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LITUANORUM GENTE: ARKIVYSKUPAS JURGIS MATULAITIS – BAŽNYČIOS IR VALSTYBĖS INTERESŲ DERINTOJAS

Lituanorum gente: Archbishop Jurgis Matulaitis –
Conciliator of the Church and the State

SUMMARY

The First World War, the subsequent international political events, changed the boundaries of the Lithuanian territory and changed the ecclesiastical administrative situation. Such a situation did not satisfy neither the Lithuanian state nor the Catholic Church itself. To solve such a situation, Pope Pius XI sent, by the title and authority Apostolic Visitor, Archbishop George Matulaitis. He became the principal creator of the 1926 Apostolic Constitution *Lituanorum gente*, the conciliator of opinions between the position of the Church and the State. Because of the archbishop's personal qualities, a good understanding of the situation and the ability to reconcile the interests of the Church and the State, also because of his advantages in diplomatic activity, the new Church Province project was drafted quite smoothly. The history of this project has remained a good example of relations between the State and the Church, and Jurgis Matulaitis himself can be considered an example of diplomatic activity.

SANTRAUKA

Pirmasis pasaulinis karas, vėlesni tarptautiniai politiniai įvykiai, pakeitė Lietuvos teritorijos ribas, sujaukė ir bažnytinę administracinę situaciją. Tokia padėtis netenkino nei Lietuvos valstybės, nei pačios Katalikų Bažnyčios. Spręsti susidariusią situaciją popiežius Pijus XI pasiuntė į Lietuvą arkivyskupą Jurgį Matulaitį, suteikęs jam Apaštalinio Vizitatoriaus titulą ir įgaliojimus. Jis tapo pagrindiniu 1926 m. apaštalinės konstitucijos *Lituanorum gente* projekto rengėju, Bažnyčios pozicijos ir valstybės interesų derintoju. Arkivyskupo asmeninės savybės, puikus situacijos suvokimas ir gebėjimas derinti Bažnyčios ir valstybės interesus, diplomatinis meistriškumas padėjo gana sklandžiai parengti naujos bažnytinės provincijos projektą. Šio projekto įgyvendinimo istorija yra gerų valstybės ir Bažnyčios santykių, o pats Jurgis Matulaitis – puikaus diplomato pavyzdys.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: *Lituanorum gente*, Jurgis Matulaitis, bažnyčios ir valstybės interesai, diplomatija.

KEY WORDS: *Lituanorum gente*, Jurgis Matulaitis, Church and State interests, diplomacy.

INTRODUCTION

The first dioceses were established during the reign of king Mindaugas. After Christianity failed to take hold in Lithuania, and after the loss of hierarchic continuity, those first Lithuanian dioceses were also lost. Later, during the Christening of Lithuania, Vilnius Diocese was established (archdiocese since 1925), and later, after the Christening of Samogitia, Medininkai Diocese was created (established in 1417). After the 3rd partition of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, new dioceses were established in Vygiai (in 1799) and in Seinai (in 1918) (the latter was also known as Augustavas Diocese). But the First World War and later international conflicts (occupation of Vilnius and Seinai) impacted administrative situation of the Church. This situation was not suitable neither for the State, nor for the Church. To solve it,

Pope Pius XI sent Archbishop (former bishop of Vilnius) Jurgis Matulaitis, who also had a title and power of an Apostolic Visitor. The mentioned Archbishop was a conciliator of the Church and the State and also the author of 1926 apostolic constitution *Lituanorum gente*. This work analyses how good he did.

Previous works (Kasparavicius A., Between Politics and Diplomacy. Holy See and Republic of Lithuania, Vilnius 2008, Zemaitis K., Pius XI Constitution "Lituanorum Gente" and Its Consequences for Lithuania // Logos, Vilnius 2006 and other) discussed this topic as well. However, this topic is rather wide and deep, therefore there is a need to once again review the details of solution of the said problem and the results that followed, by emphasizing the effort of Vatican-sent Archbishop Jurgis Matulaitis.

ADMINISTRATIVE SITUATION OF THE CHURCH BEFORE 1926

Before the First World War (during the occupational period) and even after the reinstatement of Independence of Lithuania in 1918 until the establishment of provincial Lithuanian Church in 1926, the Catholic Church Dioceses in Lithuania belonged to metropolitans beyond Lithuania: the old Samogitian and Vilnius Dioceses belonged to Mogiliov Archdiocese, which was based in Petrograd¹ and Seinai diocese belong to Warsaw Archdiocese. The Seinai diocese itself was divided between two countries². Only a part of Vilnius Diocese was in the territory of Lithuania.

