

KĘSTUTIS ŽEMAITIS\*

## Religious Literature and the Work of the „Poor Sisters” Banned by the Soviet Authorities

Throughout the occupation of Lithuania (both Nazi and Soviet), attempts were made to break the Lithuanian nation not only physically but also morally. As a result, both religious and national activities were banned and persecuted. One of the manifestations of this persecution was the ban on the free press. Religious, philosophical, and other literature that was not an instrument of the official ideology could not be allowed. For a while, books printed between the wars were still available, but they did not fill the lack of such literature. The emergence of illegal literature can be traced back to the first Soviet occupation, then to the period of Nazi rule, and finally to the beginning of Soviet reoccupation: partisan newspapers, typewritten, and then books published in this way, in a few or a few dozen copies, until the underground printing house „Ab” in Kaunas in the 1980s and 1990s. This underground book publishing was mostly carried out by nuns, priests, and many brave laymen. Religious and cultural periodicals, as well as many individual books, were written, printed, and distributed. Many people suffered for this illegal activity: they were followed, arrested, tried, imprisoned, and deported.

In this work it is important to discuss the importance of the Soviet-era broadcasting of the in the context of the St. The banned books accumulated by the Sisters’ Congregation of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary between 1945 and 1990. In this way, we will be able to evaluate the contribution of this convent to the work in the field of underground literature. The method of analysis will be to look at these books no longer as collections of the libraries of individual nuns, but as the general library of an already reconstituted convent. However, let us first look at the general circulation of underground religious books in occupied Lithuania.

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\* Kęstutis Žemaitis – Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5022-3243>; e-mail: [kestutis.zemaitis@gmail.com](mailto:kestutis.zemaitis@gmail.com)



The topic is important but little researched. It is noteworthy to mention the contribution of some authors, such as Domas Kaunas<sup>1</sup>, Vidas Spengla (Algimantas Žilinskas)<sup>2</sup>, Vilma Vasiliauskaitė<sup>3</sup>. The phenomenon of Savilada<sup>4</sup> was also present in Russia at the time.

The illegal press, and especially its writing and distribution, was severely persecuted, as Soviet law explicitly ignored any religious propaganda. Freedom of conscience was equated with freedom of atheism, and the government's goal was to free people from "anti-scientific religious beliefs"<sup>5</sup>. The Soviet constitution only allowed believers to profess their faith, but not to propagate it (as opposed to atheism)<sup>6</sup>, and then only conditionally, depending on the position or position a person held in society<sup>7</sup>. Thus, any legal publication of religious books or magazines was out of the question. Everything was done secretly under very simple and primitive conditions: by typewriter (which were also not legally available), by photocopier (secretly in an institution). The transcription was done by trustworthy people, then the covers were bound and sealed by hand<sup>8</sup>. So at least: "during the first decade of the annexation, the Soviet regime had to remove religious publications from the official public space (...). In parallel, the reverse process was taking place. An alternative mechanism of religious self-education was being created in the Church environment"<sup>9</sup>.

Such activities were subject to persecution and punishment. After the occupation and annexation of Lithuania in 1940, the Russian Criminal Code was introduced and dissidents were punished under it<sup>10</sup>. This Russian Code lasted until 1961<sup>11</sup>. Thus, during this period, priests, monks and, in general, all inhabitants of Lithuania were punished according to the Russian Code.

<sup>1</sup> D. Kaunas, *Sovietmečio Lietuvos mažatiražės knygų savilaidos paveldas*, „Knygotyra” 58 (2012), p. 207-246.

<sup>2</sup> V. Spengla, *The Church*, „Kronika” ir KGB voratinklis, Vilnius 2001.

<sup>3</sup> V. Vasiliauskaitė, *Lietuvos ir Vidurio Rytų Europos šalių periodinė savilaida (1972-1989)*, Vilnius 2006, p. 175; V. Vasiliauskaitė, *National and Liberal Underground Press in Lithuania 1976-1981*, Vilnius 2002, p. 111.

<sup>4</sup> E.H. Cabenko, *Религиозный самиздат в Сибири в 60-е-70-е годы XX века*, 2006, p. 176-179.

<sup>5</sup> J. Aničas, J. Rimaitis, *Tarybiniai įstatymai apie religinius kultus ir sąžinės laisvę*, Vilnius 1970, p. 56.

