



MISSIONARIES IN ACTION

DOMINICAN MISSION FOUNDATION

Fr. Jordan Bradshaw, O.P., Director Lesley Warnshuis, Office Manager Nancy Keating, Finance Manager

2506 Pine Street P.O. Box 15367 San Francisco, CA 94115-0367 415-931-2183 www.dominicanmission.org

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We Are One in the Spirit

Dear Mission Friends:

Fr. David O'Rourke, O.P., our one-time missionary in Vilnius, Lithuania in the early 2000s, has written an article based on his time there. He wrote several during his post and shortly thereafter, but as the decades come and go, his reflections on the significance of that assignment have become more and more clear. Here is his most recent article, spattered with passages from past articles (in italics), for purposes of further explanation or emphasis. As Fr. Martin de Porres Walsh concluded in a November 2015 newsletter on Lithuania, *"It is the responsibility of Catholics and believers in democracy everywhere to stay abreast of the news and educate others, to practice our faith openly and proudly, and to redouble our prayer efforts. We must be ever-vigilant to prevent recurrence of the atrocities perpetrated here."*

November is the month to pray for the souls of those who have gone before us. If you have sent in the names of your departed loved ones, the list is on the altar at St. Dominic's and they are being remembered at Mass all month.

In peace,
Lesley Warnshuis



Fr. David O'Rourke, O.P.

Hitler and Soviet leader Josef Stalin were bitter enemies, seemingly always on the verge of war. But on an August day in 1939, Hitler's foreign minister flew from Berlin to Moscow to meet with Stalin, and in just a few hours they agreed to a century-long peace treaty, which included dividing Eastern Europe between them: Hitler got Poland and Stalin got the Baltic Republics—Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. A week later, on September 1, 1939, Hitler invaded Poland, taking what was now "his" according to his treaty with Stalin, and setting off World War II.

Stalin's occupation of the Baltics was more covert and calculated. The Soviets quietly organized their secret police, what we know as the KGB; they prepared prisons for thousands; they made lists and located all those who had to be arrested, including the country's democratic leaders and Catholic clergy and lay leaders; and they stealthily took over the newspapers and radio stations. Then over a few nights, those on their lists were made to quietly disappear.



The deportations and genocide soon began with "decapitation," a policy that called for the arrest and deportation or execution of the nations' political, social and cultural elite. It was those in leadership whom Stalin was primarily determined to eliminate, "anybody who was a custodian of the national sense and national identity—teachers, scientists, artists, philatelists," said Father O'Rourke.

Ordinary citizens were also targeted. The worst of it was a massive sweep orchestrated on June 13, 1941, in which tens of thousands of Baltic civilians and their families were arrested. Herded to the railway stations, the men, women and children were separated and packed into cattle cars (see above) destined for any of the more than 400 forced-labor camps, collective farms, prisons, and inhabitable places of exile in Siberia. Many would die there of abuse and starvation; most would never return.



Within a year of the Soviet occupation, nearly 125,000 Baltic men, women and children had been killed, conscripted into the Soviet military, or sent to the labor camps. By war's end, an estimated 780,000 Lithuanians — one third of their population—were inexplicably gone. With the deals we and our war-weary British and French allies made with Stalin, his control of Eastern Europe became total, which lasted until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

In 1999, our order's Master General in Rome put out a request for volunteers to go to Lithuania to help rebuild the battered Dominican church there, and in essence Catholic life, after fifty years of Soviet terror in which Catholicism had been systematically destroyed. Having been long interested in—and written a few books on—the relationships among the Church, family, society, and nationalism, I raised my hand—and started studying Lithuanian!

When I began my post in 2000, the parish community consisted of one old but dynamic priest, Fr. Jonas Gregaitis, O.P., the only Dominican priest who stayed in Lithuania and miraculously survived the Soviet terror; six young guys dedicating themselves to restoring the Church and the Order in their country;



Temperatures in the long Siberian winter would often fall to 30 and 40 below zero, so the life expectancy among the armies of slave laborers was short. Millions died of exposure and hunger. It was a common saying among the slave laborers that for each railroad tie that was laid, one slave laborer died.

and one other American Dominican who had been teaching at Harvard but decided to go to Lithuania just to check out his grandparents' Lithuanian roots and ended up staying—the smart youngsters got one look at him and put him to work as the new superior.