There was a lot of confusion in 1923 when Klaipeda region was granted to Lithuania. *De facto* territory belonged to Lithuania, but *de iure* four parishes of the said region remained in the jurisdiction of Warmian Diocese in Germany³.

Such a situation was not acceptable in Lithuania on both, political and Church approach, because Lithuania had been fighting for a long time and had just regained its independence. It was common for the boundaries of the diocesan area to coincide with the borders of the state. And at that time, according to Telsiai Bishop Justinas Staugaitis, "the

Lithuanian ecclesiastical system was dispersed" (Staugaitis 2006: 285). The only question is: were there qualified diplomats in Lithuania and sufficient political will to organize the ecclesiastical administration as soon as possible? Until 1925 it was difficult for the diplomats of the Holy See to address this issue both because of the lack of understanding of the situation in Lithuania⁴ and the influence of some states (possibly Poland). The situation was worsened even more because of the complicated relationship between the Church and Lithuania, especially after the Apostolic Visitor Antonius Zechini left Lithuania and went on to reside in Riga due to the approach towards nunciature becoming hostile. The freezing of diplomatic relations began. Lithuania had not yet "grown" a sufficient number of experienced diplomats. And only thanks to the former bishop of Vilnius, the archbishop as of 1925, the Apostolic Visitor to Lithuania Jurgis Matulaitis, that this situation was started to be investigated⁵. J. Matulaitis succeeded in performing his duties due to his personal qualities, diplomatic skills and great authority in Lithuania. Bishop Justinas Staugaitis, one of the most important witnesses of these events, writes: "The wisdom and virtues of the new Visitor were well known to us, so the nomination was met joyfully by Lithuanian Catholics. Even the so-called left wing, who led a persevering struggle against the Catholic Church in Lithuania, would not say much against the person of Archbishop Jurgis (Staugaitis 2006: 285). "Justinas Staugaitis also noticed that the new Vatican envoy "return to his own people. He knew perfectly all the cur-

rents of our lives and our thoughts. He wished only the best for our Church and the State" (ibid.). Finally, Matulaitis was not only a great connoisseur of Church dogmatics and rules, but also a good observer of social processes. J. Matulaitis was appointed to the Apostolic Visitor only for Lithuania, so he could not have a conflict of interests (former Visitor Card A. Ratti was addressed to Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia)⁶. It was also a very important fact that "Mecislovas Reinyš was the Minister of Foreign Affairs during the arrival of J. Matulaitis in the temporary capital of Lithuania. They were old acquaintances from the time at the Petersburg Academy of Spiritual Studies. M. Reinyš respected his former professor and peer, so the relationship between the two priests and the diplomats, since the arrival of J. Matulaitis to Kaunas, was warm, sincere, but at the same time formal" (Žalys 2007: 457). This circumstance allowed Archbishop Jurgis Matulaitis, who represented the Catholic Church, to feel the mood of the Lithuanian government. Furthermore, he already knew the whole political situation in Lithuania. It is also important that Lithuania itself was his home. So it can be concluded that Matulaitis was somehow close to everyone.

It was clear that this was not just a matter of the Church and of the State, because the future reorganization of the dioceses and the establishment of new ones also had an international interest (Kasparavičius 2008: 238). In the region of Klaipėda, Germany was seeking more influence and Poland wanted the same in the region of Vilnius. "1926 During the preparation of the reform of the Lithua-

nian Church Province, Berlin diplomacy made considerable efforts to ensure that Klaipeda <...> continues to belong to the German church organization" (ibid.). The Bishop of Warmia was also not favourable to the future ecclesiastical status of the Klaipeda region (Yla 2007: 204).

The relationship was also difficult with Poland. In 1925, Poland, bypassing Lithuania, signed the Concordat with the Apostolic Capital. By a Concordat Vilnius Diocese⁷ is attributed to the Polish Diocese. The new Vilnius Church Province with two more dioceses, Lomza and Pinsk, no longer belonged to the Catholic Dioceses of Lithuania (*Acta Apostolicae Sedis...* Vol. XVII 1925: 276).

In Lithuania, it seemed that there were opponents of this project. Here, on April 28, 1926 (after the *Lituanorum gente* was announced), the newspaper *Vienybė* wrote: "Social Democrats, peasants, folk, and other opponents of religion are asking why the Pope established the Lithuanian Church Province, why did the government agree with the establishment..." (*Vienybė*, Weekly newspaper of Lithuanian Catholics Nr. 18, 1926. 04. 28: 1). Even Catholic society sometimes did not understand the current situation – Lithuanian Church Province without Vilnius (Žemaitis 2006: 88.). The new messenger of the Church in Lithuania faced these realities.

