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**AT THE CROSSROADS:
THE HISTORY OF THE GREEK-CATHOLIC CHURCH IN LITHUANIA**

by Francesco La Rocca

INTRODUCTION ¹.

The Greek-Catholic Church in Lithuania is an almost unknown reality in the variegated galaxy of the Catholic Churches of the Byzantine rite. Lithuania itself is not among those Eastern European nations which are traditionally associated with the Uniate Churches (Ukraine, Belarus and, out of the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Slovakia and Romania). This is understandable to a certain extent, since ethnic Lithuanians are mainly Latin rite Catholics and Protestants. A Lithuanian Greek-Catholic Church has never existed, but a Greek-Catholic Church *in* Lithuania did exist and still does. Its history is deeply related to the Lithuanian one, and the Lithuanian state itself officially recognises Byzantine Catholicism as part of its traditional religious heritage.²

The origins of the Greek-Catholic Church in Lithuania trace back to the times of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, a state whose history shaped the destiny of several Eastern European nations. Among the several features of this vast and variegated territory, religion is crucially important. In fact, the issue of religious belonging has been a key political factor for ages. Identities, policies and states were shaped by religion, and blood was shed because of it. The Communist regimes strove to erase religion in the name of the emerging atheist society, but their attempt turned out to be disastrous, and religion surfaced again once the political atmosphere allowed it to. Now religion is again a key factor of the Eastern European nations' identities, albeit in a very different way than during the Middle and Early Modern Ages.

The religious panorama of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was characterised, *inter alia*, by the presence of both Latin and Eastern Christians. If on one hand this fact provided the Commonwealth with a unique cultural and religious environment, on the other hand it sowed the seeds of a never-ending series of conflicts.

Given their proximity, Latin and Byzantine communities could not avoid influencing one another, and the Greek-Catholic or Uniate Church is one of the most important and controversial outcomes of this process. Seen as traitors of the true faith by many Orthodox clergymen, and often considered too alien to the Catholic tradition in some Catholic environments, the existence of the Uniate Church has often been precarious, save for during some particular historical periods, when both the political and religious situations were propitious. Nevertheless, the Greek-Catholic Church's vicissitudes have deeply affected the society of many Eastern European nations.

Uniatism is still a highly controversial topic. The resurfacing of the Greek-Catholic communities in Eastern Europe following the end of the Communist regimes has been seen by several Orthodox leaders as a Catholic attempt to undermine Orthodoxy. The ecumenical dialogue has quite often come to a standstill on the subject of Uniatism. It is an issue which easily takes on

¹ This series of articles on the history of the Greek-Catholic Church in Lithuania presents the results of the thesis research I completed in September 2010 for the Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Research and Studies on Eastern Europe – MIREES, awarded by the University of Bologna in cooperation with the Vytautas Magnus University at Kaunas, the Corvinus University of Budapest and the Saint-Petersburg State University.

² "The state recognizes nine traditional religious communities and associations existing in Lithuania, which comprise a part of the historical, spiritual and social heritage of Lithuania: Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, Evangelical Reformed, Russian Orthodox, Old Believer, Judaistic, Sunni Muslim and Karaites." *Law on Religious Communities and Associations of the Republic of Lithuania*, article 5, Vilnius, October 4, 1995, No. I – 1057.

the traits of a political quarrel, as in the case of the request for restitution of the Greek-Catholic churches turned Orthodox during Communist times.

Uniatism has a lot to do with the identity of some Eastern European nationalities. Even though Greek-Catholics never gained majority status in any Eastern European national communities, they left their mark on the identities of peoples like the Ukrainians, Romanians and Slovaks. Whilst this did not happen with the Lithuanian people, nonetheless Uniatism influenced their society and environment. In fact, many events took place concerning Uniatism, and many Greek-Catholic personalities lived in the territories of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania, whose political system allowed a religious freedom which was simply unthinkable in other lands at that time. Moreover, in the 20th century, some ethnic Lithuanians engaged themselves in the Catholic mission to convert followers of the Russian Orthodox Church, the last officially endorsed Catholic attempt to convert the Eastern brethren before the Vatican II Council and the ecumenical movement. Nowadays, a Greek-Catholic community is once again present in Lithuania, a presence which enriches the religious life of that country.

To sum up, Lithuania influenced Uniatism and Uniatism influenced Lithuania. Yet the relevance of this Church in the development of the Lithuanian nation has never been properly investigated. The vast majority of Lithuanians themselves are unaware of the existence of this religious group in their country. At best, there have been a handful of studies made concerning this subject. The role of the development of the Greek-Catholic Church in Lithuania as a constitutive element of Lithuanian national identity has certainly never been studied before. Hence I decided to fill this gap. Through this study, I aimed to supply an innovative point of view on several topics: on Uniatism, a phenomenon whose impact on Eastern Europe is far from finished; on Lithuanian identity, as it deals with a relevant and unacknowledged aspect of Lithuanian history; on Lithuanian minority studies, as it provides an unpublished picture of an officially recognised but not yet deeply studied Lithuanian (and more broadly European) religious minority.³

PART 1: FROM THE ORIGINS TO THE TSARIST BAN *[selected excerpts only - editor]*

1) Orthodoxy, Eastern Slavs and Lithuanians: a Matter of Politics and Faith

As the Greek-Catholic Church in Lithuania is a culturally Slavic Church, a general overview of the history of the Slavs in the Lithuanian Grand Duchy, as well as of the early developments of the Orthodox Church in those territories, is needed. A Slavic element has been present in Lithuanian history since its very beginning. As neighbouring peoples, Balts and Slavs have been influencing each other for centuries. When Lithuania started to expand in the 13th century, the glory of the Kievan Rus', the first realm of the Eastern Slavs, was only a vestige of its

³ One can argue that the word "Uniate", which will be used quite often, is not the most suitable term, according to the current religious sensibility, among the several ones in usage: Byzantine-Catholics, Greek-Catholics, Orthodox in communion with Rome etc. There are actually some Eastern Catholic communities which are inclined to avoid the word "Uniate", like the Greek-Catholics of Ruthenian extraction in North America (who prefer to be called "Byzantine"), or communities where custom does not allow the use of this word, as in the case of the Italo-Albanian Greek-Catholic community. Southern Italy hosts the descendents of the Albanian emigrants who left their country between the 14th and the 18th centuries, in order to escape the Ottoman yoke. Most of them were originally Orthodox, but were eventually accepted into the Catholic Church in the 16th century, being allowed to retain their native Byzantine rite. Nowadays, there are two eparchies (dioceses) of Byzantine rite for the Italo-Albanians in Southern Italy: Piana degli Albanesi (Palermo district) and Lungro (Cosenza district). See Various Authors, *Annuario Pontificio Vaticano 2010*, Vatican City, 2010, pp. 422, 564. The Italo-Albanian (*arbëreshë* in the Albanian language) Church was the first community of Orthodox origins to have re-joined the Catholic Church, paving the way to the following Uniate Churches. I have decided to use the word "Uniate" too, along with other synonyms, since it is the term currently used in Lithuania (*unitai*) to label this religious group.

past. Internal divisions, centrifugal tendencies and, above all, the terrible Tatar invasion, which destroyed Kiev in 1240, irremediably undermined Kievan power. Its decline paved the way for its conquest by the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.⁴ Lithuanians ended up ruling over a huge Slavic population, conquering the contemporary Belorussian and Ukrainian territories, as well as many lands which now belong to the Russian Federation. The Grand Duke Gediminas⁵ was actually regarded as “king of Lithuanians and many Ruthenians” by his interlocutors.⁶