When I first arrived, the whole country was pretty much a wreck. Fifty years of mean-spirited exploitation and abuse. As I walked all over what had once been a beautiful university city, I got the impression that the Soviets had a dire shortage of paint and soap. Our church, built in 1640, a beautiful baroque national monument and the tallest church in the country, had been badly beaten up. Both it and the priory had been used as a basketball court and a warehouse. The small community of friars was still in the process of making it livable with safe water, some heat, and a phone.

Needless to say, starting out for the first year or so, my mind-set and ideas were still in California. That soon changed. You meet people and you talk with them. You learn that every family lost someone. Every family. Memories of their families—men and women, kids, being rounded up and marched toward the railroad yards; sorted out and loaded up into cattle cars; locked in for a day or so; and then shipped eastward 1,000 miles into Russia where their individual fate was handed out.

That much everyone knew. And there were always more cattle cars. **And the arrests were intentionally public and cruel. Lenin had made state-sponsored terror one of the pillars of his government and wanted everyone to know it.**

The repressive effects of the Soviet-imposed totalitarian way of life still lived in every family memory, in every school room, even in the way you walked on the street. How do you talk about faith to a people who have learned to distrust everything? How do you talk about your own beliefs with people who have had to learn to hide their true beliefs and never let their faces show what they might be thinking? What do you mean by community with people who have learned to survive by never talking with anyone on the street, or greeting anyone, or even making eye contact? Because over and over, from years of broken promises of support and repeated betrayals, the West could not be trusted any more than the Soviets.

Within a short time, however, Fr. O'Rourke was not only saying Mass in Lithuanian, he was teaching family therapy at the University of Vilnius and developing programs for sacramental preparation and family support in the Family Center of the Archdiocese of Vilnius.



The KGB placed the bodies of executed partisans out in public. They would watch for the reactions of shock and grief in order to discover family members, who would then be arrested themselves, or sent to Siberia, or their farmsteads burned to the ground.

*It was while attempting to recruit and train volunteers to staff these programs that his overarching task became clear: **It was his mission to help rebuild the human spirit of the Catholics there.** Many of the ruins left by the Soviets were human ruins. Broken spirits and wounded souls. For 50 years, the Lithuanians had to quash not only their religious practices but also any sense of parish or community. **I am writing this article because I want to tell you how my time there became a life-changing gift for me. And I want to thank you for that. Your kind support made the work possible which brought about my transformation.** No longer was I thinking like a Californian, or even an American, but rather like a Lithuanian, and even after being back in the States for several years, much of me is still in Lithuania. I will try to describe that change with a few images that I recall as, even then, presenting me with realities my easy American world couldn't handle:*

A young Dominican I got to know, not yet thirty, still deciding what he wanted to do, reflective if not by temperament, then by fate. I went into our rec room one day and he was sitting there, bent over, obviously contemplating something. He looked up. I asked, "What's up?" He began softly, thoughtfully, no introduction. My grandparents were farmers, lived out toward the sea, he said.

Police came in one day, talked to them for a bit, told them to leave. They did. Then the police walked over and set fire to the barn. Not satisfied, they walked over and burned down their house. He was again silent, now distressed. Then added very softly that they were farmers. They never did anything wrong. This unassuming young man, like so many others, could not make sense of such cruelty. The fact that I remember it all so clearly is largely because somehow I was moving into his world, so different from mine, which was a very gentle and personal gift. One that ran deep.

Another lasting, deeply embedded image is that of the elderly women who would arrive two hours early for Mass every morning, entering and leaving our church in complete silence except for their bulky winter boots, never looking to the right or left, never saying a word to anyone. The fear of the secret police still deep within. Once inside the church, before Mass, they chanted the Rosary in common. Some would also walk up to a long and much-venerated painting of the Virgin for their own prayers. At Communion they would shuffle up to the altar, and then right before reaching me, they would fall forward to their knees, stretching out their fingers on the floor for safety; then they would push themselves to straighten up, raise their now-folded hands under their upturned faces, and as I held out the Host,

they would respond with their *Amen* to my *Kristaus Kunus*. Looking at their worn, calloused fingers and tired faces as I distributed Communion, I knew how fortunate I was to witness these holy women. Tears running down my face, I knew that I was moving from my world into theirs, just as I had with my young Dominican friend.

