijampole. The more so because Vincentas Borisevicius is known not only in Lithuania, but also in Poland, where he graduated from the seminary in Seinai. Borisevicius is also known in Vatican, as he was beatified in 1991. Thus, there is no shortage of information about his studies at the seminary and his later life in Telsiai, meanwhile his life and work in Marijampole is like a white spot.

Nevertheless, this study will add at least a little to the history of the region and will highlight some fragments of the biography of the future saint.

VINCENTAS BORISEVICIUS IN GYMNASIUMS

Priorities of Lithuania when regaining independence included the creation of a national school, which was of course inseparable from the teaching of the Catholic religion, since most of the country's population belonged to the Roman Catholic Church. Therefore, the teaching

of religion in public and private schools of general education was not only dealt with in practical terms by organising the teaching of the subject, but also by regulating it by law. The provisional Constitution referred to freedom of "religion" but made no mention of schools (Lietu-

vos valstybės laikinosios konstitucijos pamatiniai dėsniai 1918: V 22). "All citizens of the State, of whatever sex, nationality or religion, are equal before the law" (Lietuvos valstybės laikinosios konstitucijos pamatiniai dėsniai 1919: VI. & 26). The Provisional Constitution of the State of Lithuania repeats the 1919 version on this issue (Laikinoji Lietuvos valstybės konstitucija 1920: V & 15). The 1922 Constitution of the State of Lithuania not only deals extensively with matters of religion, but also explicitly regulates the teaching of religion in schools. It is "compulsory, except in schools established for children whose parents do not belong to any religious organisation. Religion must be taught in accordance with the requirements of the religious organisation to which the pupil belongs" (Lietuvos Valstybės Konstitucija su paaiškinimais 1922: IX & 80). This is reiterated in the 1928 Constitution of Lithuania (Lietuvos Valstybės Konstitucija 1928: IX & 81). Thus, in the spirit of both ecclesiastical and state laws, Father Borisevičius became one of the first chaplains of the gymnasium in Marijampole.

Again, the question arises, why was the school so important for the Catholic Church? A. Sablinskas, a researcher of the Catholic Action, answers this question. The enemies of Christianity know this and therefore always and everywhere try to take it under their protection" (Šablinskas 1939: 34).

Vincentas Borisevičius, after receiving priestly ordination in Austria, returned to Lithuania and worked as the vicar of Kalvarija parish, but during the First World War, like many other clergymen, he was forced to flee to Russia, and

on his return he was appointed as a chaplain and a teacher at Ziburys and realistic gymnasiums in Marijampole. However, for a short time he was also employed at the so-called "Bulota"² realistic gymnasium. According to A. Baltinis, Borisevičius was appointed to this gymnasium on 24 April 1919 and resigned on 2 June of the same year. What was the purpose of all this – to appoint a priest to the gymnasium? The restoration of independence of Lithuania had among its top priorities the establishment of a national school, which was of course inseparable from the teaching of the Catholic religion, since the vast majority of the population of the country belonged to the Roman Catholic Church.

At Ziburys Gymnasium, everything went smoothly, where he took care not only of the spiritual or intellectual affairs of the pupils, but also of their domestic welfare (Katilius 2021: 197-198). In Ziburys gymnasium, everything was going well for him, but in the realistic one, Borisevičius had a real test (Baltinis 1975: 33-34). It is not possible to determine the details of his life in Marijampole while he was a chaplain. The archives of the diocese of Seinai are still in Poland and do not contain Borisevičius's file, while the records of the diocese of Vilkaviskis were destroyed at the end of the Second World War. It is therefore not clear where Borisevičius lived, nor in what areas of pastoral ministry he was most active. One can only speculate that he was at saint mass and probably heard confessions in Arkangelas Mykolas church and visited the sick. All that is known is that his main field of work was that of a chaplain. However, Father Borisevičius was

not very lucky – he was not appointed to the old gymnasium of Rygiskiu Jono, but also to the realistic gymnasium across the road, founded by the left wing. Bishop Vincentas Brizgys, then still a pupil, remembers: “From my life as a schoolboy in those days, it should be mentioned that across the street from each other were the Ziburys – later Rygiskiu Jonas – and the realistic gymnasium. The first one had young people of all kinds of views, while the second one was publicly anti-religious and red. There were few others. In the second one, meetings were often called for lectures, but more correctly they were anti-religious and sometimes anti-Lithuanian meetings” (Brizgys 1993: 53). This gymnasium was organised as a tool to fight against the Catholic faith and even against Lithuanianness. The priest Justinas Juodaitis testifies from that time: “The Catholic opponents organised a realistic gymnasium in Marijampole. “All the Bolsheviks gathered in that gymnasium. But still, according to the laws of the state, a chaplain is needed there as well. <...> The Bishop of Seinai saw the most suitable candidate as Fr. Borisevicius. Fr. Vincent, always obedient to his spiritual superior, agrees to take on these difficult duties” (Juodaitis 2006: 24). Fr. Talutis states that “While working at the school, he [Fr. Borisevicius] diligently taught young people the basics of the Catholic faith, Christian virtue, and organised the activities of the Atheist and Eucharist unions” (Talutis 2018: 355 – 356). However, he did this at the greatest cost of his strength and health because the freethinking pupils, or perhaps the city’s anticlericals, “would bombard the chaplain