It is now necessary to clarify the term “Ruthenian”, since it is a key word whose meaning has changed over the centuries, creating some confusion. Initially, *Ruthenus* was the Latin word which was used of the inhabitants of Kievan Rus'.⁷ Later, when the Russian, Ukrainian and Belorussian identities started to diverge, *Ruthenus* remained a term used to identify those Eastern Slavs who had inherited the ecclesiastical tradition of the old Rus'. Contemporary heirs of the Ruthenian tradition are, among the Catholics, the Greek-Catholics of Ukraine (including their Lithuanian offshoot), Belarus, Slovakia (including their Hungarian offshoot) and Subcarpathian Rus'.⁸ Nevertheless, in the framework of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, speakers of what we identify nowadays as Ukrainian language were called Ruthenians still until the beginning of 20th century.⁹ Today, the term “Ruthenian” is used to identify the inhabitants of the Subcarpathian Rus' and their communities in the English speaking countries (mainly the USA), who maintain an autonomous ecclesiastical hierarchy.¹⁰ The Catholic Church labels as “Ruthenian rite” the ecclesiastical tradition of this particular community, one of the 13 branches of the Constantinopolitan or Byzantine tradition of the Catholic Church.¹¹

Whereas most Lithuanians were still pagan at this time, Eastern Slavs had been Christian for a long while, and the Orthodox Church was well established and organised. One can claim that the Orthodox Church was the first organised Church to be active on the Lithuanian territories. Its history among the Eastern Slavs dates back to the baptism of the Grand Prince of Kiev Vladimir the Great¹² (988), who chose Christianity as the faith of his people.¹³ A metropolis was established in

⁴ Various Authors, *Ukraina: Lietuvos Epoque, 1320-1569* [Україна: литовська доба, 1320 – 1569], Mokslo ir enciklopedijų leidybos centras, Vilnius, 2010, p. 16.

⁵ Gediminas (1275-1341), son of Butvydas, Grand Duke of Lithuania. He actively used diplomacy to strengthen his position towards his hostile neighbours. In 1323 he moved the capital of Lithuania from Trakai to Vilnius, although many claim that the city was founded by Gediminas himself.

⁶ “...*Gedeminne Letwinorum et multorum Ruthenorum regi...*”, as one can read in the breve of Pope John XXII *Excellenti et magnifico viro* written on June 1st, 1324. Stephen Christopher Rowell (ed.), *Chartularium Lithuaniae res gestas magni ducis Gedeminne illustrans: Gedimino laiškai*, Leidykla vaga, Vilnius, 2003, p. 132.

⁷ Stephan M. Horak, *Periodization and Terminology of the History of Eastern Slavs: Observations and Analyses*, in «Slavic Review», Vol. 31, No. 4 (Dec., 1972), pp. 853-862.

⁸ The Subcarpathian Rus' is a historical region, now divided between Slovakia and Ukraine, inhabited by Rusyns, a Slavic population speaking a language closely connected with Ukrainian. Rusyn communities can also be found in Poland, in the Balkans and in North America, due to a massive emigration movement which occurred in the 19th and in the 20th centuries. During their troubled history, they often wavered between Orthodoxy and Uniatism.

⁹ See, among the others: Geoffrey Drage, *Pre-War Statistics of Poland and Lithuania*, in «Journal of the Royal Statistical Society», Vol. 81, No. 2 (Mar., 1918), p. 236.

¹⁰ In Europe, Ruthenian eparchies are in Ukraine (Mukachevo) and in Czech Republic (Apostolic Exarchate for the Catholics of the Byzantine Rite residing in Czech Republic). United States hosts three Ruthenian eparchies (Parma, Passaic, Van Nuys) and a metropolis (Pittsburgh of the Byzantines). Various Authors, *Annuario Pontificio...*, p. 1148.

¹¹ Various Authors, *Annuario Pontificio...*, p. 1145.

¹² St Vladimir Svjatoslavich (ca. 956-1015), Grand Prince of Kiev, is mostly known to have converted his people to Christianity. He obtained the throne of Kiev by killing his half-brother Jaropolk, and during the first years of his reign he was a quite bellicose sovereign. Vladimir formed an alliance with the Byzantine Emperor Basil II and Constantine VIII, claiming their sister Anne's hand as pawn. On the occasion of the marriage, he converted to Christianity and received baptism. Vladimir then fought against the pagan beliefs of his subjects, destroying the shrine of the Slavic gods and

Kiev as the Christian centre of the Slavic realm.

The Lithuanian Grand Dukes had the same attitude as their Slavic counterparts: they backed or hindered the Orthodox Church according to circumstances. But there was an important difference: while the princes of Rus' and their direct successors were all Christian, the Lithuanian rulers were pagan, as were almost all Lithuanians at that time. The Orthodox Church, in turn, was extremely interested in pagan Lithuanians. In 1316 Constantinople established a Lithuanian metropol, which was hosted in Novogrodek (today Novahrudak in Belarus), in order to spread the Orthodox faith in the region and to ingratiate itself to Lithuanian power.¹⁴

2) Towards the Union

The recent conversion of Lithuanians to Catholicism and the consequent political embarrassment of the Polish and Lithuanian leaders in ruling a huge mass of Orthodox believers, the impending menace of the Turkish conquest of Constantinople and, last but not least, the sincere religious feeling of many prelates prepared the ground for the first attempt of union between Catholic and Orthodox Churches. In 1438 a council was called in Ferrara, but was subsequently moved to Florence and eventually to Rome, where it was closed in 1445. As the most important decisions were taken in Florence, it is usually called the Council of Florence. Negotiations were complicated, but all the participants were interested in having the council successfully concluded, and so in 1439 the Pope declared solemnly that the union between Rome and Constantinople had been accomplished.¹⁵ Unfortunately, this union was extremely short lived, and the causes of the failure of the Council of Florence are still disputed. Despite its failure, however, this Union left a deep impression on the Ruthenian Church. Direct contacts with Rome were once again open, and the idea of an agreement with Rome remained alive among the Orthodox community of Lithuania and Poland.

3) Union of Brest and its Consequences

On 23 November 1595, in a crowded hall of the Vatican, an event took place, which signalled the beginning of a new era for many Eastern European Christians: faced with Pope Clement VIII¹⁶, Bishop Ipatii Potii¹⁷ and Bishop Kyrylo Terletski, in the name of the Metropolitan

imposing baptism to all his people. Anyway, after the conversion he changed his habits quite radically, becoming known for his magnanimity. St Vladimir is venerated both by the Catholic and the Orthodox Church.

¹³ It is actually not exact to talk about Catholic and Orthodox Churches when one deals with the times of the baptism of Rus'. In fact, at that times Rome and Constantinople were still in communion with each other. One can only refer to separated Catholic and Orthodox Churches starting from the 13th century, after that the excommunications between Cardinal Umberto di Silva Candida and Patriarch Michael I Cerularius (1054) and the sack of Constantinople perpetrated by Crusaders (1204) had irremediably alienated the two main branches of Christianity.

¹⁴ Ammann, *Storia della Chiesa...*, p. 79; Baronas, *Stačiatikai*, p. 678.