<sup>6</sup> Constitution of the Lithuanian SSR, Vilnius 1978, p. 50.

<sup>7</sup> *Teacher is dismissed because of her faith. The persecution of o. Brieliene, a teacher*, "The Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania" 1972, no. 3.

<sup>8</sup> K. Žemaitis, *Praeities įvykių fiksavimas*, Šunskai 2022, p. 2-3 (manuscript, K. Žemaitis' personal archive).

<sup>9</sup> A. Streikus, D. Kuzmickaitė, V. Šimkūnas, *Iš sovietinės patirties į laisvės erdvę: vienuolijos Lietuvoje XX a, antroje pusėje*, Vilnius 2015, p. 104.

<sup>10</sup> The Russian Criminal Code, along with other laws, was introduced in Lithuania on the first of December 1940.

<sup>11</sup> On the Approval of the Criminal Code of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic (Law No. 061XX08ISTARG610014, Law of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic, in force since 1 September 1961).

The self-publishing of books in the underground was a means of maintaining religious and national consciousness. It included both periodicals and individual titles. Among the periodicals, religious and cultural publications were the most common:

Chronicle of the Catholic Church of Lithuania, whose author and editor was the priest (now Cardinal) Sigitas Tamkevičius<sup>12</sup>, Aušra, Alma Mater, Ateitis, Dievas ir Tėvynė, Tiesos kelias, Polemika, Perspektyvos, Viltis, Vytis.

The religious press was needed as “oxygen or light” in people’s lives<sup>13</sup>. Bishop Jonas Kauneckas<sup>14</sup>, an active fighter for religious freedom during the Soviet era, recalls that books not only developed personalities, but also brought like-minded people together<sup>15</sup>. Later, in his autobiographical book, he testifies to this<sup>16</sup>.

Priests, nuns or other people could also obtain books from seminarians studying at the Kaunas Interdiocesan Seminary, from monks working in secret, and from individuals<sup>17</sup>. Some books reached the priests in Vilnius, especially Polish literature. Later, some books were translated into Lithuanian. Some of the translations were made after receiving German or Polish books. During the Soviet period, several hundred books were translated and distributed by the priest Juozas Konstantinas Matulaitis alone<sup>18</sup>. Most of them were in the hands of priests or monks<sup>19</sup>. The Marian monk, priest Kęstutis Brilius, recalls the path of books “produced” in the underground to the reader’s home, especially to rectories and monasteries: “All the theological literature, textbooks, Catholic press that reached us at that time were either imported in small quantities from abroad and reproduced and distributed, or the literature that survived from pre-millennial sources was further transcribed by hand and distributed”<sup>20</sup>. Quite a lot of books were written in Lithuania<sup>21</sup>.

At that time, the most common works in the only seminary in Lithuania were: Peschke Karl, Christian Ethics, the works of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the future Pope, K. Rahner and H.U. von Balthasar. Fr. Česlovas Kavaliauskas translated and distributed the History of the Church by Eusebius Caesar. This

<sup>12</sup> Tamkevičius Sigitas (born 7 November 1938, Lazdijai district). Ordained a priest in 1962, consecrated a bishop in 1991, Archbishop of Kaunas from 1996 to 2015, Cardinal since 2019.

<sup>13</sup> K. Žemaitis, *Praeities įvykių fiksavimas*, op. cit., p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Jonas Kauneckas (born on 6 June 1938 in Trajoniškis, Pasvalys district, Bishop since 2000) – Bishop Emeritus of Panevėžys.

<sup>15</sup> J. Kauneckas, *Kunigai ir jų veikla pogrindyje*, Panevėžys 2021, p. 10 (manuscript, K. Žemaitis’ personal archive).

<sup>16</sup> J. Kauneckas, *Prieš visus vėjus*, Kaunas 2022, p. 137-146.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 137-141.

<sup>18</sup> K. Žemaitis, *Kunigas Juozas Konstantinas Matulaitis: XX a. Knygnešio gyvenimas*, Punskas 2021, p. 142-147.

<sup>19</sup> K. Žemaitis, *Atsiminimai apie kun. J. K. Matulaitį*, Šunskai 2022, Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuanian Catholic Church History Centre archives, f. 7, b. 2, f. 3.

