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The Second Vatican Council and Lithuania: Manipulation by the Soviet Authorities

Abstract: Following the end of the Second World War and during the ongoing Soviet occupation of Lithuania, contact between the Catholic Church in Lithuania and the Vatican was practically impossible. With the opening of the Second Vatican Council, opportunities arose for some (only those diocesan administrators who had obtained the authorities' consent) to travel to Rome. The Second Vatican Council led to at least somewhat more active relations between Catholics in Lithuania and the Holy See. Thus, following the Council, conditions in Lithuania also appear to have changed: a Liturgical Commission was active, and works on the liturgy were occasionally published, albeit in small print runs. It is important to note that contacts with the Vatican also became more frequent; The Council's decrees were in force in Lithuania too, helping to implement the principles of the universal Church, but due to interference by the Soviet authorities, the implementation of the decrees in Lithuania was complicated.

Keywords: Second Vatican Council, Lithuania, Soviet authorities, manipulation, implementation of resolutions.

Introduction

Following the Second World War, the occupation of Lithuania continued, and the formerly independent state, unlawfully incorporated into the Soviet Union, suffered political and religious persecution. Although the Constitution did not prohibit it, the Church in the Soviet Union was nevertheless denied the right to carry out its proper mission and was forced to limit itself to a quiet existence. Priests were persecuted, religious orders were dissolved, Catholic organizations were banned, and contact with the Vatican was prohibited (at least during the first post-war decades). The situation regarding theological studies was also difficult. Of the four seminaries, only one remained operational in Kaunas. The Faculty of Theology and Philosophy was closed down on the orders of the Soviet

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authorities. Admittedly, a very unique case was the continued existence of this faculty at the Kaunas Interdiocesan Seminary. This had been agreed with the Holy See and was overseen by the Vatican to the extent that conditions at the time permitted. In such circumstances, there was also a shortage of qualified theologians: the older generation had gradually passed away or been repressed and imprisoned, whilst it was very difficult to train new ones.

The situation in Lithuania was also somewhat influenced by the Second Vatican Council. The Soviet authorities were obliged to at least pretend that there was religious freedom in the country. How this was achieved will be examined in this work. The theme of the Council has indeed been examined, but not sufficiently. Dr Irena Vaišvilaitė, Egidijus Jaseliūnas and others have written about this extraordinary event in the Catholic Church and its impact on Lithuanians. The topic is further enriched by the memoirs of Canon Juozapas Stankevičius, then administrator of the Archdiocese of Kaunas and the Diocese of Vilkauskis¹. Valuable testimonies can also be found in the writings of other authors.

This paper will focus on two key questions: under what conditions and who was able to travel to the Council from Lithuania, and what role those who travelled played for the Council itself, the Catholic Church in Lithuania and the Soviet authorities. This article is being written sixty years after the Second Vatican Council, and therefore provides a good opportunity to take another retrospective look at the events of that year from the perspective of Catholic Lithuania.

The aim of this article is to analyse the development of relations between the Catholic Church in Lithuania and the Holy See during the period of Soviet occupation, with particular attention to the Second Vatican Council as a turning point that enabled renewed contacts, liturgical developments, and the implementation of universal Church principles in Lithuania despite the restrictions imposed by the Soviet authorities.

Participation in the Council: The Positions of the Catholic Church in Lithuania and the Soviet Authorities

The Second Vatican Council was opened by Pope John XXIII in October 1962. At that time, the situation within the Catholic Church in Lithuania was rather complex. Firstly, there was virtually no hierarchy. Bishop Vincentas Borisevičius of Telšiai had been executed as early as 1946; Archbishop Mečislovas Reinys, Apostolic Administrator of the Archdiocese of Vilnius, died in 1953 in a prison in Vladimir, Russia; Bishop Antanas Karosas of Vilkauskis died in

¹ Juozapas Stankevičius (1903-1974). Ordained as a priest in 1930, he obtained a Doctorate in Theology in 1953. He was editor of "Mūsų savaitraštis" from 1932 to 1934 and spiritual director of the "Angelo sargo" organisation from 1938 to 1940. Parish priest in Šiauliai from 1940 to 1941. For a time, he taught at the Kaunas Interdiocesan Seminary. From 1947 to 1965, he served as administrator (capitular vicar) of the Archdiocese of Kaunas, and for a time also of the dioceses of Kaišiadorys and Vilkauskis. Canon of the Archdiocese of Kaunas (1958). He participated in the Second Vatican Council. He wrote the "Catholic Prayer Book".