¹⁵ *Decree on the Union between the Greek Church and the Latin one issued by the Council of Florence*, Vatican Secret Archives, A.A., Arm. I-XVIII, 397, <http://asv.vatican.va/en/doc/1439.htm>

¹⁶ Pope Clement VIII (1536-1605), in the world Ippolito Aldobrandini. He was a typical Counter-Reformation pontiff, striving to introduce a new morality in the life of the Church. He managed to avoid the schism of the French Church through the conversion from Calvinism to Catholicism of King Henry IV. During his pontificate, the famous Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno was sent to the stake (1600).

¹⁷ Ipatii Potii (1541-1613), Metropolitan of Kiev. Born in a Calvinist family of Ruthenian stock, he had grown up at the court of the influential Radvila family. He then converted to Orthodoxy, and was appointed as bishop of Volodymyr-Volynskyi and Brest. Potii was sent to Rome by Metropolitan Rohoza with the delegation which confirmed the union of the Ruthenian Church with Rome. At the death of Rohoza (1599), he was elected new Metropolitan of Kiev.

Mykhailo Rohoza of Kiev¹⁸, made a public profession of Catholic faith. It was the birth of the Greek-Catholic Ruthenian Church. With this ceremony, the Metropolitan, his bishops and his flock joined the Catholic community, but retaining their ritual and theological heritage.

How did an event such as this come to pass? A single explanation does not exist, but everybody agrees on the fact that the Orthodox Church in Lithuania in the 16th century was in a state of deep crisis. This situation was the outcome of several adverse situations, of which the lack of discipline among too many monks and priests and the growing influence of the political power in the life of the Church were perhaps the most serious problems. Problems came from outside the Church too: in 1569, the political union between the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Kingdom of Poland took place. This event is named Union of Lublin after the city where the agreement was endorsed. Among the several laws which were passed to implement the union, the Polish-Lithuanian law-makers decided to allow only Catholics to enter public service. All members of the Orthodox Ruthenian nobility were cut off.¹⁹ For this reason, many Ruthenian nobles decided to convert to Catholicism and later also to Calvinism.

The debate on the origin of the Greek-Catholic Church is still ongoing. Actually, it is the debate on the *raison d'être* of all the Eastern Churches in communion with Rome: one of the most burning topics in the ecumenical dialogue between the Orthodox and Catholic Churches. What is important for us, however, is the fact that the Uniate Church was actually established, and that its influence grew fast in Lithuania and in Poland.

It is worth noting that the centre of the Greek-Catholic Church was Vilnius, as the Catholic Metropolitans of Kiev were never accepted in the Ukrainian city. Lithuania then became the heart of this new religious community, due to the presence both of the Metropolitan and the main monastery of the order which was (and still is) one of the main institutions of the Greek-Catholic Church: the Basilian Order.

4) The Basilian Order

The Basilian Order (*Ordo Sancti Basilii Magni*, Order of Saint Basil the Great²⁰) was one of the pillars of the Ruthenian Church. A Catholic order of Byzantine spirituality, it was both an innovation and an element of the conservation of the oriental tradition. Innovation, as orders did not exist in the early Byzantine tradition (and, indeed, still do not exist in Orthodoxy today). This innovation was therefore clearly caused by the Ruthenian Church's confluence with Catholicism. It was but an element of conservation too, as the Basilians aimed to revitalise the true oriental monastic discipline, which was at that time in deep crisis in the territories of old Rus'. This was, at least, the intention of the founder of the Basilian Order, St Josaphat Kuntsevich.

In order to strengthen the monastic discipline and to enhance the Byzantine tradition, at that time quite decadent, Kuntsevich proposed to bring together all the Ruthenian monasteries

¹⁸ Mykhailo Rohoza (?-1599), first Metropolitan of the Ruthenian Greek-Catholic Church. He was appointed as Metropolitan by Patriarch Jeremy II of Constantinople, who had arrived in Lithuania in 1588 to ask for economic help and to reorganise the Orthodox Church in Poland-Lithuania. He summoned the Synod of Brest in 1590 which proclaimed the union of the Church of Rus' with Rome.

¹⁹ Mudryj, *Lineamenti...*, p. 128.

²⁰ St Basil the Great (330-379), Bishop of Caesarea and Doctor of the Church. Born in Cappadocia, Basil studied in Athens but was soon attracted by monasticism. For this reason, he spent several years in Palestine and Egypt as a hermit. In 370 he was appointed Bishop of Caesarea. He wrote many seminal works on theology, thus he is now regarded as one of the most relevant Fathers of the Church. From his personal experience as a monk, Basil wrote a series of thoughts and advice which became quite popular in all monastic environments, albeit Basil never wrote a rule in the style, for instance, of St Benedict (who, in his turn, took a lot of inspiration from Basil's writings). For this reason, in the Modern Age the monks of the Byzantine rite were called "Basilians", in honour of this great Oriental saint.

under a single order. At present, the Basilian Order of St Josaphat is still active, being one of the Catholic Church's five orders of the Byzantine rite,²¹ which trace back their spirituality to the teaching of St Basil the Great.²² After having experienced several persecutions, it finally established its mother-house in Rome, where the current Protoarchimandrite, Father Basilio Koubetch,²³ resides. Persecutions forced Basilians to live in exile for most of the 19th and the 20th centuries, so that Basilian monks are today present in many countries of the world along with the Ukrainian communities of ancient and recent establishment.

5) The Case of Bazilionai

Up to this point, the Byzantine Church in Lithuania had been an issue which had little to do with ethnic Lithuanians: they lived separate lives, and the religious vicissitudes of the Church of Rus' did not influence them. Then came an event, which created an almost unique case of "symbiosis" between Lithuanians and Uniates.

Basilians had gained a solid reputation all around the Commonwealth: apart from their spiritual mission, they ran schools in many localities of Lithuania and Poland, and soon became quite renowned as teachers. For this reason, in 1794 two Lithuanian landowners, Jonas and Antanas Beinorai, bequeathed a piece of land to the monks in their home village in Samogitia, a place named Padubysys (today in Šiauliai district). When Basilians arrived, they soon founded a school, a monastery and a church (obviously dedicated to St Basil the Great), where they were celebrating according to the Byzantine rite.²⁴ Their work was so important, that the name of the town was renamed Bazilionai (from the Lithuanian *bazilijonai*, clearly meaning Basilians). The bond between the inhabitants of Bazilionai and the monks was so strong, that it was able to survive all the chaos of the next few centuries.²⁵

Seeing Bazilionai as an extraordinary meeting point between the Lithuanian and the Ukrainian religious cultures, in 2001 professor Aldona Vasiliauskienė (Šiauliai University, Ivan Franko National University of Lviv) organised there the first of a series of conferences on the history of the Basilian order.²⁶ At these conferences, scholars, prelates and an interested audience from both countries had opportunity to meet, to exchange information and to visit the most important places connected to the Greek-Catholic tradition. The conferences have been held every year from 2000 to 2009, taking place both in Lithuania (Bazilionai, Šiauliai, Vilnius) and in Ukraine (Lviv). During the 2009 conference, a wooden monument dedicated to the Order of Saint Basil was inaugurated, celebrating the role that the Greek-Catholic monks had in the life of this small but special Lithuanian village.

²¹ In addition to the Order of Saint Basil the Great, there are also the above-mentioned Italian Order of St Basil and three Orders of the Melkite (Greek-Catholic Arabic) tradition. Various Authors, *Annuario Pontificio...*, pp. 1476-1477.

