

Archbishop TEOFILIUS MATULIONIS (1873 -1962)



Early biographical sketch. Archbishop Teofilus Matulionis was born in 1873 in the village of Kadariškiai, Lithuania. He was graduated from high school in Daugpilis, Latvia. Later he studied theology in St. Petersburg (Leningrad), where he was also ordained.

He served as curate in a few parishes in Latvia. His first pastoral post was in Latgalia, Latvia, in the parish of Bykava. In 1910 he was transferred to the Immaculate Heart of Jesus parish in St. Petersburg. (At that time Russia had only one Catholic diocese, the archdiocese of Mohi-levo). As pastor of his parish he ministered to the spiritual needs of Lithuanian, White Russian, and Polish parishioners. A new parish church was built through his efforts and through the contributions of his parishioners. Archbishop T. Matulionis was honored for this achievement -he was raised to the level of a monsignor. In 1929 he was secretly consecrated by the administrator of the Mohilevo archdiocese, Bishop A. Malecki, and became auxiliary bishop.

The path of martyrdom. The Bolshevik revolution broke out while Bishop T. Matulionis was pastor at St. Petersburg: his further pastoral work was hindered by constant persecutions.

In 1923 the Communist Government enacted a law ordering the confiscation of all Church property. This act had to be signed by the parish pastors. Bishop T. Matulionis refused to sign the act and served a two-year prison term because of this refusal.

After his consecration as auxiliary bishop, he was arrested for the second time and sentenced to 10 years of hard labor in the Arctic. Hard work and the cold, damp climate greatly impaired his health. Because of his poor health, after two years the bishop was transferred to a prison in St. Petersburg and was placed in solitary confinement.

Fortunately, the Lithuanian Government signed an agreement with Soviet Russia for the release of 10 Russian prisoners in exchange for 10 Lithuanian prisoners; one of the ten was Bishop T. Matulionis. Back in Lithuania, in 1943 he became bishop of the Kaišiadoriai diocese.

During the Bolshevik occupation of Lithuania, because of a pastoral letter, Bishop T. Matulionis was arrested for the third time and was sentenced to a 10-year prison term (1945-1956). After serving his term, he returned to Birštonas, Lithuania.

In 1957 he consecrated V. Sladkevičius as bishop without the consent of the Communist Government. For this, Bishop T. Matulionis was exiled to Šeduva, Lithuania, where he lived in isolation till his death in 1962. Before he died, he was elevated to the rank of honorary Archbishop by Pope John XXIII.

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A man of prayer and diligence. All his life Archbishop T. Matulionis remained loyal to his duties. He was careful and deliberate in assuming a task, but, having done so, he faithfully and energetically accomplished all that he had undertaken.

As a student in the seminary he had been uncertain about his ability to become a priest. He left the seminary to teach for a few years; then he returned to complete his studies and to be ordained, always being careful to execute his duties and responsibilities as a priest to the utmost of his ability. Although he loved his native tongue, he nevertheless tried to master the languages

of his parishioners (White Russian, Russian, Polish, and Latvian) in order to guide his parishioners and to be a father to all without any national discrimination.

Prayer was the chief support in Archbishop T. Matulionis' life. During the second Bolshevik attack on Lithuania he had a chance to escape, but is said to have stated: "I will stay with my own people. I am not afraid of being persecuted. When I pray, I have no fear". When in prison in the Arctic, he did the work of a slave - - pulling logs from icy waters and through snow; he never complained and always tried to do the tasks assigned to him. He prayed constantly, while at work and while at rest. Even when he was extremely exhausted from the day's work, he never failed to awake in the middle of the night and secretly celebrate the Mass.

Peace in suffering strengthened his character. A stoic calm and determination to bear all difficulties was reflected in his countenance.

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An example of resistance. As a man of resistance, Archbishop T. Matulionis can be an example to all. As a priest, he resisted evil; no fault can be found and nothing can be said against him as a man. He loved all with a fatherly love, ministering to the needs of everyone. Personal comfort and welfare gave way to pastoral zeal. He resisted physical pleasures and worldliness within the priesthood; the spiritual was always placed before the material.

When the Russian Government tried to force Archbishop T. Matulionis to sign over Church property, out of principle he refused to contribute to the unlawful deed. This, of course, did not stop the communists. Someone else in his position might have said, "What is the difference, the end result is the same; I might as well sign and void the consequences." But not Archbishop T. Matulionis; he acted in accordance to his principles, and was not influenced by a desire to improve his position. The risk he took in consecrating a bishop was another threat to his person, but he heeded the needs and orders of the Church.

While a prisoner in the Arctic, he possessed no other rights except those of a slave: to work and to die. Despite the danger, he secretly consecrated bread— having nothing else to replace Host—and distributed Holy Communion in the guise of bread during the day. This act of his was not only a risk, but also the performance of his priestly duties and a silent protest against those who take away man's right to religion.

In this post as bishop at Kaišiadoriai, Lithuania, he presented the Germans (the occupants of Lithuania at that time) with a petition, protesting against the seizure of his people in the churches and their forced deportation to labor camps in Germany.

When Archbishop T. Matulionis consecrated Bishop V. Sladkevičius, the communists ridiculed him, saying: "Are you not ashamed to consecrate a bishop in the rectory kitchen?" He replied: "It is you, not I, who should be ashamed that I am forced to perform this holy act in the rectory instead of a church."

This brave and persevering attitude of Archbishop T. Matulionis strengthened the faith of the people and served as an example to other priests. In a way, even the Communist Government respected and feared his influence on the people.

They did not dare murder Archbishop T. Matulionis but kept him away from his diocese and let him die a natural death. They know that the blood of martyr would only give rise to new heroes.

When Archbishop T. Matulionis died in 1962, he was to be buried in the Kaišiadoriai Cathedral next to Bishop J. Kukta but the Communist Government did not allow this until they were assured that no massive demonstrations would take place. This demonstrated that even after the archbishop's death the Communist Government is afraid of the spirit of resistance that he had created. In 1934, during the private audience that Archbishop T. Matulionis was granted by Pope Pius XI, the Pope had rightly commented: "It is an honor to the Lithuanian nation to have such a hero."

Rev. P. CELIEŠIUS