

KĘSTUTIS ŽEMAITIS*

Bishop Vincentas Borisevičius: The Path of A New Age Martyr

The twentieth century was full of suffering and trials in Europe. Two world wars, occupations, annexations – these were the experiences of Lithuania, and not only Lithuania. However, as a Catholic country, Lithuania suffered more from the Soviet atheist regime after the Second World War, as it was forcibly annexed to the Soviet Union and subject to its laws. And this situation continued for almost half a century. The most difficult years for the Catholic Church in Lithuania were the first post-war decade. It was the time of the greatest deportations to Siberia and other lands, imprisonments, nationalisation of property, closure of churches, persecution of priests and crackdowns on bishops. One of the first bishops to become a prisoner and a martyr, shot by the Soviets (in 1946), was the Bishop Ordinary of Telšiai, Vincentas Borisevičius. In 1991, a beatification case was opened in the Telšiai diocese.

It is not always easy to foster virtue in suffering. Sometimes hope is replaced by hopelessness, faith by indifference, and love by anger, hatred to enemies, and revenge. This can happen if suffering turns out to be futile. This is why this article seeks to show how difficult but true was the path of the bishop's life, which was not lacking in heroism and virtue, and which blossomed into the most beautiful blossoms in his person. If this was indeed the case, there is no reason for the Catholic Church to wait for a new blessed.

There is nothing written about Bishop Borisevičius on this subject. His life and martyrdom in general have not been studied enough. This can be partly justified by the fact that it has taken many years since his execution for the archives to open to honest researchers. Finally, many facts were not known during the Soviet occupation. Even the bishop's burial place was found after Lithuania regained its independence (1999).

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



This work will be based on sources already in print, in particular the bishop's interrogation protocols, his pastoral letters and other writings. It is to be hoped that these sources will give a closer look at the moments in the life of one of the many, but exceptional clergymen, and the heroism of his suffering.

The road to sacra episcopo

Pope Francis also visited the former KGB palace in Vilnius during his visit to Lithuania in 2018. He went into the eleventh cell where many famous people were once imprisoned, including Blessed Archbishop Teofilius Matulionis¹, Venerable Servant of God Archbishop Mečislovas Reinys, Bishop Franciscus Ramanauskas and Bishop Vincentas Borisevičius. The Pope also honoured all the martyrs of Lithuania by praying in this former cell. However, Bishop Vincent Borisevičius is the most important for us in this work.

Vincentas Borisevičius was born during the tsarist occupation on 23 November 1887 in the village of Bebrininkai, Šunskiai parish, Seinai diocese. The boy, like the other children of that family, first learned from his parents. From his parents' home, little Vincent was shaped by both common human and religious virtues. Although he lost his beloved mother when he was only seven years old, he was not abandoned by the rest of his family. "The Borisevičius were faithful and active parishioners, attending church and singing in the choir. Their family was zealous. Although they lived far away from the parish church, this did not prevent them from attending regularly. Vincent lost his mother at a young age and remained with God with all his heart"².

The future pastor was educated at the school of his native parish, then at the gymnasium in St. Petersburg (Russia)³, then at the seminary in Seine⁴, then at the University of Fribourg, and on 29 May 1910 he was ordained a priest in Feldkirchen in Kärnten (Austria).

After his ordination, Borisevičius served as vicar of the parish of Kalvarija (diocese of Seine). During the First World War, he was forced to flee to Russia, where he worked diligently, especially among the refugees, who needed a lot of attention at that time. The Bishop of Seine, Antanas Karosas, also stayed in St. Petersburg⁵, but in 1915, when the Germans were pushing eastwards, he left for

¹ K. Žemaitis, *Blessed Teofilius Matulionis – A Witness to the Faith of Modern Times*, „Studia Elckie” 23(2021), nr 1, s. 89-96.

² K. Žemaitis, *Memories of Šunskai*, Šunskai 2009, L. 2. (Handwritings, K. Žemaitis personal archive).