²² The spirituality of St Basil is not an exclusive heritage of the Oriental Christianity: it also at the base of the creation of a Latin rite *Congregatio a Sancto Basilio* (Congregation of Saint Basil), founded in Canada in 1822 and committed mainly to the education of youth. Various Authors, *Annuario Pontificio...*, p. 1443.

²³ Basilio Koubetch OSBM was born in Brasil (Paraná State) in 1960. His vocation is one of the many that flourished among the Ukrainians in diaspora. He was appointed Protoarchimandrite of the Basilian Order in 2004.

²⁴ Various Authors, *Lietuvių enciklopedija*, vol. 2, Lietuvių enciklopedijos leidykla, Boston, 1954, p. 302; Vasiliauskienė, *Šv. Bazilijaus Didžiojo...*, p. 105.

²⁵ When I visited Bazilionai, its inhabitants were actually very proud of their special relation with the Order of St Basil the Great.

²⁶ On this occasion, professor Vasiliauskienė kindly invited me to make a speech about my research. Many of the participants and inhabitants of Bazilionai became curious at the presence of an Italian in such a particular environment.

6) 1834: End of an Era

The development of the Greek-Catholic Church in Lithuania was harshly interrupted by the dismemberment of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In fact, all of Lithuania, Belarus and many Ukrainian lands were taken by Russia, which soon focussed its efforts on erasing the Church.

After a short period of tolerance under Tsar Alexander I, renewed restrictions began under Nicholas I, until in 1839 the Greek-Catholic Church was outlawed. A bureaucratic cavil spared the diocese of Chełm for a while, since it was technically behind the borders of the Polish Kingdom, where the Russian decrees were not immediately implemented.²⁷ Moreover, Greek-Catholicism did not disappear overnight: many believers had gone underground, and the religious issue merged with the political and national one. After the banishment of the Church in the Tsarist Empire, Greek-Catholics reorganised themselves in the only land in Eastern Europe where they were still allowed to stay in peace: the Hapsburg Empire. In fact, Vienna had gained the entire Galicia from the dismemberment of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and, being a declared Catholic power, it had little against the Uniates: Lviv would have then become the new stronghold of the Ruthenian Greek-Catholic Church, while several Greek-Catholic communities were founded in exile both in Europe and in the American continent.

PART 2: THE INTERWAR YEARS, THE RUSSIAN MISSION AND THE LITHUANIANS

A Changing World

The end of World War I signalled the end of a century-long political situation in Eastern Europe. Among the many events which followed the end of the hostilities, Lithuania and Poland managed to obtain their independence from Russia, and Russia itself had just experienced the October Revolution, and was going through radical changes.

The (re)birth of these states in Eastern Europe and the new political situation in Russia completely changed the perspectives for the Catholic Church in the area, especially with regard to the Uniate community. In fact, the newly independent states were now accessible for the Catholic missionaries, and the Catholic Church seized the opportunity to revitalise Uniatism. Lithuania and the Lithuanian territories then under Polish authority (Vilnius and its district), along with other lands ruled by Poles, became the stage of renewed Unionist effort, a process led by the Jesuit Order.

Another important development in the Greek-Catholic galaxy was the birth and the development, at the beginning of the 20th century, of a Russian Orthodox Church in communion with Rome. This small but promising community had immediately attracted the attention of the Roman hierarchy who were hoping, through these new Russian Catholics, to bring the entire Russian Orthodox Church into communion with Rome. This hope, which eventually turned out to be quite naive, led to the implementation of a vast Russian mission, where some Lithuanians played a key role.

Like at the time of the Union of Brest, Lithuania (along with Poland) saw the birth and the development of a new Greek-Catholic community. There were some differences between these two experiences: first, the involvement of missionaries and orders coming from the West was much more important now than it had been before. This is largely understandable, since Lithuania had not had its own Greek-Catholic clergy for over a century. Secondly, this new Uniate community had a much more Russian physiognomy than its Ruthenian counterpart: the rite used by Jesuits was the so-called Byzantine-Slavonic one, slightly different from the rite used by Ruthenians and

²⁷ Mudryj, *Lineamenti...*, pp. 322-323.

actually a Catholic variant of the rite of the Russian Orthodox Church. This emphasis on the Russian culture was staunchly opposed by the Polish government, which obviously did not want to enhance a pro-Russian feeling among the East Slavs on its territory¹. This led to the paradoxical situation that the Catholic missionaries took up the cause of the Russian ecclesiastical, and in a way Orthodox, heritage in Lithuania and Poland.

Missio Orientalis

The independence of Poland and its subsequent territorial enlargement, the outcome of the political enterprise of Marshal Józef Piłsudski,² led to the annexation of many territories inhabited by non-Polish populations. Among these, the most relevant were the Eastern Slavs: Belarusians, Russians and Ukrainians. These people were mainly Orthodox, many of them were descendents of Uniates who had turned Orthodox during the Russian domination. These people were undoubtedly interesting in the eyes of the Catholic Church.

Rome was actually becoming increasingly interested in Oriental Christianity. In 1894 Pope Leo XIII³ wrote his seminal encyclical *Orientalium Dignitas*, where he proclaimed that Oriental rites have the same relevance and sanctity as the Roman one. Changing completely the attitude that the Latin hierarchy had previously had towards Oriental Christianity by fully acknowledging its tradition's salvific worth, this apostolic letter paved the way for a renewed momentum of the Catholic Church towards the East. The successors of Leo XIII followed his path. Benedict XV⁴ was quite active in this field: on 1st May 1919 he established the *Congregatio pro Ecclesia Orientali* (Congregation for the Oriental Church), a purpose-built pontifical department for the Eastern Catholic affairs.⁵ In the same year, Benedict XV founded an institute committed to Oriental studies, the Pontifical Oriental Institute⁶, an institution which today is recognised as one of the world's top ranking in its field.⁷

Of course, this new sensibility towards the East did not replace Uniatism as instrument for reconciliation with the Orthodox Church. Vatican Council II and contemporary ecumenism were

¹ Mariusz Wołos, *The Activities of Polish Diplomacy in 1931*, in «The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs», issue: 1/2009, pp. 92-93; Joaquin M. Dominguez SJ, Charles E. O'Neill SJ (eds.), *Diccionario Histórico de la Compañía de Jesús biográfico-temático*, vol. IV, Madrid, 2001, p. 3184.

² Józef Klemens Piłsudski (1867-1935) led Poland to independence at the end of World War I. Born in Zułów, at that times behind the Russian border, during World War I Piłsudski fought alongside the Central Empires in order to free all the Polish lands under the Russian rule. He then fought against the Central Empires too, when it became clear that Berlin and Vienna were not interested in a really independent Poland. Their final defeat, together with the defeat of Russia, allowed Poland to become free again. Piłsudski attempted to expand the borders of the new state, conquering parts of Ukraine, Lithuania and Belarus. Russia, now under the Soviet rule, tried to stop him, but its army was defeated by the Polish army led by Piłsudski. He retired shortly from the public life, but intervened when Poland went to a critical period due to economic and internal reasons (1926), establishing his own dictatorship. As a dictator, he trod cautiously between Soviet Russia and the rising power of Nazi Germany.

³ Pope Leo XIII (1810-1903), in the world Vincenzo Gioacchino Pecci. He was Apostolic Nuncio in Belgium. Leo XIII wrote the seminal encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891), where he dealt with the labour question rejecting the socialist doctrine but firmly claiming the rights of all the workers. With this encyclical, Leo XIII laid the basis for the contemporary social doctrine of the Catholic Church.