<sup>20</sup> K. Brilius, *Kunigų saviugda*, Kaunas 2021, p. 4 (manuscript, K. Žemaitis’ personal archive).

<sup>21</sup> K. Žemaitis, *Praeities įvykių fiksavimas*, op. cit., p. 3.

book was later printed legally in independent Lithuania<sup>22</sup>. In this way, little by little, literature reached readers even in times of persecution<sup>23</sup>. Such a self-published book served as a catechism, sermon texts, a textbook or simply a work of spiritual content, religious fiction.

The year 1972 was marked by a new spiritual upsurge in the Lithuanian underground. This concerned not only the religious sphere, but also the phenomena of national resistance<sup>24</sup>. Of course, they could not but influence each other. The underground press also became more active. Even the appearance of the Chronicle coincided with the Kaunas Spring, when, after the burning of Romas Kalanta, crowds of young people took to the streets to protest against the Soviet system<sup>25</sup>. With the launch of the LKKB (Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania) in 1972, and the publication of other publications, there was more courage in resisting atheist rule. It was the Chronicle that gave impetus to the resistance<sup>26</sup>. The illegal religious activities of the nuns also intensified<sup>27</sup>. Sister Nijolė Sadūnaitė<sup>28</sup> did not only rewrite the underground press. The nun remembers: “My job was to transmit the Chronicle to the West. At first it was done almost exclusively through dissidents in Moscow, and then through Lithuanian tourists coming from the West”<sup>29</sup>. It should be mentioned that the Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania was a leading underground publication of sorts, constantly informing about other publications banned by the Soviet authorities<sup>30</sup>.

### **Sisters’ activities of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary in underground press works**

In this part of the work, we will look at the work of the self-help work of this convent, which is often referred to as the „poor sisters” in the vernacular. Not only was this convent active in the clandestine writing, printing and distri-

<sup>22</sup> Eusebius Cezarietis, *Bažnyčios istorija*, Vilnius, 1993.

<sup>23</sup> K. Žemaitis, *Self-Education of Roman Catholic Priests in Lithuania During the Years of Soviet Occupation*, “Studia Ełckie” 24(2022), no. 1, p. 85-92.

<sup>24</sup> *Paaiškinimai/Pogrindžio spaudos darbai*, St. Archive of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary (collected and written by M.J. Pajarskaitė), Kaunas 2012, p. 228.

<sup>25</sup> Kaunas Spring is an outbreak of active demonstrations of resistance to the Soviet government in Kaunas in May 1972.

<sup>26</sup> K. Žemaitis, *Žingsniai be stabelėjimų. Vilkaviškio vyskupijos istorijos bruožai*, Punkskas 2016, p. 61.

<sup>27</sup> *Monastery of the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Sorrowful Virgin Mary*, Kaunas 2012, p. 216.

<sup>28</sup> Sadūnaitė Felicija Nijolė (b. 1938 – d. 2024), became a member of the Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary in 1956. She was imprisoned in Mordovia for her dissident activities and illegal distribution of self-published books, was exiled, and spent some time in hiding from the KGB while living in Lithuania.

<sup>29</sup> F.N. Sadūnaitė, *Skubėkime daryti gera*, Vilnius 2023, p. 236.

<sup>30</sup> S. Tamkevičius, *Priespaudos, kovos ir nelaisvės metai: 1968-1988*, Vilnius 2022, p. 148.

bution of books, but at the end of the Soviet occupation it inventoried as many publications as possible. Thus, the publications that were in the possession of St. John of God during the years of persecution were kept in the possession of the monastery. The information about the documents that were taken during the persecutions, which were held by the members of the Sisters' Congregation of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, often known as the „poor sisters”, can now be known and analysed<sup>31</sup>.

The Sisters' Congregation of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in accordance with the will of its founder, Blessed George Matulaitis, has been actively involved in the press. Even before the Second World War, they were already setting up printing houses and printing thousands of different magazines every month<sup>32</sup>.