In Vilnius and its world, November 2, All Souls, is an important holiday. For days ahead of time, before Mass, many of these older ladies would walk up the altar into the sacristy. Back then, still rebuilding. Lit by a single bulb hanging from the high ceiling. We did not yet have any chairs there so they would stand. And one by one they would come up, holding a worn, lumpy, paper bag before me. I soon realized that they had brought candles for me to bless. Most had been made at home, some from their own bees. The candles were for graves in the local cemetery. And after the blessing they would go back into the church for Mass, which I would celebrate in my broken Lithuanian.

The blessing was clearly very important to them, a truly sacred ritual which served as an even more profound and transformative image when I realized one day as I was blessing their candles that they were not going to be placed on the graves of relatives—they couldn't be, because so many survivors had no idea at all where the bodies of their departed loved ones ended up. The last they saw them, perhaps just a frightened glimpse, was when they were being arrested by KGB police. Or marched away by Russian soldiers to the railroad yard. Or forced by rough troops with rifles to climb up into one of the unending line of cattle cars, already headed for transport to Siberia. And then, with the slamming of doors and rattling of iron wheels, they were gone. Simply gone.

Thousands and thousands of them. It was not hidden. Stalin wanted his terror to be seen.

The women placed their candles anywhere they chose within the cemetery, their only public and personal connection within what was still sacred and unprofaned in their world. All they had. Once a year. On All Souls. *They light them, of course, for the dead buried in the cemetery. But they light them also as their point of contact with those who disappeared. They are able to take the blessed candles, made with their own hands with beeswax from their own land, and light them to burn throughout two nights. They light them to dispel the darkness under which they lived for fifty years. They light them to renew the light of human memories. They light them with the hope that, wherever they may lie, the souls of their dead may be in the hands of God. Certainly their survival and that of their faith and goodness were religiously enriching for me. And I was given the extraordinary gift of momentarily entering their world as a bridge between the Church and their unspeakable loss.*

David K. O'Rourke, O.P.

Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit,
binding yourselves together
with peace.
Ephesians 4:3

In honor of St. Martin's feast day on November 3rd, Mass will be offered at St. Dominic's Church in San Francisco on November 1, 2, and 3, invoking his intercession for your intentions. We invite you to join us in prayer each day by reciting the Triduum on the right.

Today we give our thanks ... for the ideals of honor and faith we inherit from our forefathers—for the decency of purpose, steadfastness of resolve and strength of will, for the courage and the humility, which they possessed and which we must seek every day to emulate. As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words but to live by them.

Let us therefore proclaim our gratitude to Providence for manifold blessings—let us be humbly thankful for inherited ideals—and let us resolve to share those blessings and those ideals with our fellow human beings throughout the world.

On Thanksgiving Day let us gather in sanctuaries dedicated to worship and in homes blessed by family affection to express our gratitude for the glorious gifts of God; and let us earnestly and humbly pray that He will continue to guide and sustain us in the great unfinished tasks of achieving peace, justice, and understanding among all men and nations and of ending misery and suffering wherever they exist.

~President John F. Kennedy
Nov. 4, 1963

St. Martin de Porres Triduum November 1, 2, and 3

First Day: *St. Martin, you always had sympathy for the poor and those who were suffering. I need your help and now ask for it with great confidence in your goodness and power. Please remember me, as you adore God. Amen.*

(Your petitions, followed by Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory Be and Closing Prayer.)

Closing Prayer: *Dear St. Martin, I turn to you in my sorrow and anxiety to seek your friendly protection. Please intercede for me with our merciful Father in heaven so that I may be truly sorry for all my sins and be freed from the evils that shackle me. Ask that I might have something of your spirit of love and self-sacrifice, and so be at all times reconciled to God's holy will. Oh heavenly Father, in the name of your Son and of His blessed Mother, and by the merits of your faithful servant Martin, help me in my trouble and do not forsake me. Amen.*

Second Day: *St. Martin, we praise God for the manifestation of His love. The favors you received from God encourage us now to seek your intercession and help. We ask you most humbly to befriend and assist us from your place in heaven; but most of all, we beg you to commend us to our beloved Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

(Your petitions, followed by Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory Be and Closing Prayer.)

Third Day: *Brother Martin, when you were here on earth, you spent your life loving God and your neighbor. This we know from the testimony of your own Dominican brethren. Now that you live in the presence of God in paradise, intercede for those who stand so much in need of the healing help of God and beg the Divine Physician to give us health of the soul and body. Amen.*

(Your petitions, followed by Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory Be and Closing Prayer.)