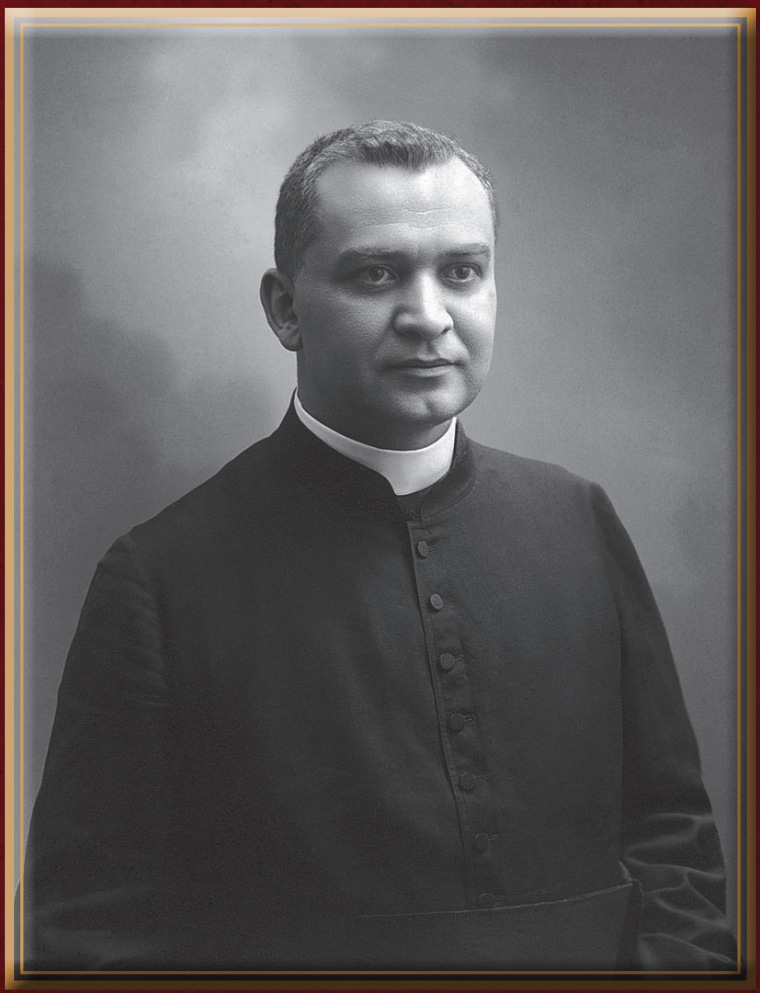
Rikiuokitės, pasišvęskite! Rikiuokitės ir pasišvęskite!

A Man of Providence



Lectures on Blessed George Matulaitis, MIC,

Commemorating the 100th Anniversary of His Birth into Heaven

A MAN OF PROVIDENCE

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Commemorating the 100th Anniversary of His Birth into Heaven

Edited by Andrzej Pakuła, MIC

General Curia of the Congregation of Marian Fathers
Rome 2027
PROMIC
Warsaw 2027
Marian Heritage
Stockbridge, Massachusetts, U.S.A. 2027

Cover illustration:
A photograph of Blessed George Matulaitis, MIC, from the period of the renewal of the Congregation of Marian Fathers.

Front cover illustration:
A photograph of Blessed George Matulaitis, MIC,
from the period of the renewal of the Congregation of Marian Fathers.
The caption above the photo in Lithuanian consists of the words spoken by Blessed George shortly before his death in response to a request from Fr. Ignas Česaitis, MIC,
who was accompanying him in the hospital,
to bestow a blessing on the Congregation of Marian Fathers.
These words (the first of which is a military phrase) mean:
Close ranks, sacrifice yourselves! Close ranks and sacrifice yourselves!

Cover page II
Coat of Arms of the Congregation of Marian Fathers

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Printing in United States of America by *Marian Heritage*

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Foreword by the Superior General

I first came to live with the Congregation of Marians as a resident candidate in 1986, and I began my philosophical studies for the priesthood that year. I entered the novitiate in our Congregation in 1987, the year that Archbishop George Matulaitis was declared Blessed in Rome by St. John Paul II on the occasion of the 600th Anniversary of the Baptism of Lithuania. I did not attend the Beatification in Rome, but I remember many members of our Province going there for the Beatification and how excited everyone was to participate in such an event. I attended many of the celebrations which took place in Washington, D.C., at that time. So, from the very beginning of my life as a consecrated religious, the example of Blessed George had a strong impact on me. I was influenced by reading his writings along with a biography and other writings about him as a young Marian in formation and later as a formator and then as a Superior.

I believe that Blessed George is a spiritual giant who is not as well-known or as appreciated in the Church as he should be. At the same time, he has a far-reaching reputation for holiness among those who know him. In our house in Rome, we are receiving requests for holy cards and for relics of him from all over the world. Those who have come to know him are convinced of his holiness.

Since his beatification in 1987, we have been searching for a miracle which could be used for his canonization process. There have been many graces received and healings attributed to his intercession. Unfortunately, we have not yet been able to find an unexplainable miracle which would meet the Holy See's strict requirements. We continue to pray and hope. I urge you to distribute his holy cards and novenas, especially among those who are sick and the hospitalized who are seeking a miracle. Blessed George is a powerful intercessor. He suffered a great deal during his short life so he knows what those who suffer are enduring.

I offer you these 12 spiritual conferences as we begin to celebrate the 100th Anniversary of the death of Blessed George on January 27, 2027, and the 100th Anniversary of the Concordat which he prepared as the Apostolic Visitator to Lithuania. During the last year of his life, he expended his last bit of energy and endured very difficult sufferings and challenges (which he likened to the fires of hell) in order to save the Catholic Church in Lithuania

from breaking away from Rome. The Parliament in Lithuania offered a special resolution recognizing the 100th Anniversary of the death of Blessed George as well as the 100th Anniversary of the Concordat. Lithuania will release a special 2 Euro coin in 2027 in honour of the Concordat.

I am certain that these 12 conferences will offer us good fruits for our monthly retreat days during this Jubilee year. I thank the 12 Marians who prepared these conferences. They offer us varying perspectives from around the world on the spiritual life of Blessed George and the lessons that we can draw from him in order to grow spiritually. I offer special thanks to Fr. Andrzej Pakuła, MIC, our General Prefect of Formation, for overseeing this project.