with various, even ridiculing, questions during the lessons. Unable to suppress the chaplain’s authority and influence on the school community, it is said that there were even plans to kill the gymnasium chaplain” (Juodaitis 2006: 24–25).

What was the reason for all this? Who was the chaplain, who only taught the truths of faith and common human ethics, harming? Bishop Brizgys answers this best in his memoirs: “Students with a freethinking attitude, or perhaps incited by the city’s anticlericals <...>” (Ibid., pp. 24–25). Some of the pupils were simply “the Reds of the spirit of Bulota” (Brizgys 1993: 53). It is difficult to work in conditions where the chaplain is openly ignored and this hostility is strongly influenced by persons outside the gymnasium. Fr. Borisevicius saw that his work in the realistic gymnasium was pointless. At the end of the school year “he handed the following letter to the chairman of the Gymnasium Teachers’ Council on 2.6.1919: ‘Since the teachers and pupils of the Realistic Gymnasium are clearly against religion, my further work in the Realistic Gymnasium is impossible. Therefore, from this day on, I ask you not to read me as a teacher in your gymnasium’ (Baltinis 1975: 35). Andrius Baltinis testifies that Vincentas Borisevicius’s predecessor in this gymnasium, Fr. Dr. Reklaitis, a Marian monk, was “only in a few classes” (Ibid., p. 34). Borisevicius remained a chaplain at the Realistic Gymnasium from 24 April to the second of June 1919. His successor, Fr. Dr. Ignas Cesaitis, a Marian monk, stayed for just over two months. All this shows how already after the First World War anti-religious and, at the same time,

perhaps pro-Russian, or rather pro-Bolshevik, groups were active in Lithuania with the aim of fighting against the Catholic faith and despising priests.

This was not the case in Ziburys Gymnasium, where Father Vincent was appointed a chaplain, finding a fertile ground for his zeal. He works diligently among the pupils, gaining the greatest sympathy, and he is simply carried in his arms (Juodaitis 2006: 24). Fr. Borisevicius's pastoral work in gymnasiums was not limited to teaching religion and moral education. In Ziburys Gymnasium, he took care of the Atheists and Eucharistic Christians (*ibid.*, p. 24).

Thus, we can see that the young priest Vincentas Borisevicius was quite

an idealist, trying to work even in areas where many found it difficult. Having studied at the seminary in Seinai and at the university in Switzerland, he was quite intellectually prepared to work with young people, but at that time in Marijampole, probably like in Lithuania, the society was divided into a strong Christian and an active libertarian side. Borisevicius had to deal with both streams. The former was represented by Ziburys Gymnasium and the latter by the Realistic Gymnasium. The latter required a great deal of effort and health to carry out his duties as a priest. However, he was always prayerful, diligent, respectful, and persevering as a pastor and teacher.

VINCENTAS BORISEVICIUS AT THE ORIGINS OF THE MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT OF MARIJAMPOLE

February 16th, 1918 Act of the Council of Lithuania, which legally restored the Lithuanian state, also contained the signatures of four priests. Vincentas Borisevicius was not directly involved in the restoration of the State because during the First World War he had to flee to Russia involuntarily and did pastoral work among other refugees. However, he was quite active in the establishment of self-government. He was also active in political activities. This can be seen in his interrogation records in the Soviet prison: "Question: How did your political activity manifest itself after the Lithuanian Seimas? Answer: in 1918–1921 I belonged to the Union of Christian Democrats, and I participated in its activities by giving lectures on theological topics and by collecting funds to help the poor.

In the 1920 elections to Marijampole Town Board, the Christian Democratic Union put forward my candidacy and I was elected to the Town Board, where I worked from 1920 to 1921, first as a secretary, and then as chairman of the Board for about three months. At the same time, from 1919 to 1921, I was a member of the Christian Democratic Party and took an active part in its activities. Since 1922 I have not belonged to any political party <...>" (Streikus 2000: 41).