1947 in Marijampolė; Bishop Kazimieras Paltarokas of Panevėžys died in Vilnius in 1958; just before the opening of the assembly, Archbishop Teofilus Matulionis of Kaišiadorys died in exile in Šeduva on 20 August 1962 under unclear circumstances²; Bishop Vincentas Sladkevičius, who had been secretly consecrated as auxiliary bishop of Kaišiadorys on 25 December 1957 and secretly appointed by Pope Pius XII, was persecuted and forced to live in exile³. In their respective dioceses, Petras Maželis, Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Telšiai, and Julijonas Steponavičius, Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Panevėžys and the Archdiocese of Vilnius, were exiled to Žagarė in 1961 for their staunch resistance to the demands of the KGB. Bishop Pranciškus Ramanauskas of Telšiai was convicted, imprisoned, and later not permitted to return to Telšiai. The bishop died in 1959. Thus, the bishops of Lithuania had died, been martyred, or exiled. Consequently, many dioceses were administered by elected priest-administrators. And yet the Soviet authorities were not strictly opposed to allowing bishops from the Soviet Union to participate in the Council. What was the reasoning and motivation behind this?

As Dr Irena Vaišvilaitė writes: “Regarding the participation of bishops from communist countries in the Council, negotiations were held with Moscow through the Holy See’s representative in Turkey, Monsignor Lardone, and the Soviet envoy in that country, Ryžov, who on 11 April 1962 announced that Catholic bishops from the Soviet Union and from Warsaw Pact countries would participate in the Council”⁴. Who from Lithuania could have attended the Council? As we have seen, when the Council was announced, there were four bishops in Lithuania: Petras Maželis in Telšiai, and the other three – Julijonas Steponavičius, Vincentas Sladkevičius and Teofilus Matulionis – had been repressed. These three were considered quite unacceptable to the Soviet authorities⁵. Although all four bishops received invitations to the Council⁶, there could be no question of the latter three travelling to Rome, as they were active defenders of the Church’s rights – in other words, bishops who would not remain silent. And yet the Soviet authorities wanted someone to represent Lithuanian

² Teofilus Matulionis (22 June 1873 in Kudoriškis, Alanta parish – 20 August 1962 in Šeduva, Radviliškis district) – Lithuanian archbishop and martyr, beatified by Pope Francis in 2017. See e.g.: K. Žemaitis, *Blessed Teofilus Matulionis – A Witness to the Faith of Modern Times*, „Studia Elckie” 23(2021), no. 1, p. 89-96.

³ In 1982, Bishop V. Sladkevičius was permitted to return to Kaišiadorys, and in 1988 Pope John Paul II appointed him a cardinal.

⁴ I. Vaišvilaitė, *The Second Vatican Council and Lithuania*, „Annals of the Lithuanian Catholic Academy of Sciences” 96(2000), p. 50.

⁵ In 1960, there were four bishops in Lithuania. Three of them – Teofilus Matulionis, Julijonas Steponavičius and Vincentas Sladkevičius – were removed by the authorities from the administration of their dioceses and exiled to the provinces. All the bishops received invitations to attend the Council, but security officers who visited them concluded that neither Vincentas Sladkevičius, nor Julijonas Steponavičius, nor Teofilus Matulionis could be considered loyal to the Soviet authorities.

⁶ I. Vaišvilaitė, *The Second Vatican Council and Lithuania*, op. cit., p. 51.

Catholics. Why was this necessary? Did the atheist regime wish to serve the Church? Certainly not. So why did they make efforts to ensure there were representatives from Lithuania at the Vatican? Dr Streikus identifies the aims and expectations behind these efforts. He sets out the Soviet authorities' motives:

"The most important arguments: 1) The participants in the Council will be compelled to refrain from attacks on communism; 2) the myth of the persecution of the Catholic Church will be dispelled; 3) the activities of progressive Catholic figures in the struggle for peace will be revitalised; 4) a positive reaction will be elicited from Italy and the countries of Latin America"⁷.