In this way, throughout the period of Soviet rule, these libraries continued to grow, and by the time of the return of independent Lithuania to the monasteries<sup>33</sup>, they had already become a fully-fledged library<sup>34</sup>. Among the books were, of course, some pre-war publications. However, we will not deal with them in this work. We are interested in books that have already been rewritten underground, printed by photocopiers, written by Lithuanian or foreign authors before the war, and often in Lithuania in secret.

So, what was created was destroyed by the Soviet occupation. As Dr. Regina Laukaitytė says, “The liquidation of the monasteries greatly affected their archives and libraries”<sup>35</sup>. The Marian monastery in Marijampolė alone had a library of about 50 thousand publications<sup>36</sup>. Therefore, when the monasteries were closed, the sisters lost their libraries, so they lived in separate apartments and accumulated modest libraries in their homes. In addition to collecting literature, the sisters also secretly printed and distributed it. If the priest-monks had conceived the idea of organising the training of priests in the underground, the sisters set up a theological course in 1983, not only for their own nuns, but also for nuns of other congregations. This required quite a lot of textbooks<sup>37</sup>. Some of them were translated from foreign languages, others were written by the sisters themselves<sup>38</sup> or by priests in Lithuania<sup>39</sup>.

<sup>31</sup> Throughout the Soviet era, such books were hidden in the sisters' personal libraries, hidden from „svetimų akių”. Later, when the sisters settled in the monasteries (now in independent Lithuania), the books found their way into their libraries. So the first task of the sisters was to catalogue all these books. This was followed by an evaluation of the collection in terms of chronology and subject matter.

<sup>32</sup> A. Pajarskaitė, *Paaiškinimai/Pogrindžio spaudos darbai*, Archive of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, L. 1, Kaunas 2014.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> R. Lukaitytė, *Lietuvos vienuolijos. XX a. istorijos bruožai*, Vilnius 1997, p. 141.

<sup>35</sup> Based on the testimony of the priests who lived in the monastery (note by K. Žemaitis).

<sup>36</sup> A. Pajarskaitė, *Paaiškinimai/Pogrindžio spaudos darbai*, op. cit., L. 3.

<sup>37</sup> R. Lukaitytė, *Lietuvos vienuolijos. XX a. istorijos bruožai*, op. cit., p. 141.

<sup>38</sup> A. Pajarskaitė, *Paaiškinimai/Pogrindžio spaudos darbai*, op. cit., L. 3.

<sup>39</sup> K. Žemaitis, *Praeities įvykių fiksavimas*, op. cit., p. 2.

The initiative of the Poor Sisters even led to the organisation of theological studies underground<sup>40</sup>. Typewritten books were also written for this purpose<sup>41</sup>. “It was necessary to rewrite a large number of copies of the textbooks of the individual disciplines, because every participant in the courses wanted to have them”<sup>42</sup>. In this way, the books accumulated in the homes of individuals. It is difficult to say how many were printed today, as there was no overall list. However, those publications were registered in 1999 in the Monastery Library in independent Lithuania with some error – 2004 units<sup>43</sup>.

The lists of books distributed in the postwar period and used for study also included books published before 1940 and later reprinted by a special printing machine, but most of them are Soviet-era publications. But there was a desire for new writings. One of the most frequently seen authors is the Marian monk priest Vaclovas Aliulis<sup>44</sup>. Other Marians, such as Pranas Račiūnas, Viktoras Šauklys, the Jesuit Jonas Lauriūnas and many others, also wrote. Their books also found their way to the Sisters of the Sorrowful. His books include *The Sign of the Future Life* (1987, typescript, 261 pages), *The Clerics’ Retreat*, (1971, 81 pages), *Dogmatic Theology, Introduction. God the Creator and Ex-alter* (with Albinus Budrikis, undated, 225 pages)<sup>45</sup>. The list also includes apologetic works, such as A.S. Balecki’s *Against the Atheist Press or Has Christ Risen* (undated, 20 pp.).