³ As he was attending gymnasium young Vincentas spoke of his wishes to join the priest seminary. This decision was no surprise to anyone, since most people saw him as an idealist, a dedicated young man (K. Žemaitis, *Memories of Šunskai*, Šunskai 2009, L. 2 (Handwritings, K. Žemaitis personal archive).

⁴ During this time Vincent's elder brother Kazimieras was also a student of this seminary (1884-1920).

⁵ K. Žemaitis, *Prisiminimai apie Šunskus*, Šunskai 2009, L. 2 (Handwritings, K. Žemaitis personal archive).

St. Here, the clergy were under government control⁶. At the end of the war, Vincentas Borisevičius returned to Lithuania and worked as a chaplain at the gymnasium in Marijampolė.

There are wonderful testimonies about his work at the Marijampolė Žiburys gymnasium. Everything went smoothly at the Žiburys gymnasium, where he took care not only of the spiritual or intellectual affairs of the pupils, but also of their domestic welfare⁷, which was a real challenge for Borisevičius⁸. The future Bishop Vincent Brizgys⁹, who was still a grammar school student at the time, remembers: “From my life as a pupil in those days, it should be mentioned that across the street from each other were the Žibūris – later Rygiškių Jonas – and the real gymnasium. The first one had young people of all kinds of views, while the second one was publicly anti-religious and red. There were few others. In the second one, meetings were often called for lectures, but more often they were anti-religious and sometimes anti-Lithuanian rallies”¹⁰. In this gymnasium, the future Bishop Borisevičius gave a lot of strength, love and patience, and proved that he was equally ready to serve everyone in order to win their souls and lead them to salvation. Here he acted like St. John of the Cross – love leads to God’s love¹¹. Here is a very clear manifestation of his path of perfection, according to St John of God. “The way of perfection is, above all, the way to fullness. Man must grow, he must learn to be a person. And personalities, in a metaphorical sense, are “vessels” that can feel full and can feel empty. [...] The journey to be filled with God, better said, to let ourselves be filled by God with his love and his truth”¹².

Borisevičius has also done a lot for the city itself¹³. He took part in the re-establishment of self-government after the war, was for a time a member and secretary of the Marijampolė City Council¹⁴, and took care of the safety, welfare, and food of the residents. This period of Borisevičius’ work can be seen as a very broad and useful one for the people¹⁵.

⁶ Seinai Augustav’s bishop letter to Emperor of Russia 1913 m. April 17/30 d./РГИА ф. 821 оп. 3 д. 882, L. 7.

⁷ A. Katilius, *Kun. Antano Šmulksčio atsiminimai. Tera jatwezenorum*, Punkskas 2021, t. 13, d. 1, p. 197-198.

⁸ A. Baltinis, *Vyskupo Vincento Borisevičiaus gyvenimas ir darbai*, Roma 1975, p. 33-34.

⁹ Brizgys Vincent (1903 m. November 10th Plynai, Marijampolės district – 1992 m. April 23 rd United States of America) – doctor in philosophy and canon rights since 1940 Kaunas bishop augziliar, 1944 forced by german military forces to move to the west.

¹⁰ V. Brizgys, *Gyvenimo keliai*, Vilnius 1993, p. 53.

¹¹ Šv. Kryžiaus Jonas, *Kopimas į Karmelio kalną. Smulkieji raštai*, Vilnius 2015, p. 174.

¹² J. A. Marcos, *Un viaje a la plenitud: El Camino de Perfección de Teresa de Jesús*, Madrid 2010, p. 12-13.

¹³ K. Žemaitis, *Vincentas Borisevicius Marijampole Period: Imput to Education and Local Government*, “Logos (Vilnius)” 2023, Nr. 114, p. 174-176.

¹⁴ Protocols of Marijampolė council 1920 01 14 – 1921 01 15. LCVA F. 1362, ap.1, b.9, L. 1. – 119.

¹⁵ A. Katilius, *Kun. Antano Šmulksčio atsiminimai. Tera jatwezenorum*, Punkskas 2021, t. 13, d. 1, p. 197.

