

Lithuanian Catholic Religious Aid: Serving the Cause for 60 Years

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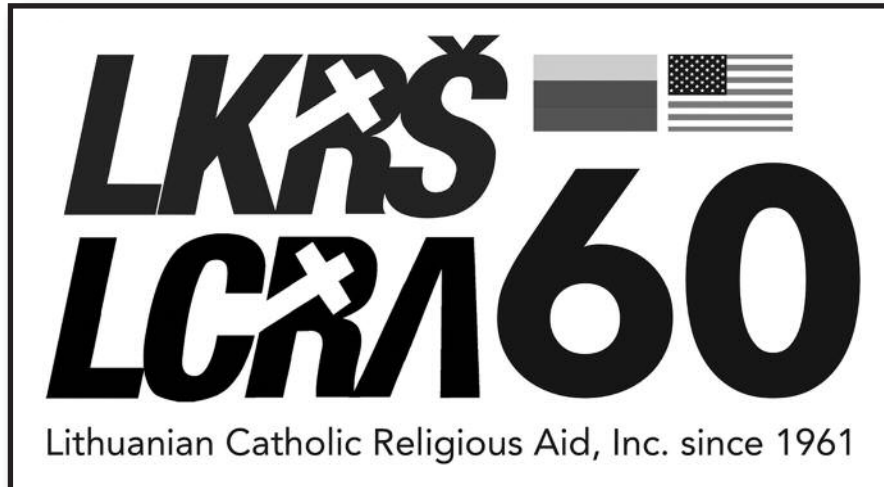
New York based Lithuanian Catholic Religious Aid (LCRA) is celebrating its 60th Anniversary this year. Founded in 1961 LCRA is a non-profit corporation which supports Catholic religious, charitable and educational projects in Lithuania and internationally where Lithuanian communities are located.

Struggle: The Early Years

Upon its formation LCRA was primarily focused on supporting the embattled Church and its faithful in Soviet-occupied Lithuania. This included buttressing the Church's leadership in Lithuania and in exile in Siberia. LCRA actively pursued these goals and provided material and moral aid to those in need. Documentation of these early efforts is sparse in that information of these aid recipients who worked in the underground was guarded. They were targets of the Soviet regime thus it was vital to keep their identities secret. For example, in a 1983 LCRA bulletin, there is simply a brief statement noting that LCRA supports persecuted and imprisoned religious, clergy and laity, and their families. The support was varied: religious items for the clergy, medicine for those who were ill, food products for the poor, and clothing for the exiled and imprisoned.

Aiding Thousands

During the past 60 years, the Catholic Church in Lithuania was in great need of rebuilding—churches were damaged or just destroyed. There was a shortage of liturgical vestments and religious items. By 1977 more than a 1,500 parishes had received aid from LCRA. Tourists and visitors to Lithuania secretly smuggled in religious books and materials. LCRA also provided assistance to clergy and the scattered religious nuns working in the underground. Care packages to these individuals were often smuggled in by visitors to Lithuania who would deliver them personally. Thus by 1977, over 1,340 individuals received aid at least once, if not more often. LCRA paid particular consideration to the elderly and unsupported clergy. Religious sisters who were suppressed by the Soviet government needed assistance. During



The Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania

The Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania was the longest continuously published underground publication in the Soviet empire. This clandestine publication forged on for 17 years (1972 – 1989). It was edited and written by Lithuanian priests and nuns, assisted by lay dissidents. The initiator of *The Chronicle* was Fr. Sigitas Tamkevičius, SJ. He was arrested by the Soviets and sentenced to the Gulag. After his release, he was named Archbishop of Kaunas. (Following the October 2019 papal visit to Lithuania, Pope Francis elevated Archbishop Tamkevičius to the College of Cardinals.) *The Chronicle* documented the ongoing

