

LITHUANIA AMONG THE CHRISTIAN NATIONS

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THE object of this article is to give to readers of *Dominicana* an idea of the relations of the Lithuanians with the Catholic Religion. In order, however, to present the proposed subject in a clear and adequate manner, particularly since the Lithuanians as a nation are but little known to the English-speaking peoples, I deem it necessary to give a more detailed description of their native country and their contemporary history with certain relative conditions and environments.

From a geographical standpoint, Lithuania (Lietuva), an independent republic of northwestern Europe, is situated along the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea. It is bounded: North by Latvia, East by Russia, South by Poland, Southwest by East Prussia, and West by the Baltic. The ethnographical history of primitive Lithuania is rather obscure. The first true record of it is found in the writings of Caius Cornelius Tacitus (55-100), the celebrated Roman historian, who writes that, during the reign of the Roman Emperor Lucius Domitius Nero (54-68), Lithuania was already known to the coasting tradesmen for her famous amber found in abundance on the shores of the Baltic; and he further informs us that certain merchants were sent there from Rome to purchase that precious ornament.

From time immemorial, Lithuania was a free and independent country. Under the Grand Duke Jogaila (1386-1434) she was united to the Kingdom of Poland; finally, in 1795, Lithuania, together with her former ally Poland, was conquered by the Prussians and Russians and shared between them. In 1840, an imperial ukase of the Tsar of Russia, Nicholas I, abolished the name of Lithuania from the map of Europe, strictly prohibited the teaching of the Lithuanian language in the private as well as in the public schools of the country, forbade the publishing of Lithuanian books and newspapers, and many thousands of pre-existing Lithuanian books were reduced to ashes by government orders. The end of the World War, November 11, 1918, marked the beginning of a new era for Lithuania. On February 16, 1918, a declaration of independence was issued and soon after a per-

manent constitutional government was framed and formally adopted by the people. The area of the present Lithuanian territory is estimated at about 59,633 square miles, with a population of about 4,500,000.

The Lithuanians are neither Slavs nor Teutons, but, together with the Letts, form a distinct ethnological Lithuano-Lettic group in the family of European peoples. They have their own characteristic features, their own social traits, national customs and traditions, and, above all this, they possess their own distinctive language which is said to be even more ancient and more beautiful than any of the known European tongues. It belongs to the Indo-European group of languages and is the nearest known idiom to Sanscrit. It has been recognized by the leading philologists, such as: Peter von Bohlen (1796-1840), professor of philology in the University of Koenigsberg, Germany; Franz Bopp (1791-1867), the founder of the science of comparative philology, professor of oriental languages in the University of Berlin and author of the *Glossarium Sanscriticum* and of the *Vergleichende Grammatik des Sanscrit, Zend, Griechischen, Lateinischen, Lithuanischen, Altslaviachen, Gothischen und Deutschen* (5 Vols., Berlin, 1833). Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), professor of metaphysics in the University of Koenigsberg, who was born in East Prussian Lithuania and had a knowledge of the Lithuanian language, said that the "Lithuanian tongue possesses the key which opens, not only the enigmas of philology, but also those of history," and August Schleicher (1821-1886), professor of philology in the University of Bonn, Germany, said that "If the value of the nation to the whole of humanity were to be measured by the beauty of its language, the Lithuanians should rank first among the inhabitants of Europe."

It is strange that the Lithuanians, living as it were surrounded on all sides by Christian nations, should have remained pagans even to the Middle Ages. The first attempt to convert the Lithuanian people to Christianity was made by the Teutonic Knights of the Cross in the thirteenth century. It was a complete failure for the simple reason that these Knights were filled with political ambitions of acquiring territory rather than with missionary zeal of converting the natives to the True Faith. In 1251, Mindaugas, the Grand Duke of Lithuania, sent an embassy to Pope Innocent IV, offering to place his kingdom under the protection of the Holy See lest the Knights should take possession of it under the pretext of evangelization. The Pope received the Lithuanian ambassador with much honor and complied with the request of Mindaugas, who was baptized in 1252 and received the

royal crown from the hands of the Rt. Rev. Henry Armacken, O. P., Bishop of Culm. As Mindaugas had desired a special diocese for his kingdom, a saintly Dominican missionary, contemporary and companion of St. Hyacinth, O. P., Father Vitus, O. P., was, by order of the Pope, consecrated the first Bishop of Lithuania by Archbishop Albert of Riga, assisted by Bishop Henry, O. P., of Culm. We find the event recorded in the *Ecclesiastical Annals* of that year:

1252 Regnum Lithuaniae et Rege Mindaugo recens conversum in clientelam Sedis Apostolicae recepit. Is enim hoc anno diadema Regium adeptus, et a Rigensi episcopo atque Henrico, Ord. Praed., Episcopo Culmensi, solemniter inunctus. Primus qui tunc Lithuanis a Sede Apostolica datus est Episcopus, ex nomine vocabatur B. Vitus, Ord. Praed., sancti et miraculorum gratia illustris. (*Annales Ecclesiastici*. 1192-1299, auctore R. P. Fr. Bzivio, O. P.).

During this epoch, however, Christianity acquired no firm footing in Lithuania. Two years after his conversion Mindaugas was murdered by his infidel nephew Trainaitis, and his two sons drenched the soil with blood in revenge upon the murderers of their father. Bishop B. Vitus, O. P., was expelled from his episcopal see by force of arms, and the work of evangelization was suspended completely for a time.

With the reign of Gediminas (1316-1340) a new era began for Lithuanian Christianity. Gediminas ruled his kingdom with wisdom and prudence, and has justly merited the title of "Founder of Lithuanian Power." His principal merit to deserve such honor seems to be derived from his decision to open his kingdom to the vivifying influence of the Roman Catholic Religion and western civilization. In 1323 Gediminas wrote to Pope John XXII, declaring himself ready to embrace Christianity, as is evident from the letter written by the above mentioned Pontiff to the Grand Master of the Teutonic Knights, dated 1324, which contains the following message: "Gediminas, Duke of the Lithuanians, informs us by letter and by his ambassadors that he desires to embrace the Christian Religion, and begs us to send persons able to instruct and baptize him. We have received his request with great joy, hoping that his conversion may lead to that of a multitude of pagans in those parts." Himself a heathen, Gediminas fostered the Catholic Religion. He built two churches for the Franciscans—in Vilnius and in Naugardukas—and one for the Dominicans in Vilnius, and confided the conversion of his subjects to the missionaries of these two Orders. Whether Gediminas really desired to become a Christian, or whether he wished simply to remove the cause of constant annoyance on the part of the Teutonic Knights, remains uncertain. This we know, however, that he was

slain at Velona, in 1340, while engaged in a fierce battle against his everlasting enemies, the Teutonic Knights, and that his two sons Algirdas and Keistutis, staunch champions of paganism, vigorously opposed the spread of Christianity in their territories and suppressed the Franciscan and Dominican institutions.

The conversion of Lithuania was finally achieved by the grandson of Gediminas, Jogaila (1386-1434), who succeeded his father Algirdas to the throne of Lithuania. Jogaila was received into the Catholic Church at Cracow, February 14, 1386, and by his marriage with the Queen of Poland, Hedwige, he united Lithuania to Poland and proclaimed Christianity the religion of his united kingdom. On the ruins of the temple of Perkunas (thunder-god) rose the lofty Cathedral of Vilnius. The Bishop of Vilnius at this time was the Rt. Rev. Andrew Vosylius, O. F. M., (1388-1398). Jogaila was a sincere and fervent Catholic ruler, and as such he was duly praised by Pope Urban VI in a letter dated April 17, 1388, and deservedly titled a "zealous missionary king." It is said that in the space of thirty years nearly five million people were converted to the Faith. St. Casimir (1458-1484), Patron Saint of Lithuania, the grandson of Jogaila, was raised to the altars of the Church by Pope Adrian VI, 1522.