However, "Bishop Teofilus Matulionis posed the greatest problem for the Soviet administration. He was exiled to Šeduva, a small parish in the Diocese of Panevėžys, even though he was the Bishop of Kaišiadorys, where, under pressure from the authorities, a week after the announcement of the Council, he handed over the administration of the diocese to the Kaišiadorys chapter. Given Matulionis's uncompromising stance, the attention shown to him by the Holy See must have caused concern among Soviet officials. On 30 May 1960, Matulionis was granted the honorary title of *Pontificio Solio adstantis*, and on 9 February 1961, the Pope appointed him Archbishop of"⁸. Dr A. Streikus makes a similar point: "In August 1962, invitations to attend the Council were received by the Lithuanian bishops T. Matulionis, P. Maželis, V. Sladkevičius⁹, and J. Steponavičius received invitations to attend the Council; however, the Soviet authorities had already conveyed their position to the Holy See via unofficial diplomatic channels that only the diocesan administrators recognised by them would be permitted to attend. Bishop E. Maželis himself declined to travel to Rome, citing poor health. To ensure the bishops' departure went as smoothly as possible, the Soviet security services carried out the necessary preparatory work. First and foremost, through their efforts, Canon E. Bakšys, who was entirely under their control, was elected as administrator of the Diocese of Kaišiadorys in place of the unreliable Canon J. Meidus. The actions of Bishop T. Matulionis, who had been exiled to Šeduva and to whom the Pope had granted the title of Archbishop *ad personam* on 9 February 1962, greatly hindered the implementation of the Soviet authorities' plans"¹⁰.

This presents a dilemma in which both options are bad. The first is not to allow Archbishop Matulionis to attend the Council. This would cause a great

⁷ A. Streikus, *The Soviet Authorities' Anti-Church Policy in Lithuania (1944-1990)*, Vilnius 2002, p. 72.

⁸ I. Vaišvilaitė, *The Second Vatican Council and Lithuania*, op. cit., p. 51.

⁹ Vincentas Sladkevičius (20 August 1920 – 28 May 2000, Kaunas), Secretly consecrated as bishop on 25 December 1957, exiled by the Soviet authorities, permitted to return to Kaišėdoris and govern the diocese in 1982. In 1988, Pope John Paul II appointed him a cardinal, and in 1989 Archbishop of Kaunas.

¹⁰ A. Streikus, *The Soviet Authorities' Anti-Church Policy in Lithuania (1944-1990)*, op. cit., p. 74.

“uproar” in the West. There would be talk of Communist oppression of the Church in the Soviet Union. The foreign press would, of course, write about this, and it would be discussed on Vatican Radio and Voice of America. Yet the Soviet authorities wanted a positive image of themselves. The other option was to send Archbishop Matulionis to the Council. But he would not be a ‘silent’ participant. Having spent three terms in Soviet prisons himself, and seeing what was happening in this oppressive state, he would be the speaking voice of conscience. The communists could not allow that either. So what was to be done? Yet he died. As the archbishop’s friend and biographer, Prelate Stanislovas Kiškis, writes in what reads like a martyrology: “Archbishop Teofilius Matulionis died in Šeduva (in his parish of exile – K. Žemaitis’s note), in his flat, on Monday, 20 August 1962, around midday”¹¹. So, just before the meeting. It seems that everything resolved itself. However, suspicions regarding the archbishop’s non-accidental death had only just begun. It was rumoured that the Soviet security services – the KGB – were also involved. Of course, during the Soviet era, this could not be proven, and after many decades, the suspicions remained, albeit unproven.

Nevertheless, the Soviet authorities also made efforts to ensure that someone would attend the Council. All the more so because they needed to exert some influence over the Council, or at least to know more about what was happening there.

The diocesan administrators were preparing for the Council: “Apart from Canon J. Stankevičius, Canon Č. Krivaitis and P. Bakšys also intended to attend the first session of the Council, although neither of them had been officially invited”¹². However, they were not free either. The Soviet authorities had their own expectations and, moreover, restricted the participants in every way: “The most important arguments: 1) Participants in the meeting will be forced to refrain from attacks against communism; 2) the myth of the persecution of the Catholic Church will be disproved; 3) the activities of progressive Catholic figures in the struggle for peace will be revitalised; 4) a positive reaction will be elicited from Italy and Latin American countries”¹³.