In his writings, Blessed George urged us to place our own growth in holiness as the priority in our lives. He knew that as active, apostolic religious, we would face the temptation to neglect our prayers in order to have more time for our apostolic work. Yet, he knew that it would not be enough to seek to rely merely on our own efforts and strength. By placing the priority on our growth in holiness, he knew that we would then have a strong spiritual foundation on which our charismatic identity as religious could be built. We would then be able to bear spiritual fruits in our apostolic efforts.

Now, Blessed George knew that, as apostolic religious, we would not have the time to pray like cloistered monks. The apostolic life calls for a certain flexibility. I am amazed at how he was able to live an ordered spiritual life along with other religious in the Bishop's House in Vilnius during the chaotic years from 1918-1925. Blessed George knew that neglecting his spiritual life while expecting to bear good fruit based on his apostolic efforts alone would be a formula for burnout and for catastrophic apostolic results. "Unless the Lord build the house, they labour in vain who build" (Psalm 127.1).

Our Founder, St. Stanislaus of Jesus Mary Papczyñski, had been the first in our Congregation to urge us to put our priority on our spiritual lives in order to bear good apostolic fruits. Blessed George, as the 27th Superior General of our Congregation, drew on the tradition and the charism that our Founder had passed on to us, in renovating our Congregation. At the origin of our Congregation, our Founder had made a self-offering of himself to the Lord which he called his *Oblatio*. The same formula was used by the early Marians to profess their religious vows in our Congregation. God gave special spiritual gifts to our Founder to carry out the work entrusted to him which we can call the charism of the Founder. St. Stanislaus then passed the founding charism and the tradition on to the Congregation on his deathbed. This charism continues to bear fruit throughout our history, and is always new and surprising.

Blessed George made a self-offering of himself to the Lord and to our Congregation in 1909 in the Bishop's Chapel in the Basilica of the Holy Cross

in Warsaw. He professed his religious vows in the hands of the then Superior General, Fr. Vincent Sękowski. Through his own "*oblatio*" that day, and later through the tiny, clandestine General Chapter which was held in Lithuania in 1911 in which Blessed George was elected the Superior General, God granted him the grace of office and the grace to renew our Congregation and to save it from extinction.

God invites each of us to make a similar self-offering to Him. On our retreat days during this Jubilee year, let us ask Blessed George to intercede for each of us and for the Congregation. Let us pray that, as we live our charism, we would be granted once again the grace of renewal.

Let us follow the example of our Founder, St. Stanislaus and of the Renovator, Blessed George. We want to place the priority on our growth in holiness so that we can live our charism authentically, and that our spiritual efforts would bear great fruit for Christ and the Church.

Immaculata Virginis Maria Conceptio — sit nobis salus et protectio! Amen.

Joseph G. Roesch, MIC
Superior General
Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus
June 12, 2026

Introduction

This collection of 12 talks certainly does not exhaust the richness of the spirituality and message that Blessed George Matulaitis, MIC bequeathed to the history of the Church and the Congregation of Marian Fathers. Rather, it reflects the current spiritual needs of the religious community he renewed, rather than attempting a comprehensive presentation of his life and legacy.

A century after his birth into Heaven, Blessed George remains relevant and has much to offer us on our pilgrimage of faith. Such is the role of the saints: on the one hand, through the witness of a fulfilled Christian life, they show successive generations of the faithful how to imitate Christ in walking the path of holiness; on the other, within the mystery of the communion of saints, they intercede for us. The Church describes the significance of the saints in these terms: "By contemplating the lives of those who faithfully followed Christ, we are inspired anew to seek the City that is to come, and at the same time, we discover the surest path by which — amidst the changing nature of the world and in accordance with our specific state of life — we may attain perfect union with Christ, that is, holiness" (*Sanctorum Mater, Introduction*, pp. 19–20).

We look at Blessed George as a religious — as a Marian. This is *our proper state*, the one mentioned in the cited Instruction. In his life, we find many personal traits, spiritual and moral attitudes toward events and difficulties, and experiences of both suffering and success. All of this is significant for us in our own times as well. The witness of the saints is timeless, just as faith, hope, and love are timeless, as are Christ's Paschal Mystery and the mystery of the Immaculate Conception — so important for our religious community and our charism. In the life of the Blessed, we discover precisely these dimensions, and these are the themes explored in the conferences.

The conferences have been thematically arranged not only to bring us closer to the person of Blessed George, but also to allow the example of his life to become for us truly *a new incentive to seek the City that is to come*. This is particularly important today, as secularism — which limits the human perspective to the present — spreads widely and the values of this world hold sway. The topics address issues central to religious spirituality, including our own — that of the Congregation of Marian Fathers. After all, Blessed George — through Divine Providence — became an instrument for the salvation and

renewal of our religious community. Hence the title of this book: *A Man of Providence*. Thanks to his decision to join the dying Marian Congregation and his obedience to the Church —which wisely and prudently guided the work of Renewal —we are able today to serve the People of God in twenty countries across the globe.

These reflections are designed to offer a closer look at various aspects of religious life within the Congregation of Marian Fathers; they are arranged to align with the liturgical seasons, thereby fostering meditation and spiritual deepening. For instance, January — marking the centenary of Blessed George's birth into Heaven — focuses on his journey toward embracing the Marian charism. The Lenten reflection addresses the suffering he endured (due to various factors, including illness); and May highlights his devotion to Mary. Other topics — while not always directly linked to the specific month — explore his personality, spiritual character, or ministry, offering a broader and deeper perspective on the spiritual qualities inherent in the nature of our Congregation.

Many authors have sought to place the legacy of Blessed George within the broad context of the Congregation's charism as we understand it today. This offers a valuable wealth of theological and spiritual reflection for a proper understanding of the Congregation's charismatic continuity and identity amidst the inevitably changing external forms. Blessed George — the subject of this work — represents a somewhat more recent interpretation of our identity, even though a full century has passed since he departed to the Lord. This means that the fourth generation is now entering the Congregation — a generation for whom the era of the Blessed is already the distant past. Consequently, whenever a new generation asks questions about the identity of the Marian Fathers, it must seek answers not only in the foundational charism of our holy Father Stanisław but also in interpretations of that charism — ideally, interpretations provided by figures whose heroic virtue, beatification, or canonization has been recognized by the Church. Blessed George Matulaitis is one such outstanding interpreter.

I thank the authors for their collaboration, for the prompt writing of the topics they so generously accepted, and for their much-needed contribution to reflecting on the heritage of our Congregation. I trust that this book — beyond its primary purpose of providing ready-made talks for monthly days of recollection — will foster further and deeper reflection on the history and spirituality of what the last General Chapter in 2023 defined as the Marian Fathers' School of Spirituality.