CONSEQUENCES OF *LITUANORUM GENTE*

April 4, 1926 Pope Pius XI announced the apostolic constitution of the Lithuanian people ("*Lituanorum gente*") which stated that the Lithuanian Church Province with new dioceses was formed, the dioceses were the following: Kaunas Archdiocese, Telsiai, Vilkauskis, Panevezys and Kaišiadorys Dioceses. The proclamation of the Constitution seemed to have solved (to what extent this could have been done at that time) the administrative territorial situation of the Catholic Church. The most important problem of the ecclesiastical affiliation of the Archdiocese of Vilnius was solved as favourably as possible for Lithuanians. Although it was not satisfactory for Lithuanians that it was appointed to the Polish dioceses, it was a clear favour for Lithuanians to be excluded from any particular Polish metropolis. Furthermore, its

status as a separate metropolis testified that under other political and territorial circumstances this archdiocese could be restored to the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of Lithuania, which was *de facto* restored after regaining Vilnius in 1939, and *de iure* after the restoration of Lithuania's independence in 1991 thanks to Pope John Paul II. Of course, the Vilnius Diocese had lost part of its territory forever, as some parishes had remained in Poland and the rest in Belarus. Jurgis Matulaitis, a former bishop of Vilnius, knew the sensitivity of this issue. Vilnius was formerly part of Poland (according to the 1925 Polish Concordat). Matulaitis had a challenging task of reassuring the Lithuanian society and persuading the government to come to terms with the situation, knowing that it could change with the political situation in the country.

However, the dependence of the Vilnius Diocese on one of the five Polish metropolises remained fragile in later years in Lithuania. This was also related to the wish to recover Vilnius as the capital of Lithuania. Well, of course, another aspiration is to have a Lithuanian bishop in Vilnius.

A new Diocese of Kasiadorys was formed from the remaining part of Vilnius diocese of Lithuania. This corresponded to the realities of that time, and the integration of the territory or the fact that it did not become a part of other diocese (as the Polish Embassy in the Vatican wanted (Kasparavičius 2008: 204) corresponded to the wishes of Lithuanian politicians. The Diocese of Kasiadorys remained on the map as a sign of political aggression against Lithuania. However, the government's plan for this area seemed different. As Stasys Yla writes, Archbishop Jurgis Matulaitis himself sent the message to bishop J. Skvireckas, that the Holy See does not want to approve the said territory as a separate administration, but to establish a diocese "which, if changed in time, could be otherwise defined". This sentence is a testament to the possibility of changing the order of the ecclesiastical administrative structure in the future. Again, this was not said without the diplomatic activity of Archbishop Jurgis Matulaitis and some kind of mediation between the Apostolic Throne and the Lithuanian government.

What about the Diocese of Seinai? The remaining part of it in Poland had already been proclaimed as a new diocese of Lomza. The Seinai Diocese, which

still existed on the territory of Lithuania for a year, was reorganized and a new diocese of Vilkaviskis was announced⁸: "Vilkaviskis Diocese with the Cathedral Church with the title of the Blessed Virgin Mary Visitation in Vilkaviskis will have the following deans: Bartninkai, Garliava, Kalvarija, Marijampole, Naumiestis, Panemune, Prienai, Seirijai, Simnas, Vilkaviskis, Sakiai"⁹. Some Lithuanian territories were lost here. Their loss was associated with the occupation of Suwalki region of Seinai. That part remained on the Polish side. Because of such division of the diocese in political and later in ecclesiastical way, a rather strong Lithuanian society remained in Lithuania, also, this ended national discord, however, this problem remained for a long time in the mixed parishes beyond the Lithuanian border.

The establishment of this administrative unit also required a resolution of the issue of a new diocese centre. Although the Visitor J. Matulaitis was from this diocese, the final decision was influenced by the clergy of this community.

The Klaipeda region¹⁰ was separated from the German Catholic Diocese of Warmia and a separate administrative unit was established: "the Klaipeda region, which includes the parishes of Klaipeda, Silute, Robkoja and Viesviliai, will form, together with the prelate church in the name of the Holy Trinity in Klaipeda city, Klaipeda *Praelatura nullius*, which is separated from the Diocese of Warmia, and will be ruled by the Telsiai Ordinary, taking into account the local circumstances and the Church statutes"¹¹. This entry in the constitution

Lituanorum gente was very favourable for Lithuania. What happened in 1923 (connection of Klaipėda region to Lithuania), now it was done in the framework of ecclesiastical law. However, this only happened with great effort. And, first of all, it was the merit of Jurgis Matulaitis.