⁴ Pope Benedict XV (1854-1922), in the world Giacomo Della Chiesa. He was the pontiff who labelled World War I *l'inutile strage* (the useless slaughter) while pushing the European powers to bring the conflict to an end.

⁵ Benedict XV, *Dei Providentis*, 1st May 1917. In 1967 Pope Paul VI changed its name to *Congregatio pro Ecclesiis Orientalibus* (Congregation for the Oriental Churches), in order to point out the multiplicity of the Oriental Christian traditions.

⁶ Benedict XV, *Orientalis Catholici*, Rome, 15th October 1917.

⁷ In this regard, it is worth remembering that the current highest authority of Orthodoxy, Bartholomew I, Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, had been a student of the Oriental Institute.

still distant: Pope Benedict XV himself passed a “Prayer for the Union of the Oriental Christians with the Roman Church”, a prayer that the pious Catholics should say to ask God for the return of the dissidents.⁸

According to this mentality, all the Orthodox population spread from the heart of Lithuania to the border with Ukraine was obviously a target of this new wave of evangelisation. The initiative was taken by Henryk Ignacy Przeździecki⁹, Bishop of Podlachia o Janów, in Eastern Poland, who was directly engaged in pastoral work with the Russians, Belarussians and Ukrainians living in his diocese. The right moment came when, on 12 November 1923, Pope Pius XI¹⁰ celebrated the tricentennial of St Josaphat Kuntsevich’s martyrdom, openly expressing a wish for the return of the separated Orientals to communion with Rome.¹¹ Przeździecki asked the Pope and the General of the Society of Jesus, a fellow Pole, Włodzimierz Ledóchowski,¹² to organise a mission specifically dedicated to these believers of Eastern Rite.¹³ The bishop’s request was accepted, and the *Missio Orientalis* (Oriental Mission) was consequently implemented, with the French Jesuit Charles Bourgeois as its first director.

Jesuits started to arrive in Poland at the beginning of 1924, where they established a mission centre in Albertyn,¹⁴ today in Belarussian territory, a village in a land where the presence of Orthodox population was quite significant. Not all of the structures of this mission were gathered in Albertyn: they were also assigned to cities where there was a significant Orthodox population. Albertyn was the location of a parish and a novitiate, whilst another parish was established in the neighbouring village of Synkowicze and a Pontifical Seminary was founded in Dubno (in present-day Ukraine). Vilnius, which was under the jurisdiction of the mission as well, hosted a Russian parish and a minor seminary.¹⁵ Several other parishes were founded in other villages scattered between Lithuania and Ukraine.

In the framework of the *Orientalis Missio*, Vilnius soon assumed a key role. The parish was established in the central Augustinian Church (which had been turned Orthodox during the Tsarist

⁸ Benedict XV, *Cum Catholicae Ecclesiae*, Rome, 15th April 1916. It is important to stress the fact that Orthodox believers were no longer labelled as “schismatic” or “heretic”, but as “Oriental Christians”: a new mentality was slowly taking root.

⁹ Henryk Ignacy Przeździecki (1873-1939), Bishop of Podlachia o Janów and Siedlce. He studied at the Theological Academy of St Petersburg and at the Theological Seminary of Warsaw. He was very active in pastoral work in his dioceses, opening some seminars and schools. In 1923, he reformed the statute of the diocese of Podlachia. Afterwards, he committed himself to the reunification with the Catholic Church of the Orthodox parishes which were under his jurisdiction.

¹⁰ Pope Pius XI (1857-1939), in the world Ambrogio Damiano Achille Ratti. In 1918 he was sent to Poland and Lithuania as Apostolic Visitor, and the following year is appointed as Apostolic Nuncio to Warsaw. Pius XI denounced the crimes of Nazism and Communism in the encyclicals *Mit brennender Sorge* and *Divini redemptoris* respectively, whilst he tried to establish a *modus vivendi* with Mussolini’s Italy.

¹¹ Pius XI, *Ecclesiam Dei*, Rome, 12th November 1923.

¹² Włodzimierz Ledóchowski (1868-1942), General of the Society of Jesus. Born in Austria from a noble Polish family, he studied in Vienna and Rome. In 1915 he became General of the Jesuits. He strove to improve the work of the Company, establishing three new provinces and merging the Pontifical Oriental Institute and the Pontifical Biblical Institute with Gregoriana University, creating a consortium of Jesuit academic institutions in Rome.

¹³ Ludwik Grzebień SJ (ed.), *Encyklopedia wiedzy o jezuitach na ziemiach Polski i Litwy: 1564-1995*, Wydział Filozoficzny Towarzystwa Jezusowego, Kraków 1996, p. 6.

¹⁴ Dominguez SJ, O’Neill SJ (eds.), *Diccionario...*, *ibidem*; Grzebień SJ (ed.), *Encyklopedia...*, *ibidem*.

¹⁵ Constantin Simon SJ, *Pro Russia: The Russicum and Catholic Work for Russia*, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 283, Pontificio Istituto Orientale, Rome, 2009, pp. 280-281.

occupation) in 1926.¹⁶ From 1932,¹⁷ its administrator was Father Adolf Szip, who had previously been a teacher at the Albertyn novitiate. Szip decided to move the editorial office of “*Da Ztučėnnia*” (towards the union), a monthly magazine published by Jesuits in the Belorussian language to propagandize the Unionist ideas, from Albertyn to Vilnius¹⁸. In addition, as previously stated, Vilnius was the location of a minor seminary of Byzantine-Slavonic rite, which was committed to the education of young Russians and Belarussians.

The Russian Apostolate in Lithuania: Byzantine-Slavonic Rite Priests in Kaunas (1937-1940)

The *Missio Orientalis* was not the only attempt that the Catholic Church made to attract members of the Russian Orthodox Church at that time. Along with the Russian population living in the neighbouring countries, there were actually substantial communities of Russian émigrés who had left Bolshevik Russia, which Rome was hoping to convert. These communities settled across the globe: in France, Germany, Turkey, Great Britain, Brazil, Argentina, China and in several other countries.

There was also another exigent problem: the recently established Soviet government had implemented a harsh persecution of all the religious organisations, which included the Catholic Church. In the space of a few years following the October Revolution the Catholic Church in Russia (a variegated mixture of Poles, Germans, Lithuanians, Latvians, Ukrainians, Belarussians, people of Western European stock and recent Russian converts) was deprived of all its bishops and almost all its priests. It was necessary to create a new Catholic clergy from scratch.

In order to face all these different challenges coming from the Russian religious world, the Catholic hierarchy persuaded itself that a group of priests trained in the Byzantine-Slavonic rite and having an excellent understanding of the Russian culture was needed. At the prompting of Michel d’Herbigny,¹⁹ the Jesuit Father who provided inspiration for Vatican policy on Russian issues in the 1920s and 1930s, Pope Pius XI founded the *Pontificium Collegium Russicum* (Pontifical Russian College) in 1929,²⁰ which was entrusted to the Jesuits. In this college, prospective priests (normally not Jesuits) from several different countries were introduced to Russian culture and spirituality. Many of those students who managed to complete their studies were subsequently engaged in

¹⁶ Leonas V. Leise SJ, *Jesuit Sites in Vilnius: A Tour of Historical and Actual Jesuit Locations in Vilnius, Lithuania, Kaunas*, 2001, p. 19.

