The history of clergy training in Lithuania goes back to the bishops George Radvila (1556–1600). Bishop Jurgis Radvila established a seminary in Vilnius in 1582, and the Seminary of Samogitians in Varniai in 1622. Later, a seminary was established in Sejny in 1826. In interwar Lithuania, seminaries were established...
in Kaunas, Telsiai (after the establishment of the diocese of Telsiai) and Vilkaviskis (before that in Zypliai and Giziai). Vilnius Seminary was theoretically a part of the Catholic Church in Poland, as was Vilnius and much of the Vilnius region. In the Soviet era, only the Kaunas Inter-Diocesan Seminary remained, and the seminary operated underground. In 1989, the Bishop of Telsiai, Antanas Vaičius, issued a decree re-establishing the Telsiai Seminary.

In 1989, at the beginning of the movement for the liberation of Lithuania and the Soviet occupation, Bishop Antanas Vaičius of Telsiai restores the closed Telsiai Seminary, and in 1993, at the beginning of independent Lithuania, Metropolitan Audrys Juozas Bačkis, Archbishop of Vilnius, restored the Vilnius Seminary. The only remaining school that is no longer in operation is the Diocese of Vilkaviskis Clergy Training School. However, in 1997, Bishop Juozas Zemaitis of Vilkaviskis re-establishes the seminary, but no longer in Vilkaviskis, but in Marijampole, and in 1999 it begins its activities.

The re-establishment of the seminary of the Diocese of Vilkaviskis has caused a lot of debate. It was a fact that was received with mixed feelings. Whether the re-establishment was a timely and much-needed event, or whether it was a courageous, but not fully thought-out act. Several years later, the seminary ceased its activities due to lack of students. The question that remains unanswered as the main problem of this thesis is: under what circumstances and with what objectives was the Blessed George Matulaitis Seminary of the Diocese of Vilkaviskis re-established.

This work is based on the documents of 1997-2000 that reveal the establishment of the seminary and the beginning of its activities (the documents of the Diocesan Curia of Vilkaviskis, Fr. Kęstutis Zemaitis’ personal archive, memories, and other documents).

CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE FOUNDATION

After the restoration of Lithuanian independence in 1990, relations between the Church and the State changed radically. The Sąjudis forced the Soviet government to make concessions to the Church. Already during the first (founding) congress of the Movement on 22 October 1988, the return of Vilnius Cathedral to the faithful was announced. This was not a very benevolent act on the part of the Soviet authorities, but rather an inability to stop the enthusiastic upsurge of the Lithuanian people and their thirst for freedom. This was followed by St. The return of Casimir’s relics followed. Here is what the chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church, which was still underground, wrote that year. On 4 March 1989, the coffin with St. Casimir’s body was returned to the church. In 1989, the cortege with the relics of St. Casimir from the Church of Sts. Peter and Paul returned to the Cathedral. A moving celebration. On that day, Vilnius residents and visitors, full of reverent solemnity, moved in one direction – towards Antakalnis.” (Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania
(news from dioceses), No 81, 19 March 1989, page not shown). The civil authorities were no longer able to ban such events. A very joyful event was related to Archbishop Martyr Mecislovas Reinis. In the same issue of the LKB Chronicle it is written:” The Curia of the Vilnius Archdiocese has received a report that on 20 February. The Curial Curia of the Vilnius Archdiocese rehabilitated Bishop Mecislovas Reinys on 20/20/20, by the decision of the Supreme Court of the Lithuanian SSR” (Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania (Rehabilitated Bishop Mecislovas Reinys), No. 81, 19 March 1989, page not indicated).

The appointment of Bishop Vincent Sladkevičius of Kaisiadorys as President of the Lithuanian Bishops’ Conference was also an extraordinary event in Lithuania. This was a very solid event, because Sladkevicius was not elected by the bishops, but appointed by Pope John Paul II himself. Sladkevicius was comparatively independent and did not try to coordinate church affairs with the Soviet government, which was still in Lithuania at that time. Another positive circumstance was that already in 1990, the commissioners of the Council for Religious Affairs in the Lithuanian SSR ceased to function.

Perhaps the most important circumstance was the events of 11 March 1990, when the Supreme Council adopted the Act “On the Restoration of the Independent State of Lithuania”. Although after the promulgation of this act the occupying Soviet army remained in Lithuania until 31 August 1993, the KGB finally ceased its activities in Lithuania in October 1991.

An important idea of the new Constitution is: “Article 26. Freedom of thought, belief and conscience shall be unrestricted. Everyone shall have the right freely to choose any religion or belief and to profess it freely, alone or in community with others, privately or publicly, to perform religious rites, to practise his faith and to teach it” (Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania, 1992: Article 26) guaranteed the establishment of denominational schools and seminaries. Since his appointment as Bishop of the Diocese of Vilkaviskis in 1989, “Bishop Juozas Zemaitis also envisaged the restoration of a seminary” (Zemaitis 2016: 71).

