

Features

# Lithuanian Catholics keep the faith alive in the free world

By Emily Morrison

When Rochester's Lithuanian community celebrates the 600th anniversary of the Baltic nation's conversion to Christianity, the Mass at Sacred Hearts Cathedral will echo similar celebrations taking place this year throughout the world.

For the Most Reverend Paul Baltakis, OFM, bishop for all Lithuanians living outside their homeland, Rochester's solemnities on behalf of the last European country to accept Christianity will be a reverberation of numerous other Masses he's concelebrated this year in locales as far apart as Binghamton, N.Y., and Australia.

For Bishop Matthew H. Clark, who will celebrate the October 25 Mass at 12:30 p.m., the Lithuanian jubilee will be a special moment of solidarity and fellowship with a singular branch of the Catholic Church in the Rochester diocese, of which Lithuanian Catholics have been an active part since 1905, when St. George's — Rochester's only Lithuanian parish — was founded.

For Grazina Kavaliunas, the joyful noise will resound on a more literal — and personal — level. A member of the choir at St. George's parish, Kavaliunas joined hundreds of other singers in St. Peter's Basilica last June 28, as part of a mixed choir of Lithuanian expatriates from all over the world, gathered in Rome to witness Pope John Paul II's beatification of Lithuanian Archbishop Jurgis Matulaitis. The 10 representatives of St. George's choir joined hundreds of others whose voices swelled proudly with the strains of traditional Lithuanian hymns, sung to protest Soviet oppression in their occupied homeland.

For the family of Laima Lelis, the echo will undoubtedly be more difficult to listen to. A vital member of Rochester's Lithuanian parish for many years, Lelis recently died unexpectedly, since traveling to Rome with the choir last June, according to her friend, Grazina Kavaliunas, who cherishes one especially poignant memory of her Roman holiday.

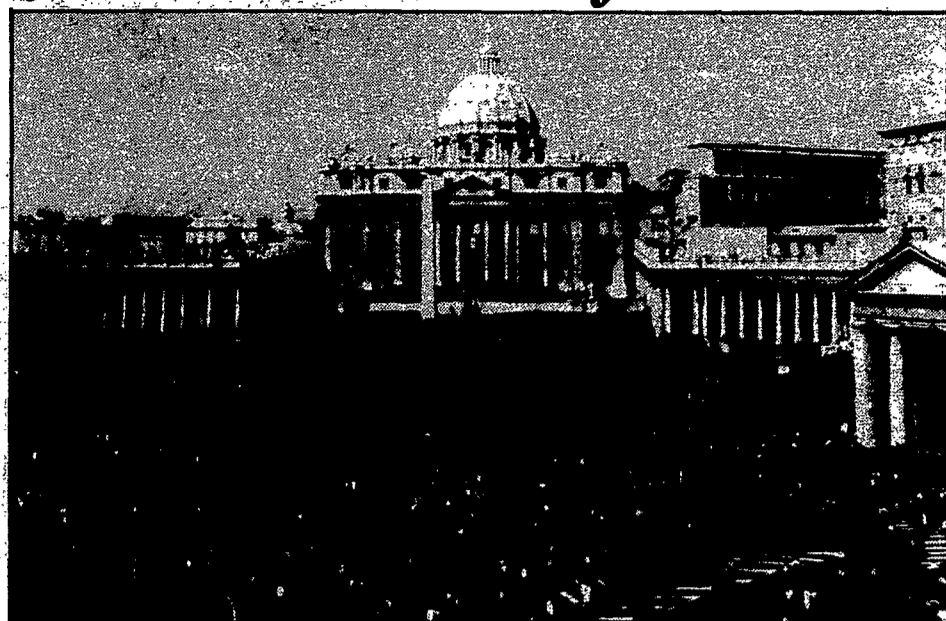
Kavaliunas shook the pope's hand, but her friend Laima was singled out to be blessed by the pontiff who has said that half his heart belongs to Lithuania.

For Paulius Klimas, the echo will be fainter, but no less meaningful. Klimas, a member of the fledgling Zilvinas Lithuanian dance group, stayed home last June, as he no longer belonged to Lazdynas, the long-established dance troupe that journeyed to Rome with St. George's choir. An eloquent spokesman for his countrymen — many of whom fled their native land after the Soviet army marched in to occupy Lithuania in June, 1940 — Klimas is himself the son of refugees from the onset of that particular era of foreign oppression. Paulius's father is a linguist who now teaches at the University of Rochester; the younger Klimas speaks fluent Lithuanian and expresses unabashed admiration for the Polish pope whose mother is reputed to be half-Lithuanian and who celebrated the beatification Mass in Rome this past June 28 in the Lithuanian tongue.

Even though the pope is gifted at languages and receives coaching from a Lithuanian priest, his ability to speak Lithuanian is not as simple a transition from Polish as it may seem to those who imagine Lithuanian is similar to the Slavic languages spoken to the south and east. "Lithuanian is very different from Polish," Klimas explains. "It's a Baltic lan-



The pope holds a special audience with Lithuanians.



Pope John Paul II's June beatification of Archbishop Jurgis Matulaitis drew Lithuanians from throughout the world to the Vatican.



Members of the Rochester Lazdynas Folk Dancers along with Lithuanians from around the world performed traditional dances in St. Peter's Square.

guage, most similar to Latvian?" As Kavaliunas adds, Lithuanian bears a closer resemblance to ancient Sanskrit than to any modern Slavic tongue; Lithuanians have always used Latin letters, while Russian is written in the Cyrillic alphabet.

"There's a world of difference," agrees Klimas.

The distinction points up the fact that many people unfamiliar with Lithuanian language and history make a lot of unfounded assumptions about this thoroughly atypical culture, as Klimas observes. It's a subject about which Lithuanians — like their similarly misunderstood brothers in Soviet oppression, the

Ukrainians — are understandably sensitive.

Philip Skabeikis, author of a booklet entitled "Catholic Lithuania: 600 Years," which was published by the Lithuanian Roman Catholic Priests' League, has summarized the history of the nation known as "the youngest daughter of the Church." An independent nation until 1940, Lithuania was annexed and made a "republic" of the Soviet Union in 1940, nearly 700 years after Grand Duke Mindaugas was baptized in 1251, after being crowned King of Lithuania.

Although the country wasn't fully converted for the next two centuries, the jubilee commemorates the 600th anniversary of the 1387

coronation of King Jogaila, who had sworn fidelity to the Church of Rome the previous year. The Lithuanians eventually became as tenacious in their Christian faith as they had once been in clinging to their pagan roots.

The jubilee, according to Paulius Klimas, means a great deal to modern-day Lithuanians. "The Lithuanian people were pagans, and they were the last people to accept Christianity in Europe," he comments. "It's ironic now that they are being persecuted for their faith."

In a letter sent to priests of the Rochester diocese last June, Birute Litvinas, who chairs

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