Thus in a few years, comparatively speaking, Lithuania, at least nominally, became a Catholic country. There remained, however, a great deal of patient and persevering labor to preserve the Faith once received and to lay a solid foundation for that superstructure of really appreciable and lasting Christian civilization. Jogaila and his immediate successors, however, labored under the great disadvantage of a lack of proper ecclesiastical organization and a shortage of native clergy, especially Religious missionaries and educators. The catechetical and missionary work of that period was, for the most part, done by the lay catechists and interpreters of foreign missionaries. What was worse, about the middle of the sixteenth century the Lutheran and Calvinist Protestants, led by Abraham Kulva and John Winkler, were getting a firm foothold in Lithuania. The zealous Reformers raised up the flag of nationalism and thereby won the favor of the people, so much so indeed that the entire nation was on the brink of passing over to Protestantism. But the rapid progress of the so-called Reformers was soon checked by the arrival of the Jesuits, who, in 1596, under the leadership of Peter Skarga, S. J. set about their task at once. They met their adversaries on their own grounds and attacked them with their own weapons. They published apologetical treatises, opened public discussions with the theologians

of the Reformers on doctrinal subjects, and thus revived the Catholic spirit throughout the entire country.

About this time also the Dominicans returned to Lithuania to resume, for the third time, their missionary labors. This time their efforts met with much success. They built many beautiful churches, schools and convents. The sons of St. Dominic distinguished themselves, particularly as preachers in the parochial missions. In less than a century the Dominican Province of Lithuania numbered thirty-eight convents with as many beautiful churches, some of which adorn the land to this day. At this time also various other Religious communities of men and women established themselves in Lithuania; namely, Bernardines, Carmelites, Camaldolese, Piarists (founded by St. Joseph Calasanctius), who devoted themselves to the teaching of youth. The Franciscans continued their missionary work in Lithuania from the time of Jogaila, 1388. The Benedictine Nuns in Kaunas and the Sisters of St. Catherine in Krakiai (both cloistered) still exist. This religious revival marked the renaissance period in Catholic Lithuania.

In 1773, unfortunately for Lithuania, the Society of Jesus was suppressed by the Holy See and thus the sons of St. Ignatius were obliged to discontinue their great missionary and educational work. There were eleven hundred and forty-four Jesuits in the Russian Empire at the time of their suppression. In 1795 Lithuania became a part of Russia, and from that time on the Roman Catholics in general, and the Religious in particular, were subject to continual vexations and at times, also to bloody persecutions. This was especially true under the iniquitous statutes and anti-Catholic laws of the vigorous champion of Russian Orthodoxy Catherine II (1762-1796), the proud Nero-like Nicholas I, (1825-1851), and the so-called "Tsar Liberator" Alexander II (1855-1881). He abolished slavery in 1861 by an imperial decree and restored to freedom twenty-three million serfs. At first he did not appear to be so anti-Catholic, but very soon indeed there was a return to the methods of Nicholas I, who in 1826 made very difficult, even altogether impossible, the admission of novices to Religious Orders and of students to theological seminaries. The Polish revolution of 1863 furnished the Russian government with a pretext for suspicion and intensified the persecutions of the Roman Catholics, especially the clergy and Religious Orders, with the final result that on November 8, 1864, the Russian government suppressed the Religious Orders, and their churches, monasteries and convents became the property of the State. Although most of the churches and convents were afterwards redeemed by the Catholics, the Religious

were not permitted to return and take possession of them. Thus the Catholicity of the Lithuanian people was put to a severe test, but their religion was so well established at this period that the most atrocious persecution of the cruel tsars of Russia could not destroy or even diminish it in the hearts of the faithful.

In 1918 Lithuania recovered her independence, and since that time all denominations alike, have enjoyed religious freedom. The present population of the Lithuanian Republic is estimated at about 4,500,000, of whom 75% are Roman Catholics 12% Jews, 9% Russian Orthodox, 4% Protestants. There are 365 churches and 180 chapels in Lithuania, ministered to by one Archbishop-Metropolitan, six Bishops and about a thousand diocesan clergy. The number of Lithuanians in the United States of America is estimated at about 500,000. They have 114 churches with 165 priests, of whom 140 are seculars and 25 Religious. 33 of these churches have parochial schools, conducted by the Sisters of various Religious communities.

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