¹⁷ Leise SJ, *ibidem*. According to Grzebień, Szip’s appointment occurred slightly later, in 1937. See Grzebień SJ (ed.), *Encyklopedia...*, p. 663.

¹⁸ Grzebień SJ (ed.), *Encyklopedia...*, p. 117.

¹⁹ Michel-Joseph Bourguignon d’Herbigny (1880-1957), was the actual designer of Vatican policy on Russia in the first decades of the 1920s and 30s. He distinguished himself by a study on the Russian philosopher Vladimir Solovev, which opened his way to Rome as an expert of Russian issues. In Rome, he was chosen as President of the newly-established Pontifical Oriental Institute. His main interest remained Russia. In fact, the Bolshevik government was harshly persecuting Catholics in Soviet Union, and most of the bishops and priests had already been executed or arrested. In order to give support to the persecuted Soviet Catholics, he asked for and obtained the creation of a college for priests committed to the mission among Russians, the *Pontificium Collegium Russicum*. Moreover, in 1926 he undertook a secret journey to Russia in order to re-establish a clandestine Catholic hierarchy. Since he was not a bishop yet, on his way to Moscow d’Herbigny passed by Berlin, where the Apostolic Nuncio Eugenio Pacelli (future Pope Pius XII) ordained him as Titular Bishop of Troy. The titular see of Troy was ironically chosen, since d’Herbigny was supposed to act as a Trojan horse. Once in Moscow, he ordained four bishops: unfortunately, almost all of them were soon identified and arrested. For still unknown reasons, d’Herbigny fell into disfavour with the Pope, and spent his last years in a little monastery in Southern France.

²⁰ Pius XI, *Quam cura*, Vatican City, 15 August 1929.

pastoral work among the Russian communities: some of them, such as Blessed Fedor Romža,²¹ Greek-Catholic Bishop of Mukachevo in Ukraine, paid for their dedication with their lives or with several years of imprisonment. Another former student of *Russicum*, who also paid with his life for his engagement in the Russian apostolate, was Father Frans Marie Helwegen, who worked and lived among the Russians in Kaunas, at that time capital of Lithuania. He was not the only *Russicum* student to have worked in Lithuania: from 1937 to 1940, three Byzantine-Slavonic rite priests from the Russian college were engaged in the Russian apostolate in that Baltic country.

This Lithuanian mission for the *Russicum* students started in 1935: Bishop Pranciškus Petras Būčys²², who was in charge of the apostolate among Russians in Lithuania, needed some priests to help him in the Russian apostolate. He then asked the Congregation for the Oriental Church if they had some suitable candidates, and the Congregation sent two former *Russicum* students: Father Helwegen and the Russian deacon Roman Kiprijanovich.²³

The figure of Helwegen is the best documented figure among these priests. Born in 1910 at Roermond in the Netherlands, he entered the local diocesan seminar at the age of 20. He started his studies in his native country, then moving to Rome in 1932 in order to specialise in Russian issues at the *Russicum*. In 1935 he was ordained a priest of the Byzantine-Slavonic rite²⁴. Following Būčys' request, he made his way to Lithuania together with Kiprijanovich, eventually settling in Kaunas²⁵. Both of them were assigned to the garrison church, Saint Michael the Archangel Church (Lit: *Šventoji Arkangelo Mykolo Bažnyčia*, also known as *Soboras*).

Unfortunately, Helwegen and Kiprijanovich did not get along well, and the Russian deacon was eventually replaced by Jonas Chomenko, a Ukrainian student of *Russicum*. He did much better than Kiprijanovich and, interestingly enough, he developed a good rapport with the Kaunas Jewish community, having a good command of Hebrew and Yiddish.²⁶

Bishop Pranciškus Petras Būčys, Vincas Pupinis and Vladas Mikalauskas, Lithuanian Priests of Byzantine-Slavonic Rite

The heart of the Russian mission in Lithuania was the Titular Bishop of Olympus Pranciškus Petras Būčys MIC. His background was unique: an ethnic Lithuanian, he was the first Catholic bishop of the Byzantine-Slavonic rite, committed to the pastoral care of Catholic Russians.

Over the course of his life of service in the Church, Būčys had an interesting and active career. Born on 20th August 1872 in Slavikai (Šakiai district), he studied at the gymnasium in Marijampolė. When he then decided to embrace the religious life, he went to the Roman Catholic Theological Academy of Saint Petersburg (the only institute of higher studies for Catholic priests in the Russian Empire), where he graduated in 1899 and, in the same year, was ordained as a priest.²⁷ He then got a doctorate in apologetics at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland) in 1901.

²¹ Blessed Fedor Romža (1911-1947) was born in a Ruthenian family from Ukraine. He studied in Rome, at the *Germanicum-Ungaricum* and at the *Russicum* Colleges. Romža was appointed as Bishop of the Eparchy of Mukachevo in 1944, when he was just 33 years old. He opposed the forced unification of the Uniates with the Orthodox Churches promoted by the Soviet authorities with all his might. For this reason they decided to kill him, first involving him in a fictitious car accident and eventually poisoning him during his hospitalisation. Pope John Paul II beatified Romža on 27th June 2001.

²² The figure of Bishop Būčys will be discussed at length subsequently.

²³ Pranciškus Petras Būčys, *Vyskupo Pranciškaus Petro Būčio atsiminimai*, vol. 2, Lietuviškos knigos klubas, Chicago, 1966, pp. 98-99.

²⁴ Simon, *Pro Russia...*, pp. 380, 577-578.

²⁵ *Interview nr. 5*, p. 86.

²⁶ Būčys, *Atsiminimai...*, vol. 2, p. 101.

²⁷ Various Authors, *Lietuviškoji enciklopedija*, vol. 4, Kaunas, 1936, p. 892.

Būčys was soon in charge of the pastoral care of the Lithuanian communities abroad, a task which he discharged travelling to several countries in Europe and beyond, including Russia, Latvia, Finland, Norway, USA, France and Italy.

His name is also related to the history of the Marian Fathers of the Immaculate Conception (*Congregatio Clericorum Regularium Marianorum*). This religious order, founded by Blessed Stanislaus Papczyński²⁸ in 1699, was quite well established in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, but later, due to Tsarist oppression, was brought to the verge of extinction. Its renewal took place at the beginning of the 20th century, thanks to the actions of Blessed Jurgis Matulaitis-Matulewicz.²⁹ Matulaitis, born in Lithuania in 1871, was able to re-launch the Marian Congregation, and was assisted in this task by Būčys. After the death of Matulaitis, Būčys was appointed as Superior General of the congregation, a duty that he fulfilled until the end of his life (except for an intermission between 1933 and 1939). Interestingly enough for this research, Marians were allowed to have members of the Byzantine rite, due to the geographical proximity that most of its members had to the Russian Orthodox world.³⁰ Some of them actually embraced the Byzantine rite, while some others were already baptised in that tradition.

