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Vienna  
SOURCE: Die Katholische Mission  
No. 2, February, 1935.

TRANSLATION

THE POSITION OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE BALTIC  
STATES

After the World War the Baltic Provinces of the Russian Empire, with the predominantly non-Slavic, partially Germanic population, declared their independence and established the three independent countries of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. As bulwarks against Bolshevism, they are of great importance in cultural and religious respects. From a missionary point of view, they must be kept in mind as the point of departure for eventual missionary work in Russia. For this reason, a certain amount of information about the position of the Catholic Church in the Baltic states might be of interest.

Lithuania

When the Grand Duke Mindaugas, who united the sub-principalities of Lithuania under his sceptre, let himself be baptized, about the middle of the 13th century, and received the title of king from Pope Innocence IV, the country came into contact with Christianity for the first time. Nevertheless, it was more than a hundred years before Christianity could take firm root and call itself at home in Lithuania. Unfortunately, as a result of a lack of priests and the considerable religious ignorance of the people, it remained so weak that at the time of the religious innovations, which were introduced into

Lithuania

Lithuania through Calvinistic preachers and through the Bohemian Brothers, there was great danger of the country becoming lost entirely for the Catholic Church. This danger was avoided through the alertness of Cardinal Hosius and the intensive activity of the Jesuit missionaries who came to Lithuania in 1569. In a short time the Jesuits succeeded in bringing many of the nobility and their families back to the mother Church, and through persistent religious instruction they taught the people for the first time to love and cherish the Catholic faith. They did their greatest service to the Church through the establishment of five institutions for educating priests, in which a spiritually zealous native clergy grew up. It was as a result of this that during the later rule of Russia, which lasted for over a century, the Lithuanian people remained true to their faith despite the most sharp oppression.

Their loyalty was not to go unrewarded. The driving out of the Bolsheviks, in 1919, brought with it the final freedom of the Catholic Church, to which today over 60 per cent of all the Lithuanians adhere. Soon after that the country underwent a new clerical division; Kaunas was raised to the position of an archbishopric and four suffragan bishoprics were attached with it to the Lithuanian clerical province. Members of religious orders once more came into the country and began their proselyting activities. Thus, the Capuchins now have a missionary school at Plunje, not far from Selsisi. Like the Jesuits in Kaunas, the Franciscans and the St. Mary Fathers devote themselves to the education of the young. The Dominicans also established themselves recently in Lithuania; the

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first monks who took up residence in the newly-founded monastery are the descendants of the Lithuanian parents who had emigrated to America.

The national government took at first a very friendly attitude toward the Church, as was only natural, inasmuch as it was composed of representatives of the three Catholic parties which had an absolute majority in Parliament. When the Socialists came into power in 1926, the friendly relations between State and Church did, to be sure, seem to be in danger. But a half year later the Socialist regime was overthrown by the national government of Smetona, which has ruled the country up to this time. Although the National Party in Lithuania has not a pronounced Catholic character, a concordat with the Vatican was nevertheless concluded under its regime. According to this concordat, the Catholic Church received assurances of its freedom in worship, jurisdiction, and administration. Each of the five dioceses received its own seminary with an annual government subsidy. Salaries for the secular clergy are also provided, although they are not high. Particular interest attached to the paragraph according to which marriages, religiously concluded, also receive civil recognition. A wide field of activity is opened up for the religious associations which are assembled in the Catholic Aktion.

Thus the external conditions for the development of Catholic life are quite favorable. This life is particularly active among the country population; regular church attendance and reception of the sacraments, as well as a model family life, are taken for granted in these districts. Other conditions, to be sure, prevail in the large cities,

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which are not numerous, and in a large part of the educated circles. Here, for the time being, there is great religious indifference and much ignorance over everything connected with religion and the Church. In order to combat this evil, the leading clerical authorities decided some years ago to establish a Catholic university in Kaunas; their plan unfortunately failed to receive the approval of the government. In order to give the working population a firmer religious foundation, a reorganization of the Catholic Workers' associations was carried through in 1933, and this association was given its own division for the youth. An attempt has been made through the spreading of the prayer societies and the men's societies to increase religious activity, above all, in the cities, and to put a stop to the growth of religious indifference.

Only a Lithuanian people which is firm in its faith could fulfill the mission which Providence has placed before it: namely, to be a bulwark for the protection of western Europe from the world conflagration of Bolshevism. The entire Christian world should for this reason help this people by its prayers, as the Holy Father has desired in his message on missionary prayers for the month of February.

#### Latvia

Whereas, in Lithuania, by far the greatest part of the population belong to the Catholic faith, in the neighboring country of Latvia the Catholics constitute only a religious minority. Out of the approximately two million inhabitants of the country, 450,000 are Catholics, 266,000 are schismatics, over a million are Protestants, and some hundred thousand are Jews. Before the Reformation, Latvia was controlled by the Catholic orders, and the Archbishop of

Riga

Riga exercised national sovereignty. With the penetration of Protestantism into the country this situation came to an end, and when the Swedes conquered Riga and a great part of Livland, in 1635, the country was lost to the Catholic Church. Only the present Latvian province of Latgallia remained under Poland and, in this way, the Catholic faith was preserved in that part of the country. The great majority of the Latvian Catholics is now to be found in this province.

After Latvia's declaration of independence, efforts were made to negotiate a concordat with the Vatican, and these efforts were successfully concluded in 1922. The Catholics were given the right to exercise their religion, freely and publicly. The bishopric of Riga which had been re-established as early as 1915, was raised by Rome, in 1923, to the position of an archdiocese; the Government placed at the disposal of the Archbishop, for use as a cathedral, the Church of St. Jacob, in Riga, which up to that time had been Protestant.

