

Features

# Lithuanian candidate for sainthood once visited Rochester

By Father Robert F. McNamara

After more than half a century, the people of St. George's Lithuanian Parish in Rochester have at last returned the visit of their beloved — and now blessed — Archbishop Jurgis Matulaitis.

Thirty parishioners from St. George's traveled to Rome last June 28 to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of their homeland's "baptism" into the Catholic faith. The central event of that observance was the beatification of the Lithuanian archbishop who stopped in Rochester during a three-month American tour in 1926.

Jurgis Matulaitis (1871-1927) was thoroughly Lithuanian, but also thoroughly international in his pastoral vision. As an advocate of social concern and of ecumenism, he was ahead of his time. His view of the lay apostolate inspired Pope Pius XI to launch his program of Catholic Action. When Pius learned of the prelate's death, he exclaimed, "This man was truly a saint!"

Invited by Cardinal George Mundelein to visit Chicago in 1926 for the International Eucharistic Congress, Archbishop Matulaitis agreed to present a formal conference on the possibility of a reunion between Catholic and Orthodox believers. He then extended his stay to visit 92 Lithuanian parishes in the eastern and midwestern United States.

Father Joseph Kasakaitis saw to it that the small parish of St. George in Rochester was not ignored on the tour, and that Archbishop Matulaitis' arrival was given due publicity. A news article in the July 11, 1926, issue of the *Democrat and Chronicle/Rochester Herald* described the visitor's schedule.

Arriving on Sunday afternoon, he paid a courtesy call on Rochester Bishop Thomas F. Hickey, then presided at Benediction. Archbishop "Matulevicius," the newspaper account stated, was "one of the most beloved pastors and patriots of his country."

A story in the following day's newspaper reported that the archbishop was indeed "a delightful man to meet, simple in manner and of rare culture."

When asked about his impressions of America, the visitor said that he admired its material progress. America's success, he observed, was proof that religion did not block progress, but rather enhanced it. As an educator, he found American schools and universities impressive. The archbishop was pleased to see that Lithuanian-Americans were not only receiving a good education, but were also developing a spirit of patriotism and civic pride and responsibility as well.

On the evening of July 12, 1926, children

and members of St. George's two parish societies gathered at the rectory door to conduct the archbishop in procession to the church. Several of the children strewed flowers in his path. Archbishop Matulaitis preached in Lithuanian to a full congregation and blessed them with the Eucharistic Host. After the service, he spent the night in Rochester before continuing on to Pennsylvania.

Mrs. Lilian Mockevicius Zelnis was a girl of eight when her aunt took her to the evening ceremony that marked the archbishop's visit. Almost all that she can remember of the event is the procession and the bald man with a fringe of hair. What she recalls most vividly is that everyone cried.

What a consolation the visitation must have been for these "exiled" Lithuanians! How the archbishop must have touched them!

Jurgis Matulaitis was born on April 11, 1871. In those days, Lithuania, like its neighbor Poland, was under the rule of the Russian Czars. Those despots treated Latin-Rite Catholics with a particularly heavy hand, as their descendants, the Soviets continue to do today.

Aside from the political and religious oppression under which he lived, Matulaitis also faced personal griefs. At the age of 10, he was orphaned. As a teenager, he was stricken with a recurring type of bone cancer that forced him to wear a metal leg brace.

After the deaths of his parents, young Jurgis was invited to make his home with a cousin in Kielce, Poland. His cousin had adopted the Polish spelling of the family name — Matulewicz — and Jurgis soon followed suit.

Sensing a call to priesthood, the young man entered the seminary at Kielce. Two years later, when the Russian government closed the school, Matulaitis transferred to another seminary in Warsaw. In 1898, after finishing his studies in theology at the Catholic Ecclesiastical Academy in St. Petersburg (now Leningrad), he was ordained a priest.

His bishop then sent Father Matulaitis to the University of Fribourg in Switzerland, where in 1902 he earned a doctorate in theology. His doctoral thesis on Russian Orthodox theology was later published in several languages.

For two years, the priest taught at the seminary in Kielce, which had by then reopened. Then a recurrence of his bone cancer sent him to Warsaw for a long recuperation. There he developed a keen interest in the working man and in labor



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organizations.

In 1907, Father Matulaitis was named a professor of sociology at the Ecclesiastical Academy in St. Petersburg, where he acquired a solicitude for university intellectuals. The Church, he concluded, had not yet paid sufficient attention to developing lay Catholic leadership at every level.

To further his apostolic work, Father Matulaitis sought permission to revive a nearly defunct Lithuanian religious community known as the Congregation of Marian Clerics. In 1909, he took vows in the restored order, and from 1911 until his death he served as its superior general. In later years, he also established two orders of religious women.

In view of his superior talents as an intellectual, an advocate of the social apostolate, a diplomat fluent in several languages, a born organizer and a priest of acknowledged holiness, Father Matulaitis was a natural choice for the bishopric of Vilnius, to which he was appointed after Lithuania became an independent republic in 1918. The next seven years showed him to be a competent administrator who lived up to his motto: "Conquer evil with good."

In 1925, Bishop Matulaitis asked Pope Pius XI for permission to resign his see so that he could devote his full attention to the order of Marian Fathers, whose central office was located in Rome. The pope not only consented, but welcomed him to Rome and promoted him to the titular archepiscopal see of Adulis.

But the archbishop could never quite detach himself from Lithuania. When a sharp political quarrel arose between the countries of Poland and Lithuania and the Holy See regarding the territory of the Diocese of Vilnius, the pope sent him as apostolic visitor to resolve the situation. Although he was shocked by the bitterness of the conflict, the archbishop was able to win an agreement from all three parties.

Archbishop Matulaitis visited the United States twice. In 1913, he traveled to Chicago

where he established the first American foundation of the Marianist Fathers.

As it turned out, the archbishop was in the last year of his life when he visited the United States a second time in 1926. A military coup in Lithuania the following December ousted the socialist government. The new administration at once asked Pope Pius XI to conclude a concordat, which the archbishop was charged with negotiating. He had hardly completed the preliminary articles of the treaty on January 22, 1927, when he suffered a ruptured appendix and died of peritonitis.

At his beatification ceremony in 1987, Pope John Paul II called Archbishop Matulaitis "a pastor full of courage and initiative, capable of facing with prudence and a spirit of sacrifice situations of difficulty for the Church."

We may well hope that Blessed Jurgis Matulaitis will soon be canonized. He was an ornament not only to Lithuania, the "Land of Crosses," but to the entire Christian world.

Father McNamara is the archivist of the Diocese of Rochester.

## Greeting card program underway to aid American Cancer Society

The Monroe County unit of the American Cancer Society is conducting its annual Holiday Greeting Card program with 12 card varieties available. A special 25-card selection is also available to businesses with a wide range of prices and styles.

The annual Holiday Greeting Card Program helps support the American Cancer Society's efforts in cancer research, education and service to cancer patients and their families.

For a color brochure on the Holiday Greeting Card Program, contact the Monroe County Unit of the American Cancer Society at 1400 Winton Road North, Rochester, 14609 or call (716)288-1950.

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## Mary Dodd Remembers Her First Love.

Mary Dodd is giving back what her parents gave her. Love. Only now she's caring for many other parents who are loving her for it. As a volunteer at St. Ann's Home, Mary is helping residents fulfill an active, happy life. As Mary put it: "I love my work. I've established some lasting relationships. And I feel I'm giving back a little of what my parents gave me." Love.



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