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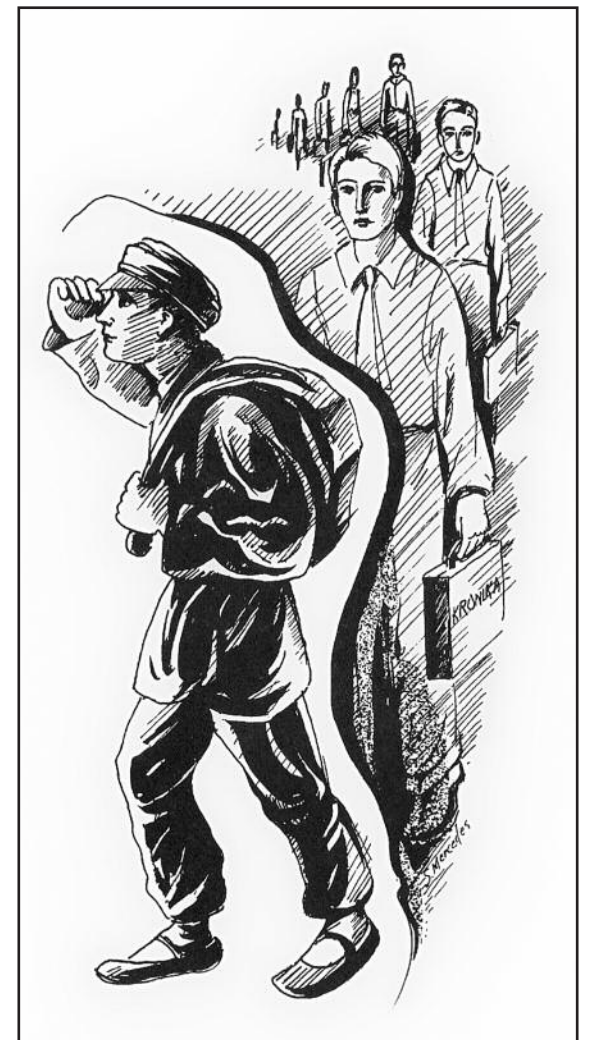
the first 16 years of LCRA's outreach, 1,481 sisters received aid, including medicine, reading glasses, hearing aids and other medical devices.

The Printed Word

LCRA was instrumental in printing religious books, catechisms, prayerbooks, and other religious publications for the faithful in Lithuania. There was a great shortage of spiritual literature. Priests especially requested religious works, because the publishing of such materials was forbidden. LCRA made great efforts to assist given the restrictions and limits set by the Soviets. Through the efforts of LCRA numerous books and other publications were clandestinely sent to Lithuania and Poland. By 1977 LCRA had published and secretly distributed 48,404 religious books and other religious publications.

Lithuanian Information Center

The formation of the Lithuanian Information Center (LIC) which published and distributed copies of Lithuanian underground publications was an important step for LCRA. When a copy of an underground publication would reach New York, LCRA through the LIC would quickly translate, duplicate and send it out to the media and other interested parties. In addition, photos were collected and indexed documenting the work of the underground. The original copy was always archived at the LCRA headquarters. The underground couriers were members of the Lithuanian underground and various supporters, including academicians, and foreign diplomats as well as correspondents.



An illustration by Sister M. Mercedes SSC from *The Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania*.

daily persecution of the laity and religious. It named names and places providing details about the particular human rights violations. *The Chronicle* was secretly smuggled out of Lithuania and received extensive coverage in the world press. It effectively unmasked the myths being promoted by the Soviet propaganda falsely claiming religious freedom and human rights under Soviet rule. In occupied Lithuania *The Chronicle* gave hope to believers, and strength to the Church leadership. It took to task those who collaborated with the Soviets. Despite the efforts of the Soviet Secret Police, the KGB, to uncover and silence *The Chronicle*, this underground periodical was never shut down and was regularly issued until 1990 when Lithuania regained its independence. The final issue was dated March 19th 1989. Without a doubt *The Chronicle* was one of the most important underground news sources, it broke through the Iron Curtain and reached the free world. The leadership of LCRA took on the work of translating and publicizing *The Chronicle* and reached out to Lithuanian American parishes for help funding this project. LCRA helped inform and mobilize Lithuanian Americans to assist those suffering in Lithuania.



Members of the Lithuanian Information Center with LCRA Board 1st row, from left: Gintė Damušis, President Bishop Paulius Baltakis, OFM, Rūta Virkutytė, Marijona Skabeikiėnė. 2nd row: R. Adams, Rev. Kazimieras Pugevičius, Viktoras Nakas, A. Adams and Rasa Razgaitienė. LCRA archive photos



Senator Charles Percy (left) and LRCA Director Rev. Kazimieras Pugevičius participated in a press conference dealing with the state of the Catholic Church in Lithuania in 1983.

