

# The Story of the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary



## FOUNDING IN LITHUANIA

On October 15, the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary celebrate the birthday of their religious community, which established and sponsors the Matulaitis Rehabilitation & Skilled Care facility. The Sisters' congregation was founded in 1918 by Archbishop George Matulaitis in response to the needs of the people after World War I in Marijampolė, Lithuania. The community was established to teach the Catholic faith and to help numerous vulnerable populations, including the sick, orphans, the elderly, the poor, and the suffering after arduous years of Russian occupation and persecution. In the first 21 years of the congregation's existence, there were over 150 Sisters working in various locations in Lithuania including kindergartens, orphanages, homes for the aged, schools, a printing press, and several hospitals.

## SOVIET PERSECUTION

In 1939, at the beginning of World War II, Lithuania was occupied by the Soviet Communists for a year, then by Nazis for 3 years, and re-taken by the Soviet Communist government until Lithuania regained its independence in 1990. The Communist government confiscated all the Sisters' institutions and convents and prevented the Sisters from living together in their communities. The Sisters could not wear religious garb, yet they continued their work clandestinely as part of the underground Church and maintained their ministry to the people as best they could. The Sisters secretly taught religion and prepared children to receive the Sacraments, cared for the sick, and printed and distributed religious literature. A few Sisters even went to Siberia as deportees as well as for mission work.

## THE SISTERS IN NORTH AMERICA

In 1936, immediately preceding World War II, five Sisters, invited by the Marian Fathers, came to work at Marianapolis in Thompson, CT. Several Sisters were later able to join them in the USA before Lithuania was occupied by the Soviets and the Iron Curtain came down. Eight Sisters, who



were refugees from the Communist occupation in Lithuania, fled to Germany and came to Canada in 1948.

## PRINTING MINISTRY

The Immaculata printing press was started in 1948 in the basement of the convent to provide religious

publications and the children's magazine Eglutė in the Lithuanian language. This ministry was significant, as religious publications were prohibited in Lithuania itself and news media coverage from Lithuania was inaccurate, subject to Soviet propaganda. Several Sisters were sent to help the Franciscan Fathers in Maine in their printing press when the Sisters' numbers were greatest.

## CHILDCARE, RELIGIOUS EDUCATION, AND PARISH MINISTRY

Shortly after arriving in Canada as World War II refugees, several Sisters opened day care centers for pre-school children in Montreal, Quebec and later in Toronto, Ontario. They also served in Lithuanian parishes, provided religious education, worked with youth organizations and Canadian-Lithuanian children's summer camps, and ministered to older adults.

The Sisters' official presence in Canada concluded toward the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

In 1988, the Sisters were invited to work at the Blessed George Matulaitis Lithuanian Parish in Lemont, Illinois. Religious education, youth organization work, and parish ministry continue there.



led the Sisters to open a boarding home for girls of Lithuanian descent. Their numbers were increased by girls whose families came to the United States as World War II refugees. These girls attended the local high school or Annhurst College, directed by the Daughters of the Holy Spirit. They received a Lithuanian cultural orientation and education program while living in the convent boarding home.

During the summers, the same boarding home facilities were used for a girls' camp, Immaculata. Between 1944 and 1968, as the number of Sisters grew, some Sisters were sent to assist in the Lithuanian youth camp Dainava in Manchester, MI.

In 1946, the first Lithuanian cultural festival was organized on the convent grounds. This event, now led by Lithuanian American community members, continues to draw hundreds of guests each summer.

Camp Immaculata at the convent in Putnam grew beyond 150 campers by 1969. The Sisters purchased a spacious and dedicated camp site in Vermont, naming it Neringa after the resort in Lithuania by the Baltic Sea. Eventually the camp sessions were extended to include programming for boys, families, and adults. About 500-600 campers now come to Neringa each summer.



## YOUTH AND CAMP MINISTRY

In 1943, the Sisters purchased the Windham County Home in Putnam, which then became their motherhouse. They took in several orphan girls to live with them, which

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## THE SISTERS IN INDEPENDENT LITHUANIA

In 1990, after Lithuania regained its independence, the Sisters' congregation in Lithuania was able to operate openly once again. Their ministries include parish work, religious education, social assistance for at-risk children and orphans, as well as homes for the elderly and dying. The Sisters administer social service centers in Vilnius and Kaunas and a nursing home in Marijampolė.



## HEALTHCARE MINISTRY

In 1942, the Sisters opened a home for the aged, Villa Maria, and later St. Joseph Villa in Thompson, CT. After some years, the elderly in their care and the Lithuanian community at large requested that the Sisters extend their care to assist individuals through the end of their lives. Through financial support of Lithuanians throughout the USA as well as with a US federal grant, Matulaitis Nursing Home became a reality in 1968. The facility started with one section serving as a rest home with nursing supervision and another section providing chronic and convalescent care. Gradually, services of rehabilitation, post-acute care, hospice, and continued skilled care were added to evolve into Matulaitis Rehabilitation & Skilled Care. When Villa Maria and St. Joseph Villa transferred their residents to Matulaitis Nursing Home, those premises were renovated and served as apartments for the elderly until 2011.



## RETREAT FACILITY

In 1980, the convent's motherhouse was rebuilt. As the need for a printing press and a boarding home resolved, the Sisters founded the Spiritual Renewal Center on the same premises in Putnam, CT. This ministry continues to grow with collaboration and assistance, supporting the Sisters' mission to help those who are searching for meaning and spiritual growth.



## IN PRAISE

The Sisters' religious community has celebrated over 100 years of service to Christ and the Church. God's Providence brought the Sisters to the USA and Canada to spread God's Love and God's Word, to catechize, to care for the young, elderly, sick, and dying. In Lithuania, the Sisters' mission has been to help revitalize religious life in families and parishes and to serve those most in need. May God's name be praised in all God's works!