Andrzej Pakuła, MIC
General Prefect of Formation

ANDRZEJ PAKUŁA, MIC

January 2027

The Maturation of Blessed George Matulaitis into the Charism of the Congregation of Marian Fathers

The Word of God: Romans 12:1–2

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God — this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Childhood and Youth – Growing Up in the Atmosphere of the Marian Fathers

The ties between Blessed George Matulaitis and the Marian Congregation were clearly present from the very beginning of his Christian life. He was born on April 13, 1871, in the village of Lugine, within a parish established on September 17, 1783, by decree of the Bishop of Vilnius, Ignatius Massalski, and entrusted from the very beginning to the pastoral care of the Marian Fathers. The Marians were present in Mariampole (formerly known as Staropol) from around 1750, when the monastery was established (J. Kosmowski, *Marians 1670–1788*, p. 281). Lugine was located approximately 6 km from the parish church in Mariampole. He was given the name George at his Baptism in the parish church. He was baptized by Fr. George Česnas, the parish priest and simultaneously the Superior General of the dwindling Marian Father Order.

When George was eight years old, he began his education at an elementary school and later attended secondary school in Mariampole, where religion was taught by Fr. Vincent Sękowski — who will soon become the last Superior General. After completing elementary school, he began his studies at the local

secondary school, but after about four years, he discontinued his education due to illness. For the next three years or so, he worked on his brother's farm as his strength permitted; then, in 1889, with the help of his cousin John Matulewicz — a professor of ancient languages in Kielce — he moved to that city to prepare for admission to the local major seminary. In 1891, he entered the Major Seminary in Kielce.

In his biography of Blessed George, Fr. T. Górski wrote: "Through the sacrament of baptism, George became connected with the Marian family. The Marians also prepared him for First Holy Communion and taught him the fundamentals of the faith. Following their example, he wished to become a priest" (Górski, p. 16). Indeed, this may well have been the case; however, one must bear in mind that in 1891 — the year young George decided to enter the Kielce seminary — there were only seven elderly Marians left in the Mariampole monastery, which — under the law established by the ruler, the Tsar — made it possible to admit novices. Under the Tsar's decree of 1864, which established so-called "state-funded" monasteries, novices could be admitted to the monasteries only when the number of monks fell below 14.

There is no evidence to suggest that George showed any interest in joining the Marian Fathers at that time. A year after George entered the major seminary in Kielce, Fr. G. Česnas died, followed by another priest the next year; in 1908, two other priests passed away, leaving only one remaining — Fr. Vincent Sękowski.

If we look at the events of our Blessed's life, there is no indication that George Matulaitis took any interest in the Marian Fathers prior to his decision to join the Congregation in 1908. He was young, and perhaps — until he left Mariampole and entered the seminary in Kielce — he did not yet grasp the full gravity of the situation facing the Congregation, which the Tsarist regime had condemned to extinction.

George's First Calling: Diocesan Priest

At the age of 20, George Matulaitis began his studies preparing for ordination the priesthood at the Major Seminary in Kielce. Subsequently, due to socio-political reasons, he continued his studies at the Archdiocesan Seminary in Warsaw and later at the Theological Academy in St. Petersburg. He received priestly ordination in the academic chapel of the Transfiguration of the Lord in St. Petersburg at the hands of the Academy's rector, Bishop Charles Niedziałkowski, on November 20, 1898, and a few months later, after obtaining a master's degree in theology, he returned to his Diocese of Kielce. He served

as a parochial vicar in Daleszyce for only a few months, as his worsening illness necessitated a trip to Merano (Tyrol) for treatment. While continuing his medical treatment, he took up residence at the "Canisianum" residence for student priests in Fribourg, Switzerland, and began his studies at the University of Fribourg, which he concluded with a doctoral dissertation on July 19, 1902. A month later, he returned to the Diocese of Kielce and was appointed a professor at the local Major Seminary; he also began engaging in scholarly, pastoral, and social activities.

Two years later, he ended his career as a professor; a serious deterioration in his health — including the risk of leg amputation — led to his admission to the Transfiguration Hospital in Warsaw, where he underwent a painful course of treatment. He would never return to the Diocese of Kielce. During his rehabilitation, he resided at the Plater-Zyberkówna Educational Institute for Girls in Warsaw, where, to the extent his strength allowed, he undertook ministry among priests, nuns, young people, and workers. In 1907, he began working as a professor and lecturer at the Theological Academy in St. Petersburg, Russia.

The Second Calling — Maturing into Religious Life

In a letter from September 1908 addressed to the last Marian, Fr. Vincent Sękowski, Fr. George revealed his desire for religious life, which he had been harboring in his heart for some time. The letter was essentially a formal request for admission to the Congregation of Marian Fathers. He wrote:

> For a long time, I have felt a desire for a more perfect life. I was simply reluctant to leave the Church in our country — where there is so much work to be done yet so few laborers—and set off for foreign lands; so, I stayed. Now that greater freedom prevails in our country and religious orders are beginning to revive, I would like to realize my aspirations — specifically, I would like to join the Marian Congregation. I discussed this with one of my friends; he, too, would join immediately along with me. We are almost certain that two other friends of ours would also like to don the Marian habit (*The Revival of the Congregation of Marian Fathers*, Warsaw 1995, p. 51. N.B. it should be noted here that in the most recent edition of J. Matulaitis's letters—titled *Polish Letters*, Licheń Stary 2012, edited by J. Kumala MIC — the phrase "would also like to don the Marian habit" was removed and replaced with the phrase "would also like to become Marians").

In his biography of J. Matulaitis, T. Górski provided two important pieces of information that illustrate the Blessed's journey toward the decision to embrace religious life. First of all, Górski believed that when Blessed George wrote of having long harbored a desire for religious life — yet hesitated to pursue it because he was reluctant to leave the Church in Lithuania — he was likely referring to an intention to join the Dominicans in Fribourg. He met the Dominicans during his stay in the city for medical treatment and studies between 1899 and 1902. They made a very good impression on him (Górski, p. 83).

Secondly, Górski noted that "Fr. Matulaitis was interested in the issues of the interior life and priestly perfection. He chose Fr. Honorat Koźmiński as his master in this field" (Górski, p. 54). Letters written to Blessed H. Koźmiński OFMCap — the founder of numerous religious communities that do not wear the religious habit — reveal that one learned to live according to the evangelical counsels under his guidance while also belonging to and participating in the life of two associations of diocesan clergy: the Marian Association of Secular Priests and the Association of the Apostolic Union of the Clergy. When, in time, very serious difficulties and doubts arose, Fr. George withdrew from both associations. Throughout this period, however, he was accompanied by a deep desire for a life more perfect than the one he led as a diocesan priest. Undoubtedly, the circumstances of his life also played a role: an illness later diagnosed as bone tuberculosis, the need to travel to Switzerland for treatment, and the studies he undertook there, culminating in a doctorate. Encounters with members of communities freely living the religious life — along with many other events — also played a significant role.