The Russian venture for Būčys started in 1929, when the omnipresent Father d'Herbigny summoned him to the newly founded Pontifical Commission Pro Russia,³¹ which was in charge of the entire Catholic mission towards Russians. D'Herbigny had regarded him as a useful element, due to his first-hand knowledge of Russia. Būčys worked at the commission as a counsellor, but d'Herbigny had in mind something different for his Lithuanian protégé. In fact, the French prelate was of the opinion that the scattered Russian Catholic community was missing a bishop of its own rite,³² until then Russian priests were being ordained by bishops who belonged to other Greek-Catholic traditions (Bulgarian, Melkite and so on). D'Herbigny decided that Būčys was the most suitable candidate for this delicate position, and proposed him as a candidate to Pope Pius XI. Initially, the Lithuanian prelate hesitated; although he had a long experience of the life in Russia and spoke Russian perfectly, he was not familiar with the Russian ecclesiastical tradition.³³ One of his first direct experiences of the Greek-Catholic world had been actually quite awkward: during

²⁸ Blessed Stanislaus of Jesus and Mary Papczyński (1631-1701) was the founder of the Marians of the Immaculate Conception. Born in Podegrodzie (Poland, Nowy Sącz district), he studied in Poland and in Ukraine (Lviv). After a short experience in the Piarist Order, in 1671 he founded his new religious order (the first congregation ever founded in Poland), an order committed to the renewal of the spiritual life of people in the light of the devotion to Holy Mary. Papczyński was also a prolific religious writer. He was beatified on 16th September 2007.

²⁹ Blessed Jurgis Matulaitis-Matulewicz (1871-1927), Bishop of Vilnius and Superior General of the Marian Order. He rewrote the constitutions of the Marians in order to revive the Order, which was on the verge of extinction. Thanks to his efforts, the Order flourished again, and Matulaitis is now officially regarded by them as "the Renovator". As Bishop of Vilnius, he tried to mediate among Lithuanians and Poles during the Polish occupation of the city. Jurgis Matulaitis-Matulewicz was beatified on 28th June 1987.

³⁰ "Members responding to the needs and the desires of the Church, especially those who are baptised in the oriental rite or also ordained in it, may, after due preparation, assume pastoral work in the oriental rite, carefully observing what is prescribed by both universal and proper law..." *Constitutions and Directory of the Congregation of the Marian Fathers of the Immaculate Conception of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary*, Marian Press, Stockbridge, MA, 2009, p. 139.

³¹ Būčys, *Atsiminimai...*, vol.2, pp. 85-86.

³² The appointment of a bishop for the pastoral care of a group of faithful having a peculiar liturgical tradition without being in charge of a diocese was a methodology that Catholic Church had already implemented. The first of this particular group of bishops had been a former Orthodox priest from Cyprus, Germanos Kuskonaris: at the end of the 16th century Pope Clement VIII had appointed him as first ordaining bishop for the faithful of the Greek rite in Italy. Marco Foscolos, *I vescovi ordinanti per il rito greco a Roma: nota bibliografica ed archivistica* in Antonis Fyrgos, (ed.), *Il Collegio Greco di Roma. Ricerche sugli alunni, la direzione, l'attività*, Pontificio Collegio Greco S. Atanasio, Roma, 1984 (= *Analecta Collegii Graecorum*, 1), pp. 290-291.

³³ Būčys, *Atsiminimai...*, vol. 2 pp. 87-88.

his doctoral defence, he had claimed that Pope Gregory VIII had imposed celibacy on the entire clergy. At that point, a student of the Greek rite refuted this argument, stating that Būčys was not taking into consideration the Oriental tradition, which actually allows the clergy to marry.³⁴ So it was understandable that he did not consider himself to be the best candidate for the Russian rite episcopacy, but the Pope had already made his decision. On 6th July 1930, Būčys was ordained Titular Bishop of Olympus at the hands of three Oriental bishops: a Greek, a Bulgarian and an Arab.³⁵

Soon after his consecration, Būčys made a long journey to visit the Russian émigré colonies in France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and the United States, where he documented the conditions of the Greek-Catholic communities in that country. In 1934 he was again in Rome, where he gave a detailed report of his travels to the Congregation of the Oriental Church. Būčys then moved to Lithuania.

In Lithuania there was a Russian population at that time, even though not as large as in other neighbouring countries. They belonged mostly to the Orthodox Church, although there was a well established Old Believer community too.³⁶ Būčys was charged to spread Catholicism among them. He then settled in Kaunas after a short period spent in Marijampolė, living in a house at 61 Laisvės Alėja.³⁷ He worked in Lithuania from 1934 until 1939, frequently travelling throughout Lithuania in order to come into contact with the Orthodox and Old Believer communities. In 1935, as already reported, Būčys asked the Congregation for the Oriental Church for some assistants of Byzantine-Slavonic rite.

The efforts of Būčys and his staff led to the creation of a Russian Catholic community of almost 200 individuals.³⁸ They used to celebrate at a lateral altar of the St Michael Church in Kaunas.

Bishop Būčys was not the only Lithuanian who embraced the Byzantine-Slavonic rite. Vincas Pupinis, a Jesuit father, born in 1920, devoted his entire life to the Russian mission and, unlike Būčys, he did not do it out of obedience, but by his own choice.³⁹

First a student and then a bursar of *Russicum*, he was appointed to the Russian Refugee Service, a *Russicum* structure in charge of the material and spiritual assistance of the Russian refugees in Italy after World War II. During the early 1950s, he visited Russians who were settled in the refugee camps in Salerno, Bagnoli and Aversa.⁴⁰

After this experience with the refugees, Pupinis asked to be sent on a mission to Russia, but his request was turned down. He was sent instead to Austria, moving first to Salzburg and then to Vienna, where there was a significant Russian community.⁴¹ He then left for South America, before eventually settling at the *Russicum*, where he worked as bursar until the end of his days (1993).

³⁴ Būčys, *Atsiminimai...*, vol. 1, p. 287.

³⁵ Būčys, *Atsiminimai...*, vol. 2, pp. 88-89.

³⁶ The Old Believers (Russian *staroveri*, Lithuanian *sentikiai*) are a religious community who separated from the Russian Orthodox Church in the 17th century. The cause of this schism was the liturgical reform implemented by the then Patriarch Nikon. Several monks, priests and laymen staunchly opposed Nikon's initiative, believing it would have corrupted the Russian Orthodox tradition. The leader of the opposition, Archpriest Avvakum, was sent to the stake on Good Friday 1682. The Old Believers were then harshly persecuted by the Tsars, a persecution which caused their dispersion through those neighbouring countries who were sheltering them. The traditional Old Believer diaspora communities can be found through all the countries from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea.

³⁷ Būčys, *Atsiminimai...*, vol. 2, p. 96.

³⁸ Būčys, *Atsiminimai...*, vol. 2, p. 100.

³⁹ Simon, *Pro Russia...*, p. 635.

⁴⁰ Simon, *Pro Russia...*, pp. 610-611.

⁴¹ Bruno Markaitis SJ (ed.), *Lietuvos Jėzuitai: Praeitis ir dabartis*, Tevų Jėzuitų Leidinys, Putnam, 1957, p. 72.

There is extremely scarce information about another Lithuanian Jesuit of Byzantine-Slavonic rite, Vladas Mikalauskas. Jesuit sources only report that he wanted to enter Russia, like Pupinis, and like Pupinis he had to fall back on South America, where he worked for the pastoral care of Lithuanians.⁴²

Witnesses

I had the great opportunity to come into contact with two priests who witnessed the Russian mission in Lithuania. The first one, Father George Branch (Anglicised form for Branchianinoff) is a Russian Catholic priest who has spent most of his life working with Russians in Melbourne, Australia. Born in Russia in 1919, he soon had to move to Harbin, in China, due to the Bolshevik Revolution. Harbin, due to its relative proximity to the Russian border, harboured thousands of White Russians, who lived there until Communists came into power even in China. Branch spent twenty years in Harbin, studying at the St Nicholas Lyceum.⁴³

He went to Lithuania in 1939, and therefore had the opportunity to observe the mission among the Russian community in Kaunas, where he met Būčys and Helwegen. He told me that the Russian community in Lithuania was not particularly large, and there were very few Greek-Catholics. With the outbreak of World War II, Branch took shelter in Rome, sharing a flat with Būčys for a year. The Lithuanian bishop himself mentioned the Russian priest in his memoirs.⁴⁴ After this Roman experience, Branch made his way to London and finally to Australia, where he currently lives. Despite his old age (91 years), Father Branch is still very lucid, so lucid that he was able to speak with me in good Italian, to my great surprise.