The Bishop of Seinai, Antanas Karosas, highly valued Father Borisevičius and soon afterwards, in 1922, appointed him a professor at the seminary (teaching moral and pastoral theology) and a spiritual father. As the Diocese of Seine was then divided between two countries, Poland and Lithuania, the seminary in Lithuania was located in Gizai. Here Vincent Borisevičius appears as an active organiser of the Catholic Action and an exemplary priest¹⁶. Prof. F. Bartkus, who worked and lived in the same seminary at the time, recalls: “It was very easy, pleasant and lovely to get along with him (Borisevičius – author’s note). As they say, take it and give thanks. He was always in a good mood, in good spirits, with a happy smile on his lips. I never saw him frown <...>”¹⁷. It is a pity that many years later it is very difficult to collect any more such testimonies. But it can be concluded that he loved his vocation and tried to carry out his duties impeccably. He lived as Saint John of the Cross taught – love is like climbing a mountain¹⁸.

In 1926, Pope Pius XI established the ecclesiastical province of Lithuania with new dioceses¹⁹. The former priest of the Diocese of Seinai, Justinas Staugaitis, was appointed Ordinary of the newly established Diocese of Telšiai. He asked Bishop Antanas Karosas²⁰ to release three priests from the newly established Diocese of Vilkaviskis to Telšiai. Among those released was Father Vincentas Borisevičius. This again shows that Bishop Staugaitis chose exceptional collaborators for the organisation of the work of creating the diocese.

Thus, in 1926, Father Borisevičius arrived in Telšiai. Here, Bishop Justinas Staugaitis appointed him Chancellor of the Curia, and in the following year he appointed him Rector of the seminary in Telšiai. As an exemplary priest, Borisevičius was given the title of prelate by Pope Pius XI in 1928. Father Vincent served as rector until 1940, when he became auxiliary to the Bishop of Telšiai. Borisevičius’s episcopal path would coincide with the war and the most brutal post-war persecution by the Soviet government. It will be the bishop’s ultimate martyrdom.

Here he will emerge as an extraordinarily strong and noble personality, because “the path of perfection is above all the path to fullness. Man must grow, he must learn to be a person”²¹.

¹⁶ A. Baltinis, *Vyskupo Vincento Borisevičiaus gyvenimas ir darbai*, Roma 1975, p. 88-89.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁸ Šv. Kryžiaus Jonas, *Kopimas į Karmelio kalną. Smulkieji raštai*, Vilnius 2015, p. 186.

¹⁹ K. Žemaitis, *Pijaus XI Konstitucija Lituanorum gente ir jos padariniai Lietuvai*, “Logos (Vilnius)” 2006, Nr. 48, p. 86-94.

²⁰ Vyskupas Antanas Karosas buvo paskutiniuju Seinų vyskupu ir pirmuoju naujai įsteigtos Vilkaviškio vyskupijos ordinaru.

²¹ J. A. Marcos, *Un viaje a la plenitud: El Camino de Perfección de Teresa de Jesús*, Madrid 2010, p. 12-13.

The Bishop's vocational path to martyrdom

In 1940, Europe, especially Poland, was tormented by a brutal war and occupations. The Holy See knew that it was only a matter of time before Lithuania would also be occupied. In that case, as Bishop Vincent Brizgys argues, the Vatican will have limited possibilities to act in occupied Lithuania²², or perhaps diplomatic relations will be severed altogether, which is what happened when the Soviets occupied the country. The Holy See has therefore hastened to appoint three young bishops to Lithuania, who will have to work long and difficult hours in the future. Thus, Vincent Borisevičius became the Bishop of Telšiai. Only three months after his consecration, the Soviet army had already occupied Lithuania²³.

The first Soviet occupation was exceptionally brutal: arrests, deportations, killings. The last days before the Nazi-Soviet war began were so unbearably terrible that people simply waited for war, which may be incomprehensible, but the Soviet terror was more terrible than war. Prelate Ladas Tulaba remembers the first morning of the war: “German planes started bombing the airfield, which was located in Aleksotas (Kaunas – K. Žemaitis’s note) and was about one kilometre away from the rectory. When we were sure that the war had started, we ran out into the garden and, as if we were crazy, we started jumping for joy, despite the bombs falling”²⁴. This may be more difficult for a Polish reader to understand because Nazi Germany attacked it first. And the Nazis came to Lithuania as liberators. At least at the beginning it seemed so. And it seemed to many that this occupation would be temporary²⁵. The church was relieved for a brief moment²⁶. But soon the ideology of the Nazi master race began to be demonstrated²⁷ and people realised that one tyrant had replaced another.