All these situations and the people he met — who led truly profound spiritual lives — combined with his own maturing faith to awaken in Fr. George's heart an increasingly compelling desire for religious life; this desire ultimately took shape in his decision to join the Congregation of Marian Fathers.

Vows in the Congregation of Marian Fathers

By a decision of the Holy See, on August 29, 1909, Fr. George Matulaitis professed his vows in the Congregation, and Fr. Francis Bučys was admitted to the novitiate. The ceremony took place in in the chapel of Bishop Casimir Ruszkiewicz, located at the Church of the Holy Cross in Warsaw. Bishop Casimir Ruszkiewicz himself described the event as follows:

> I, Casimir Ruszkiewicz, Bishop of Berissa and Suffragan of Warsaw, hereby declare that — by virtue of the authority granted to me by the Sacred Congregation for Religious via document no. 3544/09 — on August 29, 1909, I admitted the petitioners George Matulaitis and Francis Bučys, both Doctors of Theology and professors at the Theological Academy in St. Petersburg, into the Congregation of Marian Fathers in the presence of the Congregation's Superior General, Vincent Sękowski; I admitted George Matulaitis to make his first vows and Francis Bučys to begin his novitiate. This act is confirmed by the signatures of the Reverend Superior General and the petitioners.

Given the sometimes conflicting opinions regarding what actually happened during that meeting, several points must be emphasized:

1. Fr. George's taking of vows and Fr. Bučys' admission to the novitiate depended primarily on the decision of Fr. Sękowski. It was he who had to decide first whether to accept this solution proposed by the Holy See. The content of the rescript cited by the bishop in his note is unequivocal. Here is the full text: "In view of the letter of recommendation from the Ordinary of Warsaw, he is entrusted with the authority to admit the petitioners in question to the Congregation of Marian Fathers, following the receipt of valid consent from the surviving Superior General. After at least three months have elapsed since their admission, the petitioners shall return with letters of recommendation from the Venerable Ordinaries of Mogilev, Warsaw, and Sejny." Signature: "M.P."
2. Thus, Fr. Sękowski was not merely a passive observer of the event, but the legitimate Superior General of the Congregation; it was upon his decision that it depended whether Fr. George would make his vows and whether Fr. Bučys would be admitted to the Congregation. The Holy See confirmed his office as Superior General in a rescript.
3. The bishop did not state who received the vows. The act of admission to profession and the act of profession itself are two separate acts (It is not uncommon even today for a major superior, with the consent of his council, to admit someone to profession, while someone else is delegated to receive the vows).

We must constantly bear in mind that the final decision regarding the adoption of such a solution — in accordance with the Rescript — rested not with the bishop, but with Fr. Sękowski. It was also evident that, for both acts to be valid, both the taking of vows and the admission to the novitiate had to

be liturgical in nature, in accordance with the Congregation's rites at the time. By the same token, the formula of vows pronounced by Fr. George before the Superior General must have been the same as the one used in the Congregation—that is, the one employed by Fr. Sękowski when he took his vows; no other formula was in use within the Congregation in 1909.

All these circumstances — even though omitted from the bishop's note — were essential for the validity of the vows. Fr. George was dispensed from the novitiate and admitted to making his vows, as the bishop explicitly emphasizes in the note; however, there is no mention of any other dispensations. The absence of a record in the bishop's notes stating that he personally received Fr. George's vows must therefore be understood to mean that it was not he who received the vows from Fr. George, but rather the Superior General, who was present at the time.

The same applies to the admission of Fr. Bučys to the novitiate: the bishop did not write that he had admitted him to the novitiate, but merely that he had allowed him to enter it. Thus, both the reception of vows and admission to the novitiate were conducted by the Superior General, Fr. Sękowski, who was present at the meeting.

In accordance with the Congregation's Constitutions of 1787, it was the duty of the Superior General to receive religious profession from novices (Chapter X, point 2). He also presided over the admission to the novitiate, following the novices' general confession and reception of Holy Communion for the purpose of obtaining a plenary indulgence (Chapter I, point 3). It is no coincidence, then, that the bishop emphasizes in his note that the Superior General himself took part in the meeting. One must assume that this was the very purpose of his presence in the bishop's chapel — for the Superior receives vows and admits candidates to the novitiate.

Bishop Francis Bučys, MIC describes the event in exactly the same way in his memoirs, included in the *Positio* for the beatification of Blessed George: "And so, on August 29, 1909, in Warsaw on Krakowskie Przedmieście Street — at the parish house of the Church of the Holy Cross, in the Bishop's private chapel — Matulaitis and I, having made our confessions to Bishop Ruszkiewicz, performed the prescribed rite: Superior General Vincent Sękowski, in the presence of Bishop Ruszkiewicz, received Matulaitis's first religious vows and admitted me to the novitiate" (*Positio*, Rome 1980, p. 60).

Marian, from First Vows to the Office of Superior General — Renovator and Reformer

Less than two years after Fr. George took his vows, Fr. Sękowski died (on April 10, 1911). Four days later, hidden from the secular authorities, a General Chapter took place in the sacristy of the parish church in Gelgaudiškis, attended by three Marian priests: Fr. Bučys, Fr. J. Totoraitis, and Fr. George, who was elected Superior General. He remained in this role until his death in 1927. That same year, a few months later, Blessed George gave up his academic career and moved with the novices to Fribourg, Switzerland, where he could safely continue the formation of new generations of the revitalized Congregation.

As the principal formator, he began laying the foundations for the revitalized Congregation. Six months later, in a letter dated February 8, 1912 — written in Fribourg to Fr. A. Staniukynas, a highly educated and active pastor among Lithuanian immigrants in the U.S.A. and founder of the Sisters of St. Casimir — he described the situation of the Marians as follows:

> From the old Marians, one might say, we inherited only the name. Their constitutions, it turned out, did not meet the needs of the present day nor comply with ecclesiastical law enacted subsequently. It was necessary to redraft the constitutions and submit them to Rome for approval. We accomplished this while Father General Sękowski was still alive and received approval from the Sacred Congregation. The old Marians had destroyed all their documents, papers, and archives, fearing searches. Now we must develop and create everything anew. We need to draft explanations for the constitutions (instructions), establish a method for governing the Congregation, and so forth. Thus, I am currently working on this as much as I can, while consulting others. I am drawing upon the rules and instructions of the Jesuit Fathers as well as those of other young, active, and vibrant congregations. Nor did we inherit any assets from the old Marians. Upon his death, Father General Sękowski bequeathed 6,000 rubles to me, but the secular authorities invalidated his will. Consequently, we did not receive a single penny of his money. So, for the time being, our Congregation is, one might say, without assets (*Lithuanian Letters*, p. 664).