Thus, the communist authorities in Lithuania sought to extract at least some benefit from this event, which was highly inconvenient for them, and imposed demands on those attending the Council (even though they were uninvited and only joined the delegation later): “Česlovas Krivaitis, Vicar General of the Diocese of Vilnius, and Father Stasys Mažeika, a Marian priest and chancellor of the same diocese, as well as Povilas Bakšys, Vicar General of the Dioceses of Panevėžys and Kaišiadorys, attended as representatives of their respective dioceses, although the Vatican did not officially recognise such representation”¹⁴.

¹¹ S. Kiškis, *Archbishop Teofilius Matulionis*, Vilnius 2008, p. 152.

¹² A. Streikus, *The Soviet Authorities’ Anti-Church Policy in Lithuania (1944-1990)*, op. cit., p. 72.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ During the Council, delegates changed as the administrators of the dioceses changed. There were also individuals who did not hold such positions but intended to attend the Council.

The Diocese of Telšiai was not represented at all. The delegation in Moscow received detailed instructions. They were required to report that the deposed bishops would not be permitted to return to their posts, and to encourage the establishment of dialogue with the Kremlin. They were ordered to provide as detailed a report as possible on the proceedings of the Council via the Soviet Union's embassy in Rome. The task was not an easy one, as only Stankevičius was able to observe the proceedings directly. In Rome, the delegation members were staying at the Lithuanian College; they were given the opportunity to meet with members of the Vatican Curia¹⁵. Thus, on the one hand, the delegates represented the Catholic Church in Lithuania, whilst on the other, they were, in a sense, hostages of the Soviet authorities. Dr I. Vaišvilaitė writes: "The most significant aspect of the Lithuanian priests' participation in the Second Vatican Council, one might say, was the journey to Rome and the meetings with officials of the Roman Curia. It is true that during the first session, the delegation had some opportunity to act as intermediaries between the Kremlin and the Vatican. Canon J. Stankevičius tried to make use of this opportunity, but Moscow was not particularly inclined to make use of the priest's services. The Soviets needed Lithuanian priests only as a source of additional information and as disseminators of disinformation"¹⁶. Stankevičius did not find favour with the Soviet authorities and, as an archdiocesan administrator who was disobedient to them, was forced to leave his post.

However, Lithuania was represented by foreign delegates: "In a letter signed on 8 October 1960 by Cardinal Domenico Tardini, Secretary of State of the Vatican, Bishop Vincentas Brizgys, who lived in Chicago, USA, and was responsible for the pastoral care of Lithuanians worldwide¹⁷, who in 1941 became Auxiliary Bishop to Archbishop J. Skvireckas of Kaunas and retained that office in exile, was appointed as an adviser to the Commission for the Administration of Bishops and the Church, and participated in the group tasked with preparing the draft of 'Spiritual Guidance and Apostolate among Emigrants'¹⁸. Thanks to the efforts of Lithuanians abroad, liturgical reform was being implemented and publications dedicated to it were being produced at a rapid pace.

Thus, Lithuania was represented at the Council by Father Stankevičius in an expert capacity, whilst many others were more akin to tourists. All were constantly monitored and controlled by the KGB. Such was the regrettably complex situation of the Lithuanian delegates.

¹⁵ I. Vaišvilaitė, *The Second Vatican Council and Lithuania*, op. cit., p. 52.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ Brizgys Vincentas (10 November 1903 in Plyniai, Marijampolė District – 23 April 1992) – Doctor of Philosophy and Canon Law, Auxiliary Bishop of Kaunas from 1940, forced to flee to the West by the German military authorities in 1944. He lived in the United States of America.

¹⁸ I. Petraitienė, *Lithuanians at the Second Vatican Council*, <https://www.bernardinai.lt/2012-10-04-irena-petraitiene-lietuviai-vatikano-ii-susirinkime/> (accessed: 2.04.2026).