The old Diocese of Samogitia (Medininkai), formerly part of the Mogilev metropolis, is divided into three separate dioceses: Kaunas Archdiocese, Panevezys and Telsiai Dioceses. This division had the least problems because there was no greater interest from other countries (Yla 2007: 204). The Apostolic Throne attempted to satisfy as much as possible the interests of both the government and the Church in Lithuania when establishing new dioceses. However, the work of harmonizing such opinions could not be done better by anyone else other than the Visitor J. Matulaitis, having a good understanding of both the politicians and the Church in Lithuania.

After the completion of this project and approval of Pope Pius XI, Lithuania was no longer a member of metropolises of other states – it became a direct subordinate of the Holy See.

In this way, this work was the result of both the Church and the State's efforts, to which great efforts were also made by the then Apostolic Visitor to Lithuania Archbishop Jurgis Matulaitis, able to reconcile Church and State relations. This is what was also sought by the Vatican. Even in the constitution itself on the common interest of the Church and the State it said that: "For the Lithuanian people after the Great War and restoration of independence with the help of

God, we, who have seen the Lithuanian faith and prayer with our own eyes which was zealous and enduring in various misfortunes, and because we are convinced that a better arrangement of ecclesiastical affairs will be of great benefit not only to Catholicism, but for the state itself: consider it very appropriate and necessary to increase the number of dioceses and to form a Church Province from them"¹².

Finally, the establishment of the Church Province provided better conditions for the preparation of the Concordat, the development of the Catholic Action, and led to the establishment of the Telsiai Priest Seminary. The emergence of new dioceses was directly related to the new Lithuanian episcopate. The Visitor was the one taking care of this issue (Staugaitis 2006: 318). The solution of the issue was not easy. "The government wanted to say a word about the candidates" (Yla 2007: 204). Stays Yla writes: "It was not easy to reconcile everyone's interests and satisfy everyone" (ibid.: 203). So this "process" (Staugaitis 2006: 317.) took time. This resulted in a difficult start for the activities of the new dioceses, because soon after their establishment, the government changed, the political forces unfavourable to the Church took over.

However, the new bishops well-known to Jurgis Matulaitis – Mečislovas Reinyš (former Minister of Foreign Affairs), Kazimieras Paltarokas, Juozapas Kukta, Archbishop Juozapas Skvireckas and Antanas Karosas (the last Bishop of Seinai) immediately took up their duties (Žemaitis 2006: 90–91). One of the most

prominent people was the new bishop of Telsiai, former chairman of Seimas, Justinas Staugaitis, who greatly advocated for the initiation of a diocese reconstruction project. This episcopate was flawless in ecclesiastical terms. However, the relationship with the government in changing political forces was different. The oldest bishops, J. Skvireckas and A. Karosas, followed the most modest policy.

After this assignment by the Apostolic Throne, Jurgis Matulaitis was preparing for other important works. First of all, it was necessary to prepare the Lithuanian and Vatican Concordat project. He did not manage to implement this project (he died on 27 January 1927). However, his work opened a new page of relations between Catholic Church and the State of Lithuania.

CONCLUSIONS

After the tsarist Russian Empire collapsed, many of its former enslaved nations, Lithuania among them, restored their independence. However, the ecclesiastical administrative structure requested to be reorganized according to the new state borders. The archbishop, Jurgis Matulaitis, titled Apostolic Visitor, originally from Lithuania himself, was sent from Vatican to Lithuania to organize the

work. Thanks to his personal qualities, knowledge of the topicalities of the country, the great willingness to serve both the Church and the welfare of the state, the project of the new ecclesiastical province was drafted quite smoothly. The history of this project has remained a good example of relations between the state and the Church, and Jurgis Matulaitis himself can be considered a teacher of diplomacy.

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Endnotes

¹ The Russian Emperor Yekaterina II, without observing the law of the Catholic Church, which means without the permission of the Apostolic Throne, in 1773 arbitrarily established a separate Catholic Church Diocese with the center in Mo-

gilev. Pope Pius VI in 1783 April 15 recognized the Archdiocese of Mogilev. 1798 Metropolitan Center was moved to St. Petersburg. Later, the Soviet government ruined Mogilev's metropolitan activities. Archbishop Metropolitan Ed-

ward von Ropa (1917 - 1919) was arrested, later deported, Mogilev Bishop Jan Cieplak (1919-1923) arrested, exiled even from the Soviet Union in 1926.

