

## **REFLECTION FOR OFSGB NATIONAL CHAPTER SEPTEMBER 2018 ON THE RECENT CONGRESS IN LITHUANIA**

### **Kathy Maskens OFS**

Lithuania is a place I had never been to before and knew very little about however, I have been on an International Congress before. I knew that it would be an opportunity to drink some of that living water that Jesus promises us. I was not disappointed.

Firstly I must say that the whole event was incredibly well organised with a complete spirit of generosity. We were continually invited to speak to someone if something to do with our accommodation was not perfect. I did not hear anyone complaining. The love was tangible. Young adults and even teenagers were in the background everywhere holding the fort. OFS members and friars picked us up at all hours on all days from the airports and transported us back there when it was time to leave. Nothing was too much trouble, there were no exceptions.

I would like to draw attention to some highlights, because this is my personal reflection on the week. For others the experience may have been different but this is how I saw it.

Having stayed in very comfortable guesthouses in Kaunas we moved on Wednesday to stay with families in Kretinga. These were not necessarily OFS families but the homes of Catholic people of the parish of St. Anthony of Padua in Kretinga. These people gave up their beds for us, their rooms, and their homes. And I was compelled to ask myself whether my own parish would be able to do the same. I felt that they were living like the early apostles Acts 5: 32, sharing everything in common.

The family that we stayed with accommodated 4 of us. They were from a charismatic tradition and it was clear from the way they approached prayer, grace was said at every meal, including breakfast. At the same time as caring for us they were carrying on their normal lives working and caring for their own family. One of our members stayed with a man who having made them comfortable in his humble home, went out to work for the night. Such generosity.

This was in direct contrast to something mentioned during one of the sermons at Mass where we were reminded of the words of one of the Popes who said that though we might think that the worst sin of the West is Lust it is in fact Sloth. If I had heard that before, I really hadn't listened. What does that really mean? What part does sloth play in our lives, in our church, in our Order?

Here is a short interruption to encourage us <https://youtu.be/f8qjLPKgxHQ>

### **A tale of two places**

So I would like to tell you the story of two places that we visited. I hope that what I say will resonate with you, because these stories remind me of our own country, ways in which we have responded and the hope that we can have from looking at Lithuania.

In 1457 a parish was founded in the place now known as Siluva. In 1532 the parish priest of that village was inspired to bury the church documents, liturgical vestments and the treasured painting of the Virgin Mary and Child in an iron clad box and buried it in deep in the ground near a rock. Soon

after in that same year the local governor became a Calvinist and all Catholic land was confiscated and turned over to the Calvinists.

Eighty years passed, the Catholic flock gradually with no shepherd to lead it died out with only very few of the oldest villagers even remembering that there had ever been a Catholic church there.

In 1608-1612 Our Blessed Mother appeared in several times to some shepherd children saying, **“There was a time when my beloved Son was worshipped by my people on this very spot, But now they have given this sacred soil over to the ploughman and the tiller and to the animals for grazing”.**

There was a blind man in the town that was over 100 years old. He heard about the apparitions and then recalled the memory of helping the priest 80 years before to bury the church treasure. The villagers led him to the spot of the apparitions and when he reached the spot his sight was miraculously restored. He was then able to point to the exact spot where the treasure was hidden.

Since then Siluva has been a place of pilgrimage with many people finding healing in the place.

On the day that we visited this shrine it was the feast of Our Lady, Mother and Queen. We had watched a video on the coach but most of us were so tired that we slept through so we almost out of the blue found ourselves at Mass over the place where Our Blessed Mother had appeared.

Fr. Alfred was unexpectedly asked to say Mass for us that day. In his spontaneous sermon he movingly spoke of the death of his own mother on the Feast of Our Lady of Sorrows, I remembered suddenly the part that she had played in supporting me after my own father’s death 29years ago. And so we remember her again tomorrow, let us ask for her intercession.

During our time in Lithuania we were also reminded of the social activity that goes with being Franciscan. We are after all called to be in the world.

For personal reasons my son and I wanted to visit the place devoted to supporting people needing healing from addiction and I am going to tell you the story of that place now.

We went to visit a place called Pakutuvėnai in Lithuania. We approached the place along what seemed to be a temporary road and the way was not easy for the coach driver as it was a single track, dirt road that was slightly raised from the surrounding area. He had to keep stopping, I presumed to avoid skidding.

As we proceeded along this road the Friar told us some of the history of the place. And as the story unfolded one couldn’t help but be reminded of the cruelty of occupation and the evil of attempting to crush man’s spirit, but how the spirit and the love of God will always prevail. Either side of the track were stretches of fields with no obvious crops to speak of.

It was explained that there used to be a great number of small-holdings in this area. These would have been small houses growing food for themselves with man-made ponds to provide water. However, when the Communist government took over they saw this area as a breeding ground for people who may rise up against the regime. They forced the inhabitants to move to the towns where spies were asked to live close by to watch for any protesters, they then flattened their homes and

everything else, filling in the ponds also. They even removed the road so that people would not have access to their church and graveyard.

When we arrived at the church it was a small plain church with panels of colour on the wall behind the altar. The colours reminded me of the Lampedusa Cross. There were statues of men sitting on the windowsills facing the altar. We sat down and the Friar proceeded to tell us the history of the place.





Before the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war a parish priest in a local city had been asked by the people of Pakutunevai if he would build them a church. But he told them that he had too much work to do in his own parish. He was devoted to his own parish and when the war started he was concerned that the church would be destroyed, so he prayed to St. Anthony to protect it from harm. In those days the Nazis were in the habit of bombing churches because they often held strategic positions in the towns and cities. St. Anthony appears to have heard his prayer because although bombs fell all around they did not hit the church. So in thanksgiving that priest built the church in Pakutunevai.

When the Communists came to take the people away from Pakutunevai the priest told them, "you may take the people away now but in the future huge numbers of people will come including people from all over the world". The Friar looked at us in the pews of the church and said "you now are fulfilling that prophecy!"

In the town of Kretinga there had been a Franciscan parish before the Communists and after independence came only half of the Monastery there was given back to the Friars and half to the Poor Clares. As a result of this there were only two Friars in the parish and they were struggling with the volume of work that they had to do, they had no time to themselves. The mayor of Kretinga remembered Pakutunevai and suggested it as a place that they could go for time away with the Lord where no-one would find them so they went there. However there was nothing there except the church, so they had to learn how to be builders and make somewhere for themselves to live.

After a period of time they started to organise regular summer camps there for Christians with very basic facilities. One day 3 people with drug habits came to the camp looking for plants to make drugs with. There were no drugs but they found something else to satisfy their craving, Jesus Christ. When the camp was over they pleaded with the Friars to let them stay because they felt that if they returned to the city they would return to drugs. There was still nothing there except an old wooden chapel to sleep in and when winter came it was very cold. They made fires and put stones in the fires, then when it was time to sleep they said they were going to bed with their stones and put the stones in their clothes to keep them warm.

Pakutunevai has grown from there, a simple place for people to come and be away from the world for a while rather like our own Walsingham, reclaimed from forgotten-ness with annual summer camps where people can come away from the world for a while and spend time with God in his creation.

So we come to the end of this short presentation. I hope that from my explanation you will have gained something of the precious graces that we received when in Lithuania. This is a small country but with a very special history of faithfulness to the Lord and his mother. It is a memory to cherish, but also something to share with all of you as nourishment for the work that we have ahead of us here in the UK.

May the Lord God bless us all.