This description of the situation in which the revived Congregation — and the Renovator himself — found themselves is also linked to his personal experience. Due to the urgency caused by the illness of Fr. Sękowski and the desire

to save the Congregation as quickly as possible, he was dispensed from the novitiate by a decision of the Holy See. History has vindicated such actions, as this was the last moment when the Congregation for Religious saw a possibility of saving the Marians — Fr. Sękowski died a few months after approving the necessary changes to the Congregation's statutes, which were subsequently ratified by the Holy See.

At the same time, however, one must also note the consequences of such a course of action. Although Fr. George was already a mature man (38 years old) and a highly-educated priest (a professor at the Theological Academy) when he joined — and had for some time been personally cultivating a deep spiritual life — he was not initiated into the spirit and character of the Congregation he had entered. And undoubtedly, in the tradition of the Church, this is precisely the purpose of the novitiate: a time when the candidate begins life in the institute not only to discern God's call, but also to experience the Congregation's way of life and become imbued with its spirit. Given the political situation, the dying state of the Congregation, and the dispensation granted by the Congregation for Religious, Fr. George was deprived of all these supports. He was largely compelled to form himself — though obviously in collaboration with others who joined him in the work of reviving and necessarily reforming the Congregation. Fr. Bučys — a friend and co-renovator of our religious community — played a pivotal role in this regard. The letters Blessed George wrote to Fr. Bučys serve as beautiful and unequivocal evidence of his participation in this work of renewal.

The primary difficulty lay not in legal norms, rules of spiritual formation, or the principles of religious life, but in transmitting what we today call the charism of the Congregation — concepts referred to at the time primarily as the nature, character, and purpose of the religious community. Especially during the early years of his religious life, it is evident how difficult Blessed George found it to align his own vision of the Congregation with what we now call the founding charism. This absence is particularly evident during the early years of Fr. George's religious life as a Marian. Aware of Fr. Sękowski state of health, the Congregation for Religious demanded swift action from both the incumbent Superior General and his new associates. It demanded the submission of a draft of the new constitutions and supplementary documents, including the original Marian Rule and the Constitutions of 1787. In response, Fr. George prepared a draft of the new constitutions, which — along with a request from Superior General Sękowski and other documents — was submitted for approval.

The providential action of the Congregation is evident — not only in the push for necessary measures while Superior General Sękowski was still alive,

but also in the concern for preserving the identity and continuity of the Congregation of Marian Fathers. T. Górski assessed the matter as follows in the Blessed's biography:

> The Congregation introduced three fundamental amendments to the draft constitution. First, the Marian legislator [George Matulaitis] had named the draft: <Institute of the Marian Brothers under the Title of the Immaculate Conception of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary>. […] However, mindful of the Marian tradition (as a clerical order) and applicable law, the Congregation struck out this wording. […] Second, the Congregation incorporated into the constitution a provision from the old Marian statutes regarding special support for the souls in Purgatory—a practice that had been one of the objectives of the Congregation of Marian Fathers. This addition preserved one of the distinctive features of Marian spirituality and mission. […] Finally, the third amendment concerned restoring the original character of the Marian apostolate: proclaiming the truths of the faith "especially to simple people" (Górski, p. 93).

By not permitting the aforementioned changes, the Congregation ensured that the character, nature, and identity of the Institute remained intact, while simultaneously implementing necessary adjustments forced by the political and intra-ecclesial situation. To enable a hidden life, it was necessary to transform the order into a religious congregation — entailing the conversion of solemn vows into simple vows and the abandonment of the white habit. Moreover, the previous Constitutions had been approved as early as 1787, and in 1901 the Congregation for Religious issued *Norms* for all religious orders, requiring their own proper law to be brought into conformity with them.

In the view of the Holy See, however, the changes proposed by Fr. George would have resulted in the loss of the Congregation's essence and would have signified not a continuation, but the creation of a new Congregation. This providential approach to implementing changes — carried out under the supervision of the Congregation for Religious — proved to be vitally important just a few years later, when the Marian Fathers Congregation no longer had to operate in secret and began to lead its religious life openly. For controversies arose at that time, stemming from doubts among many within the Church as to whether the renewed Congregation was the same one founded by Father Stanislaus Papczyński, or perhaps a new Congregation founded by Fr. George Matulaitis. When, following the death of Archbishop Matulaitis, a group of men approached Henry Przeździecki — the Bishop of Podlasie — asking for

permission to lead a religious life according to the unreformed Marian Fathers constitutions of 1787, the bishop referred the matter to Rome. The Congregation for Religious responded with a rescript dated April 25, 1928, explaining that "the transformed Congregation of Marians is the legitimate continuation — albeit in a new form—of the very same ancient Marian Order founded in the 17th century" (cf. Górski, p. 113).

Growing into the Charism of the Congregation of Marian Fathers

Although the concept of "charism" is modern and such terms were not used in the time of Blessed George, the idea itself has been present since the very beginning of religious life. "The state of the evangelical counsels belongs inviolably to the life and holiness of the Church" (*LG* 44), and from the earliest days of religious life, due care has been taken to ensure fidelity to this charism — now known as the "foundational charism." "At the foundation of every institute of consecrated life lies a particular founding charism. Indeed, the entire history of religious life bears witness to the fact that individual religious families arose from the initiative of persons who, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, were able to discern the signs of the times and respond to them in a prophetic manner" (*VC* 48). The Renovator of our Congregation, unable to receive the formation proper to the Congregation of Marian Fathers, had to take special care in recognizing this charism, preserving it, and passing it on to future generations.

Traces of this process of maturation can be seen in his writings. I would like to draw attention to two documents. The first is a prayerful entry in Blessed George's *Spiritual Diary*, made a year and a half after taking vows: "I thank You, Lord, for the special feelings of love You have granted me toward the Immaculate Conception of the Most Holy Virgin Mary. In the past, I found this prayer difficult, but now how sweet it is to pray, kneeling at Her feet and immersing myself in prayer." One can observe here the same characteristics of our charism that are articulated in the latest Constitutions under the heading "The Essence of the Charism": "The mystery of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary is the essence of the Congregation's charism and, from the very beginning of its existence, a special sign, source of strength, and joy of the Marian vocation. The identity and mission of the Congregation flow from this mystery."