² The Catholic Church dioceses in Lithuania were separated from the Mogilev metropolis, and the Mogilev Archdiocese itself was divided into 6 territories, but their administration was hampered by the Soviet authorities. Only after a long time Pope John Paul II joined the Mogilev Archdiocese with another, namely the Diocese of Minsk, and set up the Archdiocese of Minsk-Mogilev.

Four deans were left on the Lithuanian side: Kalvarija, Marijampolė, Vilkaviskis and Naumiestis (until 1900 or 1917 in Vladislavov). On the Polish side there were three deans: Seina, Augustow, Suwalki.

³ The Diocese of Warmia was founded in 1243. In the territory of the pagan Prussia. It covered a large area bordering Lithuania.

⁴ The first representative of the Holy See in Lithuania was the Apostolic Visitor Achille Ratti. He managed to „not confuse“ Lithuanian and Polish Church affairs (Monsignor A. Ratti also represented Poland). Archbishop Antonin Zecchini was not well acquainted with Lithuania's problems.

⁵ *Constitutio Apostolica, Lituorum gente / Acta Apostolicae Sedis, Commentarium officiale, Annus XVIII-Vol. XVIII, Romae MDCCCXXXVI, p. 123: „Ad haec autem omnia executioni mandanda deputamus venerabilem fratrem Georgium Matulewicz, Archiepiscopum titulum Adulitanum, quem Lituaniae Visitatorem dedimus, eidem necessarias et opportunas facultates tribuentes, etiam subdelegandi, ad effectum de quo agitur, quemlibet virum in ecclesiastica dignitate constitutum, ac definitive sententiam dicendi de quavis difficultate vel oppositione, imposito onere intra sex menses mittendi ad Sacram Congregationem Consistorialem authenticum exemplar peractae executionis“.*

⁶ Pope Benedict XV established the Apostolic Nuncio in Poland in 1918 and nominated Achille Ratti (Future Pope XI) as the Visitor for Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia).

⁷ The Vilnius Diocese was not attributed to any other metropolis, perhaps because it was very mixed nationally – Lithuanians, Poles and Be-

lorussians lived there. There is also another reason: the assignment of Vilnius to the Warsaw metropolis could have led to an even greater political reaction in Lithuania with regard to the Holy See. The Pinsk and Lomza Dioceses also had many national minorities: Poles, Belorussians, Masurians (author not specified) 1977: 52.)

⁸ The renunciation of the old Diocese of Seinai was probably not easy for priests or politicians. Adopting another name for the Diocese meant stopping any links with the old Diocese of Seinai. However, a compromise was found and the new Diocese got the name of Vilkaviskis Diocese.

⁹ *Acta Apostolicae Sedis... Vol. XVII., 122: „Diocesis Vilkaviškensis, cum cathedrali ecclesia sub titulo Visitationis B. M. V. in civitate Vilkaviškis, continebit decanatus: Bartninkensem, Garliavensem, Kalvariensem, Mariampolensem, Naumiensensem, Panemunensem, Prienensem, Seiriensem, Simnensem, Vilkaviškensem, Šakensem“.*

¹⁰ Klaipeda region in 1923 January 15 was appended to Lithuania. Until that date, the Klaipeda region belonged to various foreign countries: after the First World War, it was occupied by Russia, later separated from Germany by the Treaty of Versailles, and occupied by the French, it was returned to Lithuania after the uprising.

¹¹ *Constitutio Apostolica, Lituorum gente... , p. 122: „Ex regione Klaipėdēnsi, quae parocias Klaipėdēnsē, Šilutēnsē, Robkojēnsē et Viešvilensem connumerat, constituetur, cum ecclesia praelatitia sub titulo SS. Trinitatis in civitate Klaipėda, Praelatura nullius Klaipėdēnsis, quam seiunctam a dioecesi Varmiēnsi Ordinarius Telšēnsis, servatis, iuxta locorum adiuncta et ad normam iuris, servandis, administrabit“.*

¹² *Constitutio Apostolica, Lituorum gente... Annus XVII-Vol. XVIII. P. 121: „Lituorum gente post bellum maximum in libertatem, Deo favente, tandem restituta, Nos, qui eorum fidem ac pietatem, tam strenue diuque in adversis rebus omne genus servatas, praesentes conspicati sumus, cum persuasum habeamus aptiorem ecclesiasticarum rerum dispositionem plurimum sane conferre, non modo ad catholici nominis incrementum, sed etiam ad ipsam rei civilis prosperitatem, apprime utile atque opportunum existimamus ut in Lituania dioceses et numero augeantur et in Provinciam ecclesiasticam constituentur“.*