The Ideas of the Council in Lithuania

Dr I. Vaišvilaitė emphasises that “the situation of the Church in Lithuania, the need for new bishops, and the question of establishing a Liturgical Reform Commission were discussed with the Roman Curia. Bishop Vincentas Brizgys had already begun to establish such a commission, but the Lithuanian representatives insisted that it be established in Lithuania. Bishop V. Brizgys relented. Furthermore, Bishop V. Brizgys was asked to present a Pro memoria report at the Council on the situation of the Church in Lithuania. Unfortunately, this document, which called for the Council to condemn communism, was not read out. In Lithuania, diocesan curias and priests were informed that a commission for liturgical reform had been established, which would revise liturgical texts¹⁹. Partial agreement was reached regarding the new bishops. Moscow permitted Father Matulaitis-Labukas, who had arrived in Rome²⁰, to be consecrated as a bishop and to return to Kaunas to administer the archdiocese. This indicates a rather significant change in relations between the Soviet Union and the Vatican. Furthermore, as Prelate Professor Vincas Bartuška, who fled to the West at the end of the war and studied in Rome, testifies regarding the early post-war years: “At that time, no one in the Vatican knew about the situation in Lithuania”²¹. And the Council took place at a time when the Soviet authorities were also seeking contact, no doubt wishing to achieve their own objectives.

The liturgical reform was more complicated. Bishop Vincentas Brizgys writes in his memoirs: “At the beginning of that same year, 1964, I organised a Lithuanian Liturgical Commission to prepare liturgical texts in Lithuanian and the Book of Rites itself. I relayed this news to Lithuania via Vatican Radio and ‘Voice of America’. There, Rugienius²² immediately summoned Bishop P. Maželis to Vilnius and ordered him to appoint a Liturgical Commission to swiftly prepare the Missal in the Lithuanian language. They worked in Lithuania (...)”²³. From Vaišvilaitė’s further reflections, we see that this commission was not entirely patriotic in its attitude towards the Church, or was like many people intimidated by the Soviet authorities: “In Lithuania, Bishop J. Matulaitis-

¹⁹ I. Vaišvilaitė, *The Second Vatican Council and Lithuania*, op. cit., p. 53.

²⁰ Matulaitis-Labukas Juozas (1894-1979) – graduated from the Vilnius Seminary (1918). He served as a priest in Žaslai, Kalesninkai and Švenčionys, and studied at the universities of Münster, Würzburg and Fribourg (1921-1926). Doctor of Philosophy (1926). Chancellor of the Diocese of Kaišiadorys (1926), Vicar General (1929). From 1946 to 1955, he was imprisoned in Soviet labour camps; thereafter, he served as a priest in Raseiniai and taught at the Kaunas Seminary (1955-1965). He served as administrator – capitular vicar – of the Archdiocese of Kaunas and the Diocese of Vilkauskis. President of the College of Ordinary Bishops of Lithuania (1966-1979). Bishop (1965), he participated in the Second Vatican Council in 1965.

²¹ R. Bacevičius, *From Kazliškis to California*, Šakiai 2008, p. 58.

²² Council for Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the USSR Representative for the Lithuanian SSR.

²³ V. Brizgys, *The Paths of Life*, Vilnius 1993, p. 258.

Labukas, together with Bishop Maželis and the diocesan curias, discussed the work of the Liturgical Commission and the translation of the documents of the Second Vatican Council into Lithuanian. Thus, the delegation of the Lithuanian Church informed the Soviet authorities more about the work of the Council than the local Church”²⁴. From this observation, we can understand that the ideas of the Council were certainly not sufficiently disseminated among the Catholic people of Lithuania. After the Council concluded, ritual books were published, the most important of which were:

Roman Catholic Ritual for the Dioceses of Lithuania = *Collectio rituum ad usum dioecesium Lituaniae iuxta rituale Romanum* / [Liturgical Commission of the Dioceses of Lithuania]. – Vilnius; Kaunas: College of Ordinaries of the Dioceses of Lithuania, Vilnius, 1966: (Part One) – Sacraments and Blessings = *Ritus sacramentorum et benedictionum*. – 286 pages. – Print run 3,000 copies. – In Lithuanian and German; (Part Two) – Processions, litanies, funerals = *Ritus processionum et exsequiarum, litaniae*. – 415 pages. – Print run: 3,000 copies. – In Lithuanian and German; (Supplements) – Chants for Holy Mass and Funerals. – 127 pages. – Print run: 3,000 copies.