From the ecclesiastical point of view, the establishment of the seminary of the Diocese of Vilkaviskis was not necessary. It could be re-established as the old seminary of Vilkaviskis, which was descended from the old seminary of Seinai, with all its spirit (Katilius, 2021: 189-205), as no ecclesiastical authority had officially ceased to operate. Church law guaranteed that a legal person does not disappear if it is destroyed only by the civil power: “Kan. 120 § 1. A juridical person, by its very nature, is perpetual; but it ceases to exist if its activity is lawfully terminated by the competent authority or if it has been inactive for a period of one hundred years” (Code of Canon Law. Codex Iuris canonici). The canon speaks of the authority competent in this area – that is, the ecclesiastical authority.

To re-establish the seminary, the question of its premises had to be resolved. A sewing factory was set up in the old seminary in Vilkaviskis. Already in the post-war period the buildings were occupied, and soldiers’ uniforms were being made,
but during the years of independence other orders were accepted and more than two hundred workers were employed. The buildings were reorganised and adapted for production. It was almost impossible for the seminary to return there: many workers would have to leave their jobs, and it would require a large investment to rebuild the seminary, which had been “damaged”. And Vilkaviskis itself was not the best place for such an institution to function. All eyes turned to Marijampole. The bishop’s curia was there, and there were better connections with Marijampole. In fact, there were also thoughts of establishing a seminary in Liškiava near Druskininkai. The old Dominican monastery had been renovated and the premises would have been sufficient, but the main reason for the negative conclusion was that the distance from the centre of the diocese was too far, and it would be inconvenient for the lecturers to get there (Zemaitis, 2022: 3).

Another project was the construction of a completely new building. This required a plot of land. A site adjacent to the Drama Theatre was considered, but this proved too complicated and expensive. Even the Drama Theatre was discussed, as it was also owned by the Church before World War II (Zemaitis, 2022: 4). When this project also failed, a lease agreement was finally agreed and signed with the Province of the Lithuanian Marian Monastery, and the remaining unrenovated part of the Marijampole Monastery building (about three-fifths of the building) was given to the Diocese of Vilkaviskis for fifty years. After renovation of the premises and landscaping, it became a seminary (Zemaitis, 2022: 3).

The restored seminary of the Diocese of Vilkaviskis was given the title of Blessed George Matulaitis (Bishop of Vilkaviskis, Juozas Zemaitis, Decree No. 152, 13.04.1999), and the chapel of the seminary was given the title of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross by the bishop (Bishop of Vilkaviskis, Juozas Zemaitis, Decree No. 412, 06.12.1999) and the right to celebrate the feast day of the Holy Cross, Joseph of the Holy Trinity, Mary’s Betrothed (19 March), the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (14 September) and the Eucharist of St. Joseph (14 September). The feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary (8 December). (Bishop Juozas Zemaitis of Vilkaviskis, Decree No. 307, 13.08.1999).

THE OBJECTIVES OF THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE SEMINARY

During the Soviet years, the number of priests dropped significantly. At the beginning of the Sąjūd period and at the beginning of independence, there was a strong Catholic presence in religious services and church attendance. It seemed
then that this upsurge was just begin-
ning, or at least would continue. That
there would be more people preparing
for the priesthood in their own seminary
also seemed to be an indisputable truth.
And the diocese of Vilkaviskis in Kaunas
had enough seminarians with which to
start a new clergy training institution.
The number of seminarians at the
Kaunas inter-diocesan seminary as of the
first day of November 1990 (Catholic

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<tr>
<th>Diocese of Kaisiadorys</th>
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<th>Vilnius Archdiocese</th>
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<td>22</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>12</td>
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In 1993 there were 39 students in the
first year of studies in Kaunas, 7 of
whom were seminarians of the Diocese
of Vilkaviskis. Three years later, 43 se-
minarians, 9 of whom belonged to the
Diocese of Vilkaviskis, were in the first
year of their studies in Kaunas (Catholic

There was a sense of religious patrio-
tism among the young people, most of
the seminarians were idealists, and they
had before their eyes moral examples
such as Archbishop Teofilius Matulionis
(1873–1962, bishop 1929, archbishop 1962,
beatified 2017), who was declared blessed
by Pope Francis (Zemaitis, 2021: 90–96).

Probably, Bishop Juozas Zemaitis of
Vilkaviskis had another goal in the cre-
ation of the seminary, which was to have
a greater influence on the preparation of
future clergy for his diocese than he had
in Kaunas Seminary (Zemaitis, 2021: 2).