A second document illustrating the maturing attitude and the ongoing quest for the identity of the Congregation founded by Fr. Stanislaus is a record

made by Blessed George — after he had resigned from the See of Vilnius and about a year and a half before his death — in Rome in August 1925:

> I moved to the Benedictine Fathers at the Basilica of Saint Paul to make a retreat. I felt a great thirst for it. I was eager to set my conscience in order and lay the foundations for a new life. The retreat. It was truly worthwhile. I put my conscience in order and found complete peace. I experienced many graces from God. I found inner stillness. In the Fathers, I saw a beautiful example of a zealous, devout religious life. We Marians — how mediocre we still are as religious compared to those Fathers.

Growing into the charism of the Marian Fathers is also a process of the Renovator maturing into the charism of religious life. Over time, Blessed George comes to increasingly understand the value of religious life in itself, and not merely as a tool for a more effective apostolate. His journey from diocesan priest to Renovator of the Congregation — whose spirit and character he must adapt to on the one hand, while shaping them himself on the other — serves as a good example of how an Institute's form can change while its identity is preserved. This confirms the Church's teaching that religious life is a dynamic gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church — rooted in history yet always open to new challenges.

Thanks to the spiritual intuition of Blessed George and his obedience to the Church, the dying Congregation of Marian Fathers not only survived but became living proof that the Holy Spirit ceaselessly renews the face of the Church through people ready to do anything *Pro Christo et Ecclesia*.

Questions:

- What is my knowledge of the Congregation's history from 1864 (the suppression of religious orders by the Tsar, which effectively condemned the Congregation to extinction) to 1930 (the establishment of the American, Lithuanian, and Polish provinces)—particularly regarding the period before the renewal, the time of the renewal itself, and the first years following it?
- What is the story of how I came to embrace the charism of the Congregation of Marian Fathers?

CLAUDIO GOMES DOS SANTOS, MIC

February 2027

The Social Sensitivity of Blessed George

The Word of God: Luke 10:25–37

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

Introduction

The Parable of the Good Samaritan sets forth a blueprint for an evangelical way of life for all the baptized in the face of the social injustices humanity experiences in every age. "How relevant this parable is," commented Pope Bene-

dict XVI. "And do we not see people around us who have been plundered and broken? Victims of drugs, human trafficking, and sex tourism; people who are inwardly shattered — who, while wallowing in wealth, are spiritually empty. We cannot remain indifferent to all this; it is a call for us to possess the eye and heart of a neighbor, as well as the courage to show love."[1]

In our Constitutions, when the characteristics of a Marian are discussed, concern for the poor and the unjustly treated comes to the fore. The Marians, inspired by the mystery of the Immaculate Conception, "...are distinguished by: mutual love and fraternal unity, a spirit of self-denial and sacrifice, industriousness, hospitality, a readiness to cooperate with clergy and laity, a spirit of mercy, and **sensitivity to the poor and the socially disadvantaged**" (Const. 13).

In the face of so many who traverse the paths of life today — seeing people lying by the roadside yet turning away and walking on, locked in a world of selfishness where only the "self" matters — Marians are called, following the example of their Founder and Renovator, to become like that traveler journeying in the footsteps of the Master: one who notices the wounded and abandoned and is deeply moved with compassion. This requires stripping oneself of self and opening up to the action of God's grace. Without it, concern for the poor could remain merely a social activity, susceptible to ideologies contrary to the Gospel. Blessed George Matulaitis always strove for Gospel perfection; thus, his social engagement was purified of worldly elements. In all things, one must seek God and do His will, while renouncing oneself. He wrote of this in his *Diary*:

> We must view everything in the light of eternity; with great diligence, we must seek God in all things and strive to please Him alone. (...) We must break the shackles that bind us—with the chains of vainglory—to the affairs and trifles of this world. We must cast off the heavy burden imposed by an unnecessary concern for the empty opinions of others—a burden that so often weighs us down. We must boldly remove all obstacles from our path and scorn the specters that fear likes to conjure up before us: the dread of the cross, of suffering, oppression, want, persecution, and failure. In short, we must not fear dying—like the grain cast into the earth of which the Gospel speaks. Until the grain dies, it lies in the ground alone and fruitless; only when it dies does it bring forth life and yield abundant fruit. "Unless a kernel of

[1] J. Ratzinger – Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth. Part 1: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, Kraków 2007, p. 171.

> wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed" (John 12:24). Likewise, a person should not fear dying to self and immersing themselves in God. Only when one truly dies to self and to the world does one come alive again, reborn in God, and bear much fruit. Whoever thus "loses" their soul in God and for God will find it—now holy, pure, and divinized—and will save it, and through it, many others... (*Diary*, 32).

The priest and the Levite in the parable — and even more so the robbers — did not allow the old self to "die"; that is why they did not go out to the other man who lay beaten and abandoned. With the Marians, it should be different; our Renovator reminds us of this:

> What kind of people do we need, and what sort of workers for God does our vocation demand? People who have died to the world, and to whom the world has died (cf. Gal 6:14); people who have completely denied themselves and surrendered themselves entirely to God; people who have stripped themselves of self-love and their corrupt nature, and have clothed themselves in grace and the Spirit of Christ; people who remember that *Christ died for all, so that those who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again for them* (2 Cor 5:15) (*Diary*, no. 52).

Through the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus shows that the Christian life should be built around two fundamental axes: love of God and compassion for one's neighbor. We find this in the life of Blessed George, and it should permeate the entire community renewed by him. This community, and all those reached by its pastoral ministry, cannot accept the injustices that people endure, for even today "they sell the innocent for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed" (Am 2:6-7).

Blessed Bishop George Matulaitis: A Samaritan of His Time

In the attitude of that "Good Samaritan," the Church of every age recognizes the program Jesus entrusted to it: to care for, tend to, and heal all men and women wounded by life or rejected by society — those lying along the roadside of humanity's journey. Does our Marian community embrace this

mission? Does the Church truly strive to be a "field hospital" that welcomes and heals the "wounded" — those abandoned by others walking the path of human history who remain unmoved by compassion? These are questions of enduring relevance, questions that surely stirred the heart of Blessed George; for from his very childhood, he was imbued with religious sensitivity, fervent and sincere piety, and compassion for his neighbors.