Regrettably, little knowledge of Prelate Borisevich survives from the first years of the Soviet occupation. There are no living witnesses, and Andrius Baltinis, who wrote his biography, completed it at the beginning of Lithuania’s independence. One thing is clear: it was even harder for all bishops then, as it was for the people. However, he did not give up – together with other bishops, he tried to maintain at least one seminary in Kaunas²⁸.

²² V. Brizgys, *Katalikų Bažnyčia Lietuvoje. Pirmoje rusų okupacijoje 1941-1944 m.*, Čikaga 1977, p. 18.

²³ L. Tulaba, *Vatikanas ir Lietuva*, Vilnius 2001, p. 12.

²⁴ L. Tulaba, *Nuo Dusios iki Tiberio*, t. 1: *Atsiminimai*, Roma 1993, p. 114-115.

²⁵ K. Žemaitis, *Vyskupas Antanas Karosas – sunkių išbandymų piligrimas*, Punksas 2021, p. 51.

²⁶ K. Žemaitis, *Lietuvos katalikų bažnyčios istorija*, Kaunas 2006, p. 95-96.

²⁷ P. Maldeikis, *Mykolas Krupavičius*, Čikaga 1975, p. 244.

²⁸ V. Brizgys, *Katalikų Bažnyčia Lietuvoje. Pirmoje rusų okupacijoje 1940-1941 m. Vokiečių okupacijoje 1941-1944 m. (trumpa apžvalga)*, Čikaga 1977, p. 93-94.

During the Nazi occupation, Bishop Borisevičius took care of the Telšiai seminary²⁹, travelled with the Ordinary to the parishes, and took care of all the diocese's affairs. However, the young bishop does not forget his home parish of Šunskai. He loved his homeland, which was beautiful and well-kept, the church of his childhood, and he prayed for the souls of his parents and his brother, Father Casimir³⁰.

During the war, Bishop Borisevičius was an apostle of great love of neighbour. This was very clearly evidenced by his actions during the Nazi occupation. He risked his life to save Jews who were being persecuted and murdered³¹, for which he was punished without mercy. One could say that this rescue of the persecuted was "playing with death"³². Surviving documents testify to this. The Jews of Telšiai testified to this in writing in the case of Bishop Borisevičius about the girl who was rescued from the ghetto³³, but the Soviet court completely disregarded this. The Bishop rescued Jews in hiding, fed them and hid them. In so doing, he fulfilled Christ's command: "As often as you have done it to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you have done it to me" (Mt 25: 31-46).

As the front approached Lithuania, quite a large number of the population retreated with the fleeing German army. Especially many intellectuals, farmers and priests left Lithuania in Samogitia and Suvalkija. They all remembered the first Soviet era, and the horrors of the front forced them to flee further away. They hoped that the front would stop at Lithuania's German border and that they would be able to return again³⁴. However, Bishop Vincent Borisevičius, even though he knew the hell that awaited the return of the Soviet government, decided not to leave Telšiai³⁵. This action can be seen as his decision to accept the coming persecution, but not to leave his flock, because "a good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (Jn 10: 11-18).

The first decade of the Soviet occupation was the most brutal in Lithuania³⁶. The communist government imprisoned, shot, or deported Lithuania's

²⁹ During the early years of soviet occupation Lithuanina priest seminaries were closed. Kaunas seminary was forced to work under extremely rough conditions. During the reign of Nazi's the seminaries were active, however the wealth taken during the soviet occupation was not repaid. Considered the most prosecuted was the priest seminary of Kaunas.

³⁰ K. Žemaitis, *Prisiminimai apie Šunskus*, Šunskai 2009, L. 2. (Rankraštis, K. Žemaičio asmeninis archyvas).

³¹ *Ibid.*, L. 3.