The second witness I was able to meet is Father Vaclovas Aliulis MIC. A Lithuanian, who was born in 1921, Father Aliulis is currently Superior of the Marian Community at Vilnius, President of the Lithuanian Bible Society and member of the Lithuanian Catholic Academy of Science. He currently lives in Vilnius, where I met him.

I had applied to him in order to check some material concerning Bishop Būčys and, while in his residence, he told me he was actually in Kaunas at that time. He let me know that Būčys used to celebrate on a lateral altar of the St Michael Church. He also had met him personally. Aliulis portrayed a living picture of Būčys, whose figure distinguished itself among the others due to his Russian liturgical cloth and his long beard. Aliulis also mentioned Būčys while celebrating mass according to the Byzantine-Slavonic rite, being assisted by his two helpers.

The End, Again

World War II and above all the Soviet invasion of Lithuania and Poland signalled the end of the *Missio Orientalis* and the newly-born Russian Catholic community in the area. It must be noted that even German Nazis persecuted many priests engaged in the Russian apostolate, regarding them as Russian spies or supporters of the Russians. Soviets and Nazis unintentionally cooperated to destroy the Russian Catholic community in the area.

⁴² Markaitis, *Lietuvos Jėzuitai...*, *ibidem*.

⁴³ The St Nicholas Lyceum in Harbin was a boarding school held by Marian Fathers. It took care of hundreds of Russian and Belorussian kids, both Orthodox and Catholic. Its founder, the Servant of God Father Fabian I. Abrantovich, administrator of the Russian Catholic Ordinariate of the Byzantine-Slavonic Rite in Manchuria, was later caught by Soviets and killed in Moscow in 1946. On the St Nicholas Lyceum history, see Jan Kosmowski MIC, *Mariańska misja wschodniego obrządku w Harbinie* in «*Immaculata*», luty rok 49 (2010) nr 543 (2), pp. 60-78. The Russian Catholic Ordinariate in Harbin officially still exists, although it seems there are no more Catholic Russians (and Russians in general) there. Various Authors, *Annuario Pontificio Vaticano 2010*, Vatican City, 2010, p. 1038.

⁴⁴ Būčys, *Atsiminimai...*, vol. 2, p. 103.

The *Missio Orientalis* was ended by the Soviet invasion of Poland. Currently there is only one Greek-Catholic community in Poland, the parish of Kostomłoty (Biała Podlaska district), which traces back its origins to the work of the *Missio*.

Frans Helwegen was arrested by Germans while in Maastricht in 1944, accused of fomenting Bolshevik propaganda.⁴⁵ He died after being deported to Buchenwald concentration camp the following year.

Būčys left Lithuania in 1939, making his way to Rome. He ceased to be directly involved in the Russian apostolate, partially returning to the Latin rite. He died in Rome in 1951.

The Minor Seminar, the Russian Church and the monthly paper "*Da Žlučėėnia*", which were based in Vilnius, were all shut down by the Germans during the occupation of the city in 1942, and the Jesuits were arrested and deported. With the Soviet occupation, the church used by the Russian Catholic community was turned into a warehouse.⁴⁶ There are no more Jesuits of the Byzantine-Slavonic rite today: all Jesuits working in Russia are of the Latin rite and preach to a Latin rite flock⁴⁷. Lithuanian Jesuits celebrate a Latin rite Mass in the Russian language in the St Casimir Church in Vilnius on Sundays, for the benefit of those faithful who do not understand Lithuanian or Polish.

The Russian mission in Lithuania followed the tragic path of the Catholic Church in Soviet Union. A Greek-Catholic community in Lithuania would reappear only many decades later, with *perestroika* and the collapse of the Soviet Union. It will be the topic of the next part.

It must also be admitted that a Catholic mission among Russians as it was conceived at the beginning of the 20th century was probably condemned to failure in any case: very few Russians embraced Catholicism of the Byzantine rite. The exiguous number of Catholic Russians in Lithuania was emblematic.

An interesting evidence of the exiguity of the Russian Catholic community in Lithuania can be found in the list of students in the Jesuit Gymnasium of Kaunas. The Jesuit Gymnasium, an institution which still exists, was a Catholic secondary school which also welcomed students belonging to other religious traditions. Jesuits noted down carefully the ethnicity and the religious belonging of their pupils. The student list of 1936 reports that, in a population of 404 students, only two were Russian, and only one of these Russian students was Catholic.⁴⁸ It is clear that such shrunken numbers cannot be regarded as a success.

Moreover, many Russians considered these foreign people, who were pretending to be accepted as true "Russian" priests, as not very reliable. The case of Būčys was emblematic: to what extent could a Lithuanian-born priest, who had joined the Byzantine rite quite late and who always felt uncomfortable with it, be a serious point of reference for the Orthodox Russians? Many Russians saw these "Russian" Catholic priests as a stalking-horse, and from a certain point of view they were not so far from the truth.

On the other hand, it must be said that many of the Catholic priests who engaged themselves in the Russian apostolate did it out of a genuine love for Russian people and for its Oriental spirituality. As we have already seen, some of them lost their lives because of their bond with Russians, whereas others suffered several years of imprisonment in the terrible Soviet gulags along with their Orthodox brethren.

⁴⁵ Simon, *Pro Russia...*, p. 580.

⁴⁶ Grzebień (ed.), *Encyklopedia...*, p. 746.

⁴⁷ There does exist, nevertheless, an Apostolic Exarchate for the Catholics of the Byzantine Rite in Moscow. Various Authors, *Annuario Pontificio...*, p. 1039.

⁴⁸ *Mokinių skaičius ir sudėtis*, 1936, Kauno Jezuitų Privatinių Gimnazija.

In any case, at a certain point it became clear to the Catholic clergy that another path towards unity with the Oriental Christians was needed. If the Uniate Churches have never been dismissed,⁴⁹ nonetheless Uniatism is no more thought as an effective way to re-establish the unity among the Western and Eastern branches of Christianity. In fact, shortly after the end of the Russian mission, the Catholic Church experienced great changes promoted by Vatican Council II and engaged itself in ecumenical dialogue with other Christian denominations and with other religions, a dialogue which still goes on.

⁴⁹ In this regard, the words addressed by Pope Benedict XVI to the Greek-Catholic bishops of Ukraine during their last *ad limina* visit on 1st February 2008 are quite significant: "Now that your respective Churches have rediscovered full freedom, you are here representing reborn communities, vibrant with faith, which have never stopped feeling in full communion with the Successor of Peter. Welcome, Dear Brothers to this house in which intense and unceasing prayers have always been raised for the beloved Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine." . Benedict XVI, *Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Greek Catholic Bishops of Ukraine on their "ad limina" visit*, Vatican City, 2008.