Alongside the Gospel, a significant source of inspiration for Blessed George's social sensitivity was Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of May 15, 1891. In it, the Pope paid particular attention to the plight of workers affected by the consequences of the Industrial Revolution: the proletarianization and exploitation of the workforce, social conflicts, the concentration of wealth, and widening social inequalities. The living and working conditions of laborers were also among the issues that deeply concerned our Renovator.

The Church's social teaching is not ideological in nature. Therefore, through its pastors, the Church reflects on human and societal life, drawing upon the insights of the human sciences as well as the teachings of the Gospel and Church Tradition. Free from any ideology, the Church's social teaching is a form of moral theology — that is, a reflection of faith regarding human conduct in social life (cf. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 41). In the light of the Gospel, the Church concerns itself with interpersonal relationships, reflects upon them, and points out ways to shape them in accordance with Christian principles, with a view to the good of the human person and society as a whole. *Rerum Novarum*, recognizing the dangers arising particularly from the ideologies propagated by the *Communist Manifesto* (February 21, 1948) of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, sought to address the extremely difficult situation of wage earners — especially industrial workers — who were afflicted by degrading poverty. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* expresses the same concern:

> The Church has rejected the totalitarian and atheistic ideologies associated in modern times with "communism" or "socialism." Furthermore, it has rejected, in the practice of "capitalism," individualism and the absolute primacy of market forces over human labor. Managing the economy solely through central planning distorts social bonds at their very foundation; managing it solely through market forces fails to realize social justice, as "there are many human needs which find no place on the market." Prudent management of the market and economic enterprises is to be encouraged, in accordance with a proper

hierarchy of values and with regard for the common good (CCC, § 2425).

His concern for upholding Gospel values led Blessed George to engage with the social issues of his time, desiring that all actions be imbued with God's grace. His love for the Gospel and the Church prevented the shadows of ideologies — such as socialism, with its totalitarian and atheistic ideas — from creeping in, particularly within the working-class environment. The truth of the Gospel should permeate every aspect of life. "Let my motto be: to seek God in all things, to do everything for the greater glory of God, to bring the Spirit of God into everything, and to imbue everything with the Spirit of God." (*Diary*, 1)

Thanks to his studies in Fribourg, then-Father George Matulaitis became one of the foremost experts on the Church's social teaching in Polish lands. Together with other activists, he organized courses on the subject and actively engaged in the Christian social movement — known at the time as Christian Democracy. When the bishops of the Kingdom of Poland established the Social Work Commission in 1905, Fr. George, together with Fr. Henryk Przeździecki, presented the foundations and principles of the Church's social activities. Fr. George was one of the authors of the statutes of the Christian Workers' Association. He dedicated himself to organizing the association's library and served as editor-in-chief of the periodical *Towarzysz Pracy* ("Work Companion"), steadfastly guided by Catholic teaching in an effort to eliminate all ideological and partisan influences. In 1907, he organized social studies courses for the association, attracting over 700 participants. The lectures delivered by Fr. George drew the greatest interest. The young priest was aware that he was undertaking a risky apostolate, as his activities aroused suspicion among those unfamiliar with Catholic social thought.

Due to his social activism, he was accused of socialism, liberalism, modernism, and even heresy. Consequently, the Warsaw Curia considered suspending him. Years later, recalling this painful period, he confided in his friend, Fr. Francis Bučys:

> It was as if the ground had opened up beneath me. I felt no solid footing. It seemed to me that I had desired with all my heart to serve the Church, yet its authority intent on condemning me. I had to suffer through the physical toll of that blow; I remained in my room for more than a week. (...) Through that illness, God revealed to me the meaning and purpose of the cross and suffering. And, by God's grace, I was healed. I ceased to pay attention to what people thought, said, or wrote

about me. I focused solely on the glory of God and the good of the Church. I chose for myself the motto*: Vince in bono malum*.[2]

This is the experience of those who desire to do God's will. The prophet Jeremiah is an example of a man who constantly brought his complaints before God: "I heard the slander of many: 'Terror on every side! Denounce him! Let's denounce him!' All my friends are waiting for me to slip: 'Perhaps he will be deceived; then we will prevail over him and take our revenge on him!' But the Lord is with me like a mighty warrior" (Jer 20:10–11). Blessed George knew he was following a path in accord with the Church's will, and he did not abandon his intentions. Many people remain abandoned and forgotten on the margins of life. The power of the Gospel should rouse those who proclaim Christ from complacency and spiritual lethargy, enabling them to confront the poverty and suffering present in society.

Let us be Samaritans. Even if it entails hardship and suffering, every effort is worth making for the sake of Jesus Christ. Let us always strive to stand with Christ — living in poverty, obedience, hard work and toil, humiliation, scorn, and suffering. Following Him and standing by His side, let us endeavor to embrace those tasks others are reluctant to undertake, and to serve in the most abandoned, hopeless, and despised places. Let us strive to raise up a sufficient number of willing candidates for assignments regarded by the world as the lowest and worst. Jesus, grant us this great grace (cf. *Diary*, 61).

Father George's addresses were well-received by the majority of his listeners and subsequently sparked discussion, demonstrating that his teachings were guiding Catholic social associations in Poland along the right path. His particular commitment to the social sphere led the Theological Academy in St. Petersburg to offer him the newly-established chair of sociology; he headed the department and lectured on the subject there for two years. His friend, Fr. Bučys, spoke of his fellow religious in these words: "In Fr. Matulaitis's sociology, we find a rare and valuable harmony between Catholic dogmatic orthodoxy and sound progress."[3] This fidelity to the Church's teaching characterized Blessed George's entire life and, through him, permeated the Congregation he renewed — something evident in Article 9 of our Constitutions.

In his homeland, Fr. George organized courses on social issues in Kaunas, delivering three lectures: "The Social Question in Our Times," "The Church

[2] Fragment of the article by Fr. João Carlos Roma Leite Rodrigues, MIC, in: *A Misericórdia na Espiritualidade do Beato Jorge Matulaitis-Matulewicz, Renovador dos Marianos*. April 25, 2011. www.marianos.pt Accessed: April 17, 2026.