The first such council in Marijampole was elected with the permission of the Germans and met on 6th December, 1918. Fr. M. Talutis writes about Borisevicius that "while still working in Minsk, he was actively involved in the activities of Christian Democratic Party, and therefore, while living in Marijam-

pole, as a representative of this party, he was a member of the town council, and for some time he was the chairman of the town council. He travelled around the area lecturing on various national, religious, and social topics, setting up bookshops and libraries in parishes, and collecting funds for the poor” (Talutis 2018: 356).

Vincentas Brizgys, an eyewitness of the time, writes about the first meetings and the first town councils of Marijampole: “Usually, these first municipalities were elected at mass meetings. When the rally was held in the evening, where you couldn’t count hands in the dark, the supporters of Bulota won or shouted out their victory. When the next day Staugaitis, Fr. Borisevicius called a rally in the daytime, where it was easy to count the hands, then the right-wing won” (Brizgys 1993: 50-51). Marijampole Town Council was finally “elected at the beginning of 1920” (Grinius 2016: 242), with its first meeting on 14 January of the same year (Minutes of the Marijampole Council, 14 January 1920–15 January 1921. OCAL F. 1362, ap.1, b. 9, L. 1). As Dr. Kazys Grinius testifies, “this was the first Marijampole Town Council” (Grinius 2016: 242).

Dr. Kazys Grinius recalls that the first elected³ council of the town included him, priest Vincentas Borisevicius – in total, several people (Grinius 2016: 242). In fact, 23 members attended the first meeting of the Council (Minutes of the Marijampole Council 14 January 1920 – 15 January 1921. OCAL F. 1362, ap.1, b. 9, L. 1). The Christian Democrats had a majority in the Council, and the priest V. Borisevicius became an influential figure in the Council, whose opinion was

shared even by Jewish representatives (Juodaitis 2006: 24). One reason for this may have been his authority as a person, the other was his education. He had not only graduated from the seminary in Seinai, but also continued his studies at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland. From Gintaras Zilinskas’s article *Local Municipalities in the First Republic of Lithuania: Education and Qualification of Councillors and Clerks* shows that there was a shortage of educated people in the municipalities of that time. Most of them had only completed primary school or could only read and write (Zilinskas 2013: 497). At least in the first municipal council of Marijampole there were Dr Kazys Grinius, priest Antanas Smulkstys, teacher Vaclovas Kasakaitis, engineer Stasys Ciurlionis, and teacher Konstantinas Barniskis. It is not clear how many of them had completed higher education. The education or profession of the other members is not specified. However, it is clear that there was not a single woman in this council (Minutes of the Marijampole Council, 14 January 1920 – 15 January 1921. OCAL F. 1362, ap. 1, b. 9, L. 1). And if we look at the statistics in general, in 1921 only 1.82 per cent of persons with higher education in Lithuania were in municipalities. In the Constituent Assembly, the percentage of persons with higher education was 29.46 per cent. G. Zilinskas does not provide data on the number of women and the number of women in each Lithuanian municipality in the above-mentioned work (Zilinskas 2013: 499).

During the first meeting of Marijampole “Selected Council”, according to Dr. Kazis Grinius, he was the oldest person

in age and was the chairman, and the secretary was Vincentas Borisevicius. The latter was a chairman also at the October 14, 1920 meeting (Minute No. 31). Here the issues of the town's fire service, night-time protection of the city (patrolling) were discussed, and it was decided to install an artesian well in the town, and to open Ziburys Orphanage. A number of individual issues were discussed and resolved. The chairman and secretary of this meeting was Fr. V. Borisevicius (Minutes of the Marijampole Council, 14 January 1920–15 January 1921. OCAL F. 1362, ap.1, b. 9, L. 79–82).

Under Borisevicius's presence, Marijampole Town Council discussed the most important issues of the municipality of Marijampole in the emerging Lithuania: social, economic. Here, already at the second meeting, the "bread issue" arose. This issue is presented by Fr. Vincentas Borisevicius. He speaks about the shortage of grain and bread in the town and proposes a way of solving the problem (Minutes of the Marijampole Council, 14 January 1920–15 January 1921. OCAL F. 1362, ap. 1, b. 9, L. 7). Thus, during the year in question, from 14 January 1920 to 15 January 1921, the elected Marijampole Town Council met 45 times. This last minute records the election of a new Council Secretary. Rev. Borisevicius, K. Barniskis