It was a great achievement to receive the book of all the Council documents in Lithuanian. This took place after the Council had ended in 1968²⁵.

We still had to wait quite a while for the Lithuanian Missal. Its introduction almost coincided with Lithuania’s independence as the Soviet Union collapsed.

A number of priests representing various dioceses worked on the Liturgical Commission. Perhaps the most important role was played by the Marian priest, Father Vaclovas Aliulis²⁶, who served as secretary of the Lithuanian Liturgical Commission from 1965 to 1979 and as its chairman from 1980 to 1990. Dr. Canon Algimantas Kajackas also made a significant contribution²⁷. For a long time, Bishop Juozas Preikšas was responsible for the liturgy²⁸.

²⁴ I. Vaišvilaitė, *The Second Vatican Council and Lithuania*, op. cit., p. 54.

²⁵ *Decisions of the Second Vatican Council. Constitutions, decrees, declarations*, Vilnius-Kaunas 1968. Publication of the College of Ordinaries of the Dioceses of the Lithuanian SSR.

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

²⁷ Algimantas Vincas Kajackas (21 December 1932, Kalvarija parish – 16 January 2015, Kaunas) – priest, Doctor of Theology.

²⁸ Preikšas Juozas (b. 1926 – d. 2018). Bishop (1984). After graduating from the Kaunas Interdiocesan Seminary, he served as its procurator from 1953 to 1954 and as a lecturer in dogmatic theology and philosophy from 1956 to 1969. From 1954, he was parish priest of Kaunas Garrison Church; from 1959, bursar of the curias of the Archdiocese of Kaunas and the Diocese of Vilkauskis; from 1961, chancellor of the Diocese of Vilkauskis; and from 1969, parish priest and dean of the parish of Vilkauskis. In 1984, he was nominated titular Bishop of Egnatia, consecrated and shortly afterwards appointed auxiliary to the Apostolic Administrator of the Archdiocese of Kaunas and the Diocese of Vilkauskis; in 1988, he became Apostolic Administrator. From 7 February 1989 – Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Panevėžys. Since 2002 – Bishop Emeritus.

Thus, following the Council, conditions in Lithuania appear to have changed: the Liturgical Commission is leading the way, and works on the liturgy are occasionally published, albeit in small print runs. It is important to note that contacts with the Vatican have also become more frequent²⁹.

The liturgical reform was also linked to specific tasks, such as the installation of new altars facing the congregation. All this took place slowly. However, this slow ‘movement forward’ also yielded positive results: traditions were preserved³⁰ – (such as the Easter morning Resurrection service with a procession around the church, certain traditions of popular piety³¹, and special reverence for the Eucharist) – and there was no drift towards excessive liberalism.

Conclusions

The Second Vatican Council led to at least somewhat more active relations between Catholics in Lithuania and the Apostolic See. However, bishops persecuted by the authorities were not permitted to attend the Council, and the participation of diocesan administrators was neither particularly welcome nor particularly beneficial. Nevertheless, the priests who attended the Council were able to meet with Lithuanian bishops and priests in exile, although these contacts were not of great significance to Lithuanian Catholics, as not all the delegates were trustworthy.

The resolutions of the Council were also in force in Lithuania and helped to implement the principles of the universal Church; however, due to interference from the Soviet authorities, their implementation in Lithuania proved difficult. Perhaps this was the reason why the traditions of popular piety (at least a significant part of them) were preserved in Lithuania, without a shift towards greater liberalism in the liturgy.

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²⁹ K. Žemaitis, *What is Worth Remembering*, Šunsakai 2024, p. 4 (manuscript, personal archive of Kęstutis Žemaitis).

³⁰ Similar issues had already been discussed at the Synod of Piotrków (Synod w Piotrkowie) as early as 1577, and it was decided that the devotional traditions of individual nations did not contradict Church teaching.

³¹ A. Motuzas, *Practices of Catholic Popular Piety in Lithuania*, Kaunas 2004.

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