



Vilnius and Kaunas Jesuit Schools in Lithuania, founded in 1570 and 1659, underwent many changes and were reborn twice in 20th century. The schools are rated annually among the ten best secondary schools in Lithuania. Their renewal from 1924 and 1989 is closely meshed with the Jesuit Chicago-Lithuania partnership.



The Lithuanian Province sent Fr. Jonas Bružikas (1887–1973) to the U.S. in 1931 to give parish missions and to raise funds for the Kaunas Jesuit School, Jesuits in studies, and other urgent needs. His main stop was Chicago, where the provincial helped him obtain a visa to live and work in the U.S.



St. Casimir's church in Vilnius was given back to the Jesuits in 1989. Much work needed to be done to restore some of its features, which are based on the Jesuit Church of the Gesu in Rome. Fr. Edward Schmidt, SJ, of the Chicago province and Fr. Antanas Saulaitis, SJ, discuss the task of restoration and adaptation to today's needs.

The Lithuanian Jesuits

SERVING CHICAGO'S IMMIGRANT POPULATION

By Antanas Saulaitis, SJ

IN 2008, the Jesuits celebrate 400 years of the Lithuanian Province. The history of this province began early in the life of the Society of Jesus and includes a remarkable story of how, in the past 77 years, Chicago has played a crucial role in continuing the mission and service by the Lithuanian Jesuits, even in the face of overwhelming odds.

In the 1930s, Jesuit Fr. Jonas Bružikas from the Lithuanian Province was sent to the United States to serve Lithuanian immigrants. He made Chicago his home base and traveled all over the eastern United States to minister to his constituents, offering an incredible 240 week-long parish missions in six years. He also sent back funds raised to

support Kaunas Jesuit School (founded in 1659) and the training of Lithuanian Jesuits in formation.

In 1937 Fr. Jonas Kidykas replaced Fr. Bružikas and continued his service from his base at St. Ignatius College Prep. When World War II cut Lithuania off from the free world, Fr. Kidykas continued to send donations received from Lithuanian Americans to support the scholastics abroad. With the help of Fr. Joseph Egan, SJ, the Chicago Provincial at the time, Fr. Kidykas bought a house in Chicago and formed a community of Lithuanian Jesuits, ranging from those who'd been ordained and serving in Western Europe, to younger men in formation who completed their studies in the States.

In 1948, the Soviet Union, which occupied Lithuania after World War II, closed all religious communities in Lithuania, forcing the Jesuits there to go underground. The Society of Jesus responded by naming Fr. Jonas Kidykas, superior of the Lithuanian Jesuits in Chicago, as the acting provincial of the Lithuanian Province. Every six years, the Society of Jesus continued naming acting provincials based in Chicago until 1989, when Soviet occupation of Lithuania ended. Amazingly, the underground Lithuanian Jesuits continued their apostolic ministry in Lithuania as Fr. Jonas Danyla served for 41 years (1948–1989) as provincial, vocation director, and formation director.

As they have throughout their 450-year history, Jesuits took a lead in creating a new Lithuania. They reopened two Jesuit high schools—one in Vilnius, the other in Kaunas—despite the deplorable condition of the existing facilities. They also reclaimed four Jesuit churches, which barely resembled houses of worship after 50 years of physical abuse. One church had been converted into a Soviet museum of atheism; another had been used as a shooting range. Still, recognizing the tremendous spiritual hunger of the people, Jesuits quickly restored these facilities to working order and re-opened them. Students and worshippers filled the churches; it was clear that the demand for

moral nourishment was great, and that once again Jesuits were ready and willing to respond to the call.

In the past 77 years, the Jesuits of the Lithuanian and Chicago Provinces have shared a special relationship and, together, have made a great difference for Lithuanian natives and immigrants. Through the good graces of Frs. Leo Klein, Bradley Schaeffer, Edward Schmidt, and Daniel Flaherty, the Chicago Province has been an active partner in fostering Jesuit life and service in Lithuania through donations, scholarships, resources, visits, and retreats. Moreover, Loyola University and Xavier University have taken in Jesuits from Lithuania for English language and other studies, while St. Ignatius College Prep hosts an exchange student from Lithuania each year.

The work of the Lithuanian Jesuits in Chicago has expanded to include a Lithuanian Jesuit Youth Center, chapel, and Jesuit residence built in 1956–1957 on the southwest side of Chicago. In 1990 the Bl. Jurgis Matulaitis Lithuanian Catholic Mission was established in Lemont, a suburb of Chicago. Since 1974 Jesuits have been located at Our Lady of Perpetual Help parish in Cleveland. From these three locations the Jesuits assist in parishes, serve as chaplains of various societies, and in summer programs for Lithuanian youth. ■

For over 400 years of dangerous challenges and amazing resilience, the Jesuits in Lithuania have served God's people. Today's Jesuits in Lithuania minister to people who have endured years of foreign occupation and religious persecution. Since the end of the Soviet reign, Jesuits have been forming Lithuania's youth with an emphasis on education, faith, and rebuilding a morally just society. For 77 years, the Jesuits in Chicago have been blessed to share a special bond with our Lithuanian Jesuit brothers and continue to have our prayerful support for their mission.

—Fr. Edward Schmidt, SJ,
Provincial of the Chicago Province



Today's Baltic Jesuit Board, based in Lemont, Illinois, continues the tradition of connecting Lithuanian Americans to help rebuild Jesuit ministries in Lithuania and Latvia. Standing left to right, Charles Vygantas, Auste Vygantas, Lukas Laniauskas, SJ; seated, Antanas Saulaitis, SJ, Alex Saulis and Vytas Saulis.



The Lithuanian Jesuit residence and chapel in Chicago, located at 2345 W. 56th Street, are named for Our Lady of the Way.

For more information, please visit the Lithuanian Jesuits at:



www.balticjesuits.org