³² Playing with death – to risk your life.

³³ V. Vyskupas, *Borisevičius sovietiniame teisme, Raštiškas liudijimas. Lietuove vyskupai kankiniai sovietiniame teisme*, Vilnius 2000, p. 181.

³⁴ K. Žemaitis, *Prisiminimai apie Šunskus*, Šunskai 2009, L. 3. (Rankraštis, K. Žemaičio asmeninis archyvas).

³⁵ V. Brizgys, *Katalikų Bažnyčia Lietuvoje. Pirmoje rusų okupacijoje 1940-1941 m. Vokiečių okupacijoje 1941-1944 m. (trumpa apžvalga)*, Čikaga 1977, p. 172.

³⁶ K. Žemaitis, *Žingsniai be stabtelėjimų. Vilkaviškio vyskupijos istorijos bruožai*, Punksas 2016, p. 50-51.

elite – intellectuals, farmers, even landless people – those who were even suspected of being disloyal to the new regime. The Catholic Church in Lithuania also lost its best members and many of its clergy. The Lithuanian bishops were also caught up in this process of terror, the first of whom was the Ordinary of Telšiai, Vincentas Borisevičius.

He was accused of hostility to the Soviet government and of having links with Lithuanian partisans³⁷. In fact, in the post-war years, it was impossible to avoid meetings with people active in the underground - organisations resisting the occupation regime. Partisans needed not only moral but also material help. They turned to the villagers, the clergy and the townspeople. Such contact was considered by the Soviet regime to be a serious crime and carried the harshest punishment. Bishop Borisevičius also did not escape this reality of life. However, the real reason for his conviction and execution was that he refused to cooperate with the Soviet security services and refused to become a traitor. Borisevičius was first arrested on 18 December 1945, held in the NKGB-MGB³⁸ internal prison in Vilnius until Christmas Day, released³⁹ and arrested a second time on 5 February 1946. On his return from his first imprisonment, he formally declared in writing that he refused to be a Soviet security agent: “<...> I declare that it is absolutely incompatible with my title, my position and my conscience to make such allegations, and that I refuse to do so categorically. If I have committed a crime, it is my responsibility to atone for it, not someone else’s. This is what my religion demands”⁴⁰. Here, then, there remains no doubt about the heroism of the bishop and the unfolding of his divine virtues in his person. Finally, he writes his last pastoral letters at this time, in which he encourages everyone to be merciful and forgiving. Here he goes even further in his virtues⁴¹.

The Bishop’s written legacy is also rich and rich. He wrote on the Christian education of young people, the Catholic family, virtue, the apostolate of the laity, and other issues. He understood quite well what the person of a good priest should be⁴², and he tried to be one himself.

The Bishop’s life testified that deeds and words were very much in harmony in his person. In choosing martyrdom he chose life. It seemed to many that he was gone, and many may have sighed that such a fragile human life was

³⁷ V. Vyskupas, *Borisevičius sovietiniame teisme, Raštiškas liudijimas. Lietuovė vyskupai kankiniai sovietiniame teisme*, Vilnius 2000, p. 175.

³⁸ Sovietinio saugumo struktūros.

³⁹ It was attempted to recruit him as an agent of structure safety during his time in jail.

⁴⁰ Piliečiui NKGB generolui Vilniuje. Telšių vyskupo Vincento Borisevičiaus apklausų, vykusių 1945 m. Gruodžio 18-23 d., papildymai, Vyskupas Vincentas Borisevičius straipsniuose ir dokumentuose, LKMA, Vilnius 2002, p. 281.

⁴¹ K. Žemaitis, *Biskup Wincenty Borysewicz – prorok miłości i przebaczenia. Więksi i mniejsi prorocy Europy środkowo-wschodniej XX wieku*, Lublin 2003, p. 125-130.

⁴² V. Borisevičius, *Šv. Tėvas Pijus XI ir dvasininkai. Vyskupas Vincentas Borisevičius straipsniuose ir dokumentuose*, LKMA, Vilnius 2002, p. 71-90.

like a hand burnt in fire. But Saint Teresa of Avila would say here: “So now we say that this little hand has died, and with the greatest joy, because it has found peace, and Christ lives in it”⁴³.