Thanks to the sisters, the translated and rewritten books of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) are being disseminated: a collection of essays *Faith, Renewal, Hope: Theological Reflections on the Present Situation of the Church*, 1981, 161 pages, *An Introduction to Christianity*, year and pages not given, H. Sienkiewicz, *Quo vadis*, eight parts, year not given, *Let’s Go After Him*, year not given, 26 pages, *Religious Knowledge for All* by unknown author, 20 pages. As an example, the book of *Catechetical Sermons* written by Fr. Juozas Žemaitis (bishop since 1989)<sup>46</sup>. Among the Marians who wrote in the underground press and published books were priests Pranciškus Raičiūnas and Viktoras Šauklys and it is necessary to mention the periodical press, especially *the Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania*, which was not only read by the nuns, but was also rewritten by them<sup>47</sup>. They became centres of a kind from which people received religious publications. Such centres were

<sup>40</sup> R. Laukaitytė, *Lietuvos vienuolijos. XX a. istorijos bruožai*, op. cit., p. 155.

<sup>41</sup> K. Žemaitis, *Praeities įvykių fiksavimas*, op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> A. Pajarskaitė, *Paaiškinimai/Pogrindžio spaudos darbai*, op. cit., L. 3.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Aliulis Vaclovas (March 14, 1921). Krekštėnai, Krokialaukis parish (26 May 2015). Marijampolė – Ordained a priest in 1944, Marian, publicist, thinker, public figure.

<sup>45</sup> These and similar theological books were also used in the underground seminary (note by K. Žemaitis).

<sup>46</sup> K.J.K., *Katechetiniai pamokslai*, (city and number of pages not specified), 1989 (typescript).

<sup>47</sup> K. Žemaitis, *Praeities įvykių fiksavimas*, op. cit., p. 1.

located all over Suvalkija, especially from 1963, when the Poor Sisters intensified the printing of underground publications<sup>48</sup>.

It is not clear how many books or articles the nuns themselves wrote, and today it is difficult to determine which publications they rewrote, but one thing is clear: their contribution to the religious, cultural, and patriotic education of society was immense.

The nuns, who were scattered in their separate apartments, were thus involved in the production and distribution of the illegal press. Later, in free Lithuania, they accumulated in the monastery's communal houses a great intellectual wealth, which is still interesting, valuable, and worthy of researchers' attention today. This treasure trove of books is part of the history of the Catholic Church's struggle for its freedom, marked not only by thousands of underground publications, but also by years of suffering, interrogation, and persecution of the participants of that history. Other monasteries<sup>49</sup> also participated in the distribution of underground literature. However, these activities require a detailed study of their own.

### Conclusions

During the Soviet occupation of Lithuania, the Catholic Church was fought against in various ways. In this way, the religious press was banned, and books already published were destroyed. Under these circumstances, enthusiasts emerged who organised the distribution of books forbidden by the Soviet authorities – self-publishing. Underground, books were translated from other languages (if they could be obtained), or such books and periodicals were simply written, then bound, usually by hand, with a cover, and distributed. Religious publications educated the public, were shared, but also risked, because the Soviet authorities were actively interested in who was writing, printing, distributing, or reading. Many participants in this work were persecuted in various ways. Not only the laity and priests, but especially the nuns, were active in the work of the Savilaida. The Sisters of the Sorrowful Ones were especially active throughout the occupation, reprinting, distributing, and accumulating a rather solid library of such publications. Religious self-publishing was a major contribution to religious education and personal formation in Soviet-occupied Lithuania.

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### Summary

At the end of the Second World War, Lithuania was occupied by the Soviet Union for decades. The Soviet government was essentially atheistic and per-

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<sup>48</sup> A. Streikus, D. Kuzmickaitė, V. Šimkūnas, *Iš sovietinės patirties į laisvės erdvę...*, op. cit., p. 106-107.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104-140.

secuted all religious activities. Literature was very important for religious education, but it was destroyed, and the printing of new literature was forbidden and even punishable by imprisonment or other penalties. However, enthusiasts emerged who, under such conditions, began writing, reprinting and distributing periodicals and individual publications. These books included translations mainly from Polish or German. Monks, priests, and laymen did a great deal of work in the field of self-publishing. In particular, members of the Sisters' Congregation of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Immaculate Conception of the Poor, popularly known as the Sisters of the Poor, were involved in the distribution of such underground books. They distributed religious literature, were persecuted and persecuted, but their contribution to the development of a Catholic society was felt. After the end of the Soviet era, the nuns, and the return of individual residences to the old monastery buildings brought with them "secret" books and created a rich library worthy of research attention.

**Keywords:** banned literature, distribution, Sisters of the Poor, persecution.

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