The Bishop of Vilkaviskis prepared
for the re-establishment of the seminary
in advance. In his letter Pro memoria, he
says: “Being well aware that the re-es-
stablishment of the seminary in the con-
text of today’s ecclesiastical norms is a
very responsible step, I have tried from
the very beginning to take steps that
were planned and thought out in the
ecclesiastical spirit. As soon as the first
opportunities arose, I arranged for the
training of priests and laymen for this
purpose, who, having acquired the nec-
essary academic qualifications, would be
the teachers and spiritual directors of the
restored seminary (Zemaitis, 1998: 3).

Bishop Juozas Zemaitis was aware of
the history of the training of clergy in
Uznemune since the time of the semi-
ary in Seinai. His goal was not only to
rebuild the seminary, but also to make
sure that it would be on the level of a
high school and that the students would
receive a university education. Since
Kaunas had a Faculty of Catholic Theol-
ogy attached to Vytautas Magnus Uni-
versity, the focus turned to Kaunas. In
principle, the university agreed to af-
filiate the Marijampole seminary, thus
making it another branch of the univer-
sity. On 31 May 1999, the Rector of the
University signed the following order:
“In accordance with the Statutes of the
University, the resolution of the Senate
of 25 March 1999, the request of the Cu-
ría of the Diocese of Vilkaviskis on 18
March 1999, the consent of the Grand
Chancellor of the Faculty of Catholic
Theology and the consent of the Metro-
politan of Kaunas on 14 March 1999: ‘I
hereby establish a branch of the Faculty
of Catholic Theology of the University
of Vytautas the Great in the Diocese of
Vilkaviskis from the following year. 2. I
grant the rights of a legal person to the branch of the Faculty of Catholic Theology of Vytėntas Magnus University of Vilkaviskis Diocese "..." (Rector of Vytėntas Magnus University, Order of 31 May 1999, No. 180)

When the seminary was re-established, a branch of Vytėntas Magnus University was also established. The teaching related to the Bachelor’s degree was combined in accordance with the requirements of the Catholic Theological Faculty and the University. The seminarians studying at the seminary also graduated from the Faculty of Catholic Theology at Vytėntas Magnus University.

RESULTS

During its six years of active academic activity, the Seminary of Blessed George Matulaitis of the Diocese of Vilkaviskis has trained several new priests, who have joined the ranks of the diocesan pastors. This is perhaps the most important goal and result.

The renovation of the buildings, which served the purposes of the seminary and the theological branch (later the theological department), has left them to serve the diocese: the pastoral centre, the Caritas, the youth centre, the reception of pilgrims and various diocesan events. Thus, the funds accumulated and used for repairs are used for the pastoral care of the diocese, even when the seminary is no longer functioning (Zemaitis, 2021: 2).

During the six years of its operation, the seminary in Marijampole had become not only a centre of education but also a cultural centre. Scientific conferences, literary evenings and exhibitions of the city’s artists were held here. Politicians, heads of government and foreign diplomats visited the seminary, and various topical issues were presented and discussed (Zemaitis, 2021: 3).

The diocesan seminary had a sufficient intellectual potential, which was able to maintain the educational process in accordance with the Church’s regulations and to maintain the level of education in accordance with the requirements of Vytėntas Magnus University (Zemaitis, 2021: 2).

However, the overall outcome was not encouraging, with the number of admissions to the seminary declining each year. According to the data of 2001, there were 47 seminarians in the seminary (Catholic Directory, 2001: 31), the following year 37 (Catholic Directory, 2002: 31), the next year 35 (Catholic Directory, 2003: 30), and in the last year only 24 students (Catholic Directory, 2005: 31).

This decline in enrolment can be explained not only by changes in demographics, but also by the process of cultural secularisation and desacralisation of values. “Due to the low number of students, the seminary ceased to function in 2005, and seminarians moved to Kaunas Seminary to continue their studies” (Zemaitis, 2016: 72). Thus, the seminary in Marijampole had to suspend its education and training process again after six years of its active operation. Only this time, not because of external factors, but because of an internal decision, the activities were interrupted for an unknown period.
Nevertheless, the re-establishment of the seminary in Marijampole and its six years of active academic and educational activity became a significant historical event not only in Uznemune, but also in the process of training and pastoral care of the clergy of the Catholic Church in Lithuania.

CONCLUSIONS

The opportunities for the activities of the Catholic Church have increased considerably with the changes in the political situation in Lithuania. The laws and authorities of the independent state no longer persecuted church institutions. Taking advantage of this, the Bishop of Vilkaviskis re-established the activities of the Vilkaviskis diocesan seminary in Marijampole, where the conditions were right for this. The restoration of the seminary was also favoured by the laws of the Church. The reestablishment of the seminary was intended to increase the number of vocations, to maintain the level of higher education, and to become a focal point for cultural and social activities. However, the re-establishment of the seminary did not foresee the realities of the future – the decline in vocations to the priesthood. This became the short-term period of the seminary’s activity when, after six years, it was no longer rational enough to continue its activities.

References