Lithuanian Information Center

Lithuanian Information Center (LIC) was central to this work. In 1976 under the leadership of Rev. Kazimieras Pugevičius the LIC was created with Gintė Damušis as Director. The primary mission of the LIC was to bring wider attention to the information coming from the underground regarding the situation of the Church and the faithful in Lithuania. The need to disseminate accurate information in the West was critical. The LIC financed by LCRA became a reliable source of current and accurate information about attacks on religious freedom in Soviet-occupied Lithuania. The publications of LIC were quoted by *The London Times*, *Corriere della Sera*, ABC TV, BBC Radio, *National Review*, as well as news sources in the US, Germany, Australia, England, Holland, Switzerland, France and other countries. LIC publications were referenced in prestigious international papers such as *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *The New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*. In addition, LIC also reached out to smaller publications, including numerous Catholic ones.

The efforts of LIC to publicize *The Chronicle* and inform the world about Soviet violations had a positive impact on the suffering Catholic faithful in Lithuania. Knowing that the world was being informed about the violations of their rights, their suffering, and repression, provided them with much needed hope. This gave them courage to pursue their struggle. During the 17 years of the publication of *The Chronicle* there was a gradual growth in non-violent resistance and a sprouting of the freedom which ultimately led to the reestablishment of Lithuanian Independence in March 1990.

The Bible in Lithuanian

LCRA generously funded the publication of various religious books. Perhaps the most important was the funding of a new translation of the Old and New Testaments in Lithuanian. After years of Soviet anti-religious activity, which caused spiritual and physical suffering, Lithuania received a great gift, a one-volume Bible translated from the original languages, Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek.

The Old Testament translation from Hebrew and Aramaic was prepared by the professor Rev. Antanas Rubšys. He taught Scripture at Man-

hattan College in New York for over 25 years. The New Testament was translated from Greek by Rev. Česlovas Kavaliauskas. He was a talented poet, theologian and philosopher. Despite his poor health due to imprisonment in Soviet prison camps, Rev. Kavaliauskas continued to spread the Word of God in Lithuania until his dying day. The Conference of Catholic Bishops in Lithuania decided to publish these translations as one volume. In 1998, 20,000 copies of the Old and New Testaments were printed and LCRA supported this publication with a grant of \$217,000.

Focus on the Next Generation

LCRA continues to foster Christian values among the youth of Lithuania. The character of the upcoming generation will determine the moral future of the country. LCRA supports diocesan and parish youth centers and youth programs, Catholic schools, preschools and kindergartens, youth activities, camps, cultural and social programs, and Catholic publications geared to youth. A young person's spiritual development and character is formed mainly in the family, thus LCRA supports family centers, centers of family spiritual formation, as well as programs supporting families facing violence, unemployment, conflict, or addiction, and orphans as well as large families. Children at these centers are fed, tutored, and given a safe space to spend quality time learning Christian virtues. Such centers are especially needed in the villages and small towns of Lithuania.



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Multi-Faceted Support: Here and There

Support is also given to other worthy causes: the elderly, hospices, Caritas, and the Internet news site *Bernardinai.lt*. LCRA also supports organizations and institutions outside of Lithuania such as summer camps, the Lithuanian American press, the Pontifical College of St. Casimir in Rome, to name a few. During the pandemic LCRA not only assisted organizations helping the poor, but also those who were in need of assistance with sanitizing measures. Aid is also provided to smaller parishes impacted by the closing of churches during the pandemic.

Over the years, LCRA's focus shifted with the changing challenges of the people of Lithuania face. During the Soviet occupation LCRA supported religious and human rights. Having regained its independence there is now an urgent need for Lithuania to heal and grow spiritually. LCRA continues to support this Christian worldview and seeks creative initiatives to encourage society to seek the common

good, truth, and Christian virtue. LCRA has strived to support the healing of the national soul of Lithuania through the generosity of its donors over the last 60 years.

How does LCRA reach those who are most in need? LCRA has developed an effective application process. Organizations, parishes, and dioceses seeking support are required to submit grant requests online along validated by the local bishop, provincial or religious community leader. LCRA's Board of Trustees meets in the spring and fall to review the grant requests. Each grant is individually reviewed.

Though 60 years have passed, and the leadership, members of the Board of Directors, as well as the donors have changed over time, however, the mission remains important to Lithuanians. We thank all our donors, and promoters. Please follow us on our website: www.lcraid.org.

Jūratė Žukauskienė is LCRA Executive Director. This article is based on „Lietuvių Katalikų Religinės Šalpos Veiklos Fragmentai“ by Monika Paulavičiūtė-Kungienė.



The LRCA sent out a 20-ton shipment of books to the University of Vilnius, the Telšiai seminary, the Lithuanian Parliament and the Caritas organization in 1990.