Unfortunately there are only 150 secular priests at the disposition of the Pope for the spiritual care of 450,000 Catholics. These priests are assisted, however, in their hard spiritual work by the members of various orders; the Capuchine and St. Mary Fathers are particularly active in this respect. The blessed works of the Sisters of the Poor Child Jesus also deserve particular mention. They were called to Latvia in 1927 by the Archbishop Springovich to help in raising the mental and moral level of the Catholic population of Latgallia. To this purpose they were called upon to found a large common school and a high school for girls. The Sisters began their work against

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great sacrifice. The estate Yaunaglona, which had been assigned to them, was a former Russian manor house, partially going to pieces, in which a group of shady characters had already made themselves comfortable. The population in the vicinity was strongly infected with Communism. Nevertheless the Sisters tackled their job with courage and with confidence in God, and their resolute action carried them to the desired results. In the seven years which have passed since they entered the vicinity the situation has changed completely. Today, twenty-two nuns and fifty postulants are at work in Yaunaglona. Their school for girls, which has received the recognition of the State, is completely developed and the common school is attended by 160 children; furthermore, the sisters have had two large churches in the near vicinity, which were standing unused before they came, renovated, and they see that religious services are held there every Sunday. The Latvian State has given the great accomplishments of these nuns complete recognition and has supported them on more than one occasion.

Not far from Yaunaglona lies one of the greatest points of attraction for the Catholics of Latvia. It is Aglona, a place of pilgrimage. Here, at Whitsuntide and Ascension Day, the two main days of pilgrimage, up to 70,000 pilgrims stream together. They pray devoutly before the merciful image of the Mother of God for the reunion of their people in the true faith.

#### Estonia

In Estonia, the most northern of the Baltic countries, the Catholic Church was almost completely forced out by the Reformation, particularly at the time of the Swedish regime. Thus, there are today only 3,500 Catholics among the 1,500,000

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of the inhabitants of the country. Very few of these Catholics, hardly a hundred, are born Estonians; the remainder is composed of employees of the existing foreign consulates in Reval (Tallinn), as well as Polish, Lithuanian, and Latvian immigrants. Ten Catholic priests under the leadership of the Apostolic Administrator work in six parishes to minister to their spiritual wants.

The oldest congregation is that of Reval, where some hundred years ago the Dominican monks from St. Petersburg began to care for the spiritual welfare of the foreign Catholics. Today, two Jesuits and the secular priest P. Dianys are stationed there; the latter belongs to the group of twelve Lithuanian priests who returned from Soviet Russia in 1933, after a long and painful imprisonment. The parish in Reval, with its two branches in the suburbs of Nõmme and Koppel, comprises about one thousand Catholics. The Chargé d'Affaires of the Vatican, Mgr. Arata, has his office in the Catholic parish house. The priest of Pernau, the well-known health resort of the North, is also a priest of the Society of Jesus, and was formerly a missionary in Russia. His congregation numbers 30; unfortunately many of them have become completely estranged from religious life. Capuchin monks take care of the three religious posts, Dorpat, Walk, and Narva, of which the last two have beautiful and spacious churches. The parish, Rakvere, recently received a new little wooden church which can hold a congregation of 250 and will satisfy the needs for a long time to come. Although the number of Catholics in Estonia is still small for the time being and their influence insignificant, the Church can nevertheless look forward to the future with hope and pleasure. The Government established diplomatic relations

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with the Vatican in 1933, and takes an entirely friendly attitude to the Catholic population and its priests. The Lutheran Church, whose members constitute almost 50 per cent of the population, was raised to the position of a State church after the declaration of Estonia's independence; but in 1925, State and Church were divided. The result of this measure was a perfect penetration into the country by all sorts of sects, which, being well-equipped with funds, began to beat the drum for the enlistment of new members. The population whose religious wants had never been satisfied by Lutheranism went over in swarms to the Methodist and Baptist preachers. Those seekers of Truth whose natures were deeper, on the other hand, found the way to the Mother Church and there is good reason to expect that many more of the Estonians, some of whom are filled with a sincere and positively touching yearning for the one true religion, will attach themselves to the Catholic Church.

The Church also places great hopes on the efforts to bring about a reunion with the schismatics in Estonia. These have long been divided among themselves. The 115,000 Estonian orthodox believers, under the diocese of Reval, celebrate the liturgy in their mother tongue, while the 85,000 Russians who are united in the orthodox diocese of Narva use Church-Slavic. When the Bishop of the Pechory Monastery was elected to the Bishopric of Narva, some years ago, against his own will, and appealed thereafter to the Patriarch of Constantinople for a decision, the disunion was increased, since the Estonian metropolitan was reluctant to recognize the decision of Constantinople. The Estonian orthodox believers are entirely oriented

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toward the West and want above all to free themselves from the Russian influence. Many of them see in the Roman Church a place of refuge and are not unwilling to enter into a union. In the year 1933, the Holy Father therefore instructed the French Jesuit, Father Bourgeois, who in 1924 had taken over the Byzantino-Greek ritual, to take up residence in Narva and to establish contact with the orthodox believers. Together with a Dutch Capuchin, P. Bourgeois is working on the completion of this difficult task; at the moment he is attempting to get Catholic students from England for the apostolate of the united church; for it is necessary to counteract the efforts of the Anglicans, who would like to bring about a union of the Estonian schismatics with the Church of England, and who for this purpose have sent a number of well-educated young people into the country.

The reunion of the orthodox believers is truly the great hope of the future, which maintains the courage of the toiling Catholic priests in Estonia on their stony field of endeavor. They are grateful to the Catholics of Germany for the assistance of every prayer which they care to devote to them and to the flock which has been entrusted to them.

R. Mikl S.J.

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