and A. Petravicius declined themselves as candidates, and the Council "invited Antanas Rasytinis from the country to be the secretary" (Minutes of the Council of Marijampole, January 14, 1920–January 15, 1921. OCAL F. 1362, ap. 1, b. 9, L. 119). It is not clear whether Borisevicius remained in the Council as an ordinary member for some time. However, he soon left Marijampole. It can therefore be assumed that this was the end of the episode of Fr. Vincentas Borisevicius' pastoral activity and active work in Marijampole Town Council. However, that episode was very eventful. The Council had to deal with the most important issues of a separate region of the nascent state, devastated both by the years of tsarist occupation and by the horrors of the First World War. The Council members addressed various issues to make the region's development more proactive in reducing social problems. Here, as we have seen, was the extraordinary contribution of Father Vincentas Borisevicius. Thus, the years in the Town Council with Vincentas Borisevicius have been a period of major and difficult work in building well-being of the people of Marijampole. Borisevicius was soon appointed to teach pastoral and moral theology at Seinai Theological Seminary, then located in Gizai.

CONCLUSIONS

After the restoration of independence, the interwar Lithuania had among its top priorities the establishment of a national school, which of course was inseparable from teaching of Catholic re-

ligion, since the vast majority of the population of the country belonged to the Roman Catholic Church. The relationship between Church and State in Lithuanian school system depended not

only on the legislative framework, but also on the attitudes of parties or individuals towards Catholic faith.

The restoration of statehood in Lithuania also offers better opportunities for education of young people. The network of Ziburys gymnasiums is expanding. These educational institutions were often led by educated priests. However, society was not overly Catholic. There were often echoes of the 1905 Revolution in Russia and attempts to pit the clergy against the rest of intelligentsia. Although many intellectuals were Catholics, some of them had a “libertarian” attitude and had considerable influence among people, and in the case of Borisevicius, in Marijampole realistic gymnasium. The chaplains at this school did not stay long because of their extreme hostility to the clergy, the church and even to Lithuania. Borisevicius did not last long either. Seeing that his work at the realistic gymnasium was not producing the expected results, he resigned. Vincentas Borisevicius gave a lot of time and energy here while working in the gymnasiums in Marijampole. And if he had difficulties in the realistic gymnasium, he had a long and successful career in Ziburys gymnasium, where he was loved by pupils and teachers, and was a caring and obliging chaplain. Sensitive and prayerful, devoted to his vocation,

Fr. Vincent showed his determination and dedication in a short period of time.

In Lithuania, the clergy also stood at the origins of independence and consolidation of statehood. Those who were not indifferent and capable were also involved in the establishment of Lithuanian self-government and in formation of public attitudes, beliefs and customs. One such person was Father Vincentas Borisevicius. A short period of his life related to Marijampole.

Father Borisevicius devoted quite a lot of time to the work of Marijampole Municipality. He was also the secretary of this council. He had to work with people of quite different political and religious convictions, such as Dr Kazys Grinius and others. The elected members of the Town Council dealt with the problems of the territory and population devastated after the First World War, and were particularly concerned with the poor and the problems of the town. Thus, if we look at all the areas of Father Vincentas Borisevicius’s activities, we can summarise the testimony of Father Antanas Smulkstis, who knew him, that Borisevicius’s activities in Marijampole “were wide-ranging and very useful” (Katilius 2021: 197). And later, his activities in both ecclesiastical and social spheres were of great importance.

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Endnotes

¹ Borisevicius Vincentas (1887–1946). Born in Sunskai parish, Vilkauskis county. After graduating from the Seminary of Seinai, he studied at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland. He was ordained a priest in 1910. Priest Borisevicius was a vicar in Kalvarija, an army chaplain (in the Russian X army), a representative in Petrapilis Lithuanian Seimas. After 1918, Vincentas Borisevicius was a chaplain of the public and private gymnasium in Marijampole, a member of the Marijampole City Council and even the chairman (for a while). In 1940 V.Borisevičius was appointed a titular Bishop of Lysia and an assistant to the Bishop of Telsiai. After the death of Bishop J. Staugaičius, he was appointed an

Ordinary Bishop of Telsiai. 5th February, 1945 he was arrested for the second and last time. He was brutally interrogated and tortured. He was shot in Vilnius 12th October, 1946 (Mūsų švyturiai, p. 24–25.)

² Bulota Andrius 1872 Putriskiai, (Padovinis rg.) – 1941 Paneriai (Vilnius), lawyer, advocate, Freemason, representative of the Russian State Duma, active member of the Lithuanian Socialist People's Party, 1918–1940 practiced as a lawyer and lived in Marijampole, patron of the writer Julija Zemaite.

³ In 1918, a provisional city council was elected in Marijampolė, which continued its activities until 14 January 1920.