Bishop Vincentas Borisevičius was sentenced to death by a Soviet court and executed on 18 November 1946. He was simply tortured because he could no longer stand during the execution, so he was propped up against another exhausted and tortured priest who was being shot⁴⁴. Borisevičius was the first and only Lithuanian bishop to be so brutally dealt with by the Soviet authorities in Lithuania, who felt great hatred for him as a cleric. Thus died a Bishop who sacrificed for others and fulfilled the words of Christ: “Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15: 9-17).

During his visit to Lithuania, Pope Francis also visited Cell 11 of the former KGB building. There he lit a candle in honour of those imprisoned there, including four Lithuanian bishops: Archbishops Mečislovas Reinis and Blessed Teofilios Matulionis, Bishops Vincentas Borisevičius and Pranciškas Ramanauskas. The Holy Father’s prayer in this prison may bring out more saints, including Vincent Borisevičius.

Vincent Borisevičius was also honoured in independent Lithuania. In 1999 (posthumously) he was awarded the Grand Cross of the Order of the Knight’s Cross, Commander of the Order of the Cross of Vytis, and in 2003 (posthumously) he was awarded the Cross of the Rescue of the Living.

Conclusions

Although a considerable amount of time has passed since the martyrdom of Bishop Vincent Borisevičius, there are no witnesses left, and there are not many historical sources available, it is still possible and necessary to talk and write about this topic. Bishop Vincent Borisevičius of Telšiai had a lifetime of very responsible duties. He was always obedient to his superiors and did not shy away from heavy responsibilities. He always remained faithful to his vocation even in the face of great dangers and threats. This is shown by the rescue of the Jews and his determination not to retreat from the front line and the impending new Soviet occupation. These facts in themselves raise the question of what kind of man and Christian he must have been. Looking at his biography, we can see that he had already received the foundations of virtue at home. In a virtuous and believing family, he and his brother later went to the seminary in Seinai. After becoming a priest, he does not shy away from his work, obediently accepts the duties assigned to him by the Church, and when he becomes a bishop, he bears witness to the supreme virtue of charity, not only for his shepherds, but also for every other person.

⁴³ Šv. Jėzaus Teresė Avilietė, *Vidinės pilies buveinės*, Vilnius 2014, p. 244.

⁴⁴ Alongside Bishop V. Borisevičius priest of Telšiai diocese Pranas Gustaitis were shot and killed.

Bishop Vincent also accepts the challenges of the second Soviet occupation. He does not retreat as the front approaches but chooses his own fate. He gives his life as a virtuous shepherd for his flock because he has remained faithful to Christ and to his vocation. Bishop Vincent Borisevičius became a martyr, but he did not become a coward, a traitor or an apostate. Saint Teresa of Avila or Saint John of the Cross would say here that a martyred bishop has reached the fullness of life. And such a choice can lead him to the company of the blessed of the new age.

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Bishop Vincent Borisevičius: The Path of A New Age Martyr

Summary

The twentieth century brought many difficult trials to Europe. Lithuania was devastated by two world wars and long and difficult periods of occupation. The Catholic Church was persecuted by both the Nazis and the Soviets. The clergy suffered much. One of the first martyrs during the Soviet occupation was the Bishop of Telšiai, Vincentas Borisevičius. Although there are not many written sources and testimonies about him, we can get a good idea that he grew up in a moral and faithful environment and matured for the priesthood. Borisevičius was entrusted with the duties of the rector of the seminary, later became an assistant to the Bishop of Telšiai, and finally an Ordinary. Bishop Borisevičius demonstrated his heroic virtues during the Second World War by rescuing Jews, by remaining faithful to his flock, and by not cooperating with the occupying power's security structures or betraying innocent people. This is what brought the moment of his arrest and suffering closest. Although murdered, the bishop remained an apostolic example for the Christians of the new times. Because of his virtues and martyrdom, the Church has opened the case for the beatification of Bishop Vincent Borisevičius.

Keywords: bishop, Vincent Borisevičius, life, martyrdom.

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