[3] Quoted in: T. Górski, Z. Proczek, *Apaixonado pela Igreja: Bem-Aventurado Arcebispo Jorge Matulaitis-Matulewicz*, Curitiba 2002, p. 24.

and Property," and "The Question of Urban and Industrial Workers." These lectures were published in the journal *Draugija* in 1909. In the first of these, he wrote:

> The first great social issue arose when the teaching of Christ began to spread and people came to understand who they truly were. Perhaps nowhere else were foreign religions tolerated as they were in Rome. The Romans readily welcomed foreign gods into their pantheon, placing them alongside their own deities and worshipping them. Why, then, did they hate only the faith of Christ and His followers? Because they sensed that Christ's teaching was a new social force that was overturning the old order. The ancient state was founded on slavery, whereas Christ proclaimed liberty, equality, and fraternity to mankind. People realized that once these ideals were put into practice, the old order would inevitably vanish. Thus began a bloody struggle between the existing order — with its laws and worldview — and the new teaching of Christ and the new ideals of His time. Christ came, in a unique way, to set the world right and renew it. Yet, He did not engage in a direct battle against the existing order. He neither destroyed any of its institutions nor presented a pre-packaged, detailed blueprint for social renewal. Instead, He did something far greater: He touched the depths of the human soul, heart, and conscience. In doing so, He initiated the reform of the world.[4]

Jesus Christ Himself is, therefore, the foundation of the Church's entire social teaching, and it cannot be otherwise. Our Renovator was fully convinced of this. His reflections, articles, and lectures became the basis for the program of the Christian social movement in Lithuania. Always guided by a pastoral spirit, he sought the things that are above and constantly turned to supernatural means, yet at the same time he kept his feet firmly on the ground, walking the paths and the peripheries of human society. In the words of Pope St. John Paul II, "If our actions truly originate in the contemplation of Christ, then we should be able to see Him above all in the faces of those with whom He Himself chose to identify: 'For I was hungry and you gave Me food, I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed Me, I was naked and you clothed Me, I was sick and you took care of Me, I was in prison and you visited Me' (Mt 25:35–36)."[5]

[4] Ibid., pp. 25–26.
[5] John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte* (2001), no. 49.

Love is the "driving force" behind proclaiming the Gospel, because the Gospel itself is love. Guided by this conviction, Blessed George expanded the motto of the French Revolution to include love and justice.[6] In a spirit of love, he also strove to overcome all forms of discrimination. Replying to a correspondent from Kyiv, he wrote: "Our magazine is not antisemitic, and therefore we cannot accept your article for publication. Our motto is love and justice."[7] Love makes no distinction between people and overcomes all prejudices. Guided by this principle, when distributing food to the needy and noticing that some wished to exclude Jews and communists, the Bishop of Vilnius wrote: "Every hungry and needy person deserves compassion and must be saved, regardless of their beliefs or nationality."[8]

When the Renovator obtained permission to open a novitiate in the Diocese of Warsaw in 1915, he was entrusted with the Camaldolese church and monastery in Bielany. As the complex was vast, a portion of the buildings was designated to house orphaned children. "Many were astonished to see the renowned priest and professor Matulaitis carrying sacks of potatoes for the poor, hauling wood to the boiler room, standing in lines for food and clothing for his orphans, and enduring insults and abuse."[9]

Blessed George's social conscience was guided by love and justice, so that the Kingdom of God might expand into every dimension of society — especially among the poor and the downtrodden. Yet, his vision was not limited merely to championing the rights of the marginalized; as previously noted, the Light of Christ was meant to permeate everything. Therefore, one of his great insights was to invest in the intellectual formation of those who were to lead associations and trade unions. He possessed a clear understanding of both theological and social issues. Sound formation — grounding Christian teaching in people's minds — enabled the seeds of the Gospel to permeate working-class circles and other social spheres, purifying them of all ideological tendencies.

Proclaiming the Gospel cannot, therefore, be limited merely to the economic, political, social, or cultural dimension; rather, it must embrace the hu-

[6] The cover of the magazine *Towarzysz Pracy* bore the motto: Love, justice, freedom and brotherhood. (cf. T. Górski, Z. Proczek, *Apaixonado pela Igreja: Bem-Aventurado Arcebispo Jorge Matulaitis-Matulewicz*, Curitiba 2002, p. 21)

[7] Ibid.

[8] *Bishop's Journal*, April 24, 1919, in: *Dzienniki*, Licheń 2009, p. 217. Quoted by: Fr. João Carlos Roma Leite Rodrigues, MIC, in: *A Misericórdia na Espiritualidade do Beato Jorge Matulaitis-Matulewicz, Renovador dos Marianos*, www.marianos.pt Accessed: May 8, 2026.

[9] E. Matulaitis, *Divine Mercy in the Life and Teaching of Blessed George Matulaitis MIC*, in: *The Mystery of Divine Mercy in the Marian Charism*, J. Kumala, MIC (ed.), Licheń 2004, p. 323. Quoted by: Fr. João Carlos Roma Leite Rodrigues, MIC, in: *A Misericórdia na Espiritualidade do Beato Jorge Matulaitis-Matulewicz, Renovador dos Marianos*. Accessed: May 8, 2026.

man person in their entirety, including their openness to the Absolute — to God.[10] In the effort to make the conditions of human life on earth increasingly worthy of the human person, the rationality of faith forbids overlooking the values or the transcendent vocation of the human person. The Kingdom of God cannot be equated with a purely temporal and political project. In this way, Catholic social teaching could be embraced and assimilated by properly formed individuals who would become its witnesses and apostles, demonstrating the truth of faith that the preferential *option for the poor* stems from the Gospel, not from the ideology of class struggle. [11]

Conclusion

Faith finds expression in action when politics and economics remain rooted in eschatological and ethical values. In this way, faith does not become a tool for achieving political goals. Blessed George was convinced that the Church's social teaching serves the salvation of the human person. Therefore, it does not propose a specific political or economic model, but rather indicates paths and presents spiritual and ethical principles for action in the world. In its social teaching, the Church emphasizes that its primary and fundamental mission is the proclamation of Jesus Christ. Therefore, Blessed George's ministry was not beholden to any human agenda or ideology, but was entirely at the service

[10] Cf. Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975).

[11] In Latin America, during the mid-1960s, liberation theology adopted the term "preferential option for the poor" — a concept solidified at the 1968 Medellín Conference. Unfortunately — contrary to the teachings and life of the Renovator — this expression and its practical application began to drift toward an ideological framework that placed the social dimension at the center of proclaiming the Kingdom of God. Naturally, one must consider the "Third World" context, marked by dictatorial regimes and the exploitation of the poor — injustices crying out to Heaven. While the prophetic denunciation of social ills was certainly necessary, the "Christian" perspective adopted was heavily politicized and socially oriented. Consequently, the Sacraments receded into the background within these communities, and practices such as prayer, confession, the Eucharist, the Rosary, and Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament — along with other traditional spiritual practices — were undervalued; some thinkers within the liberation theology movement even dismissed them as obsolete or alienating.

Since then, the Church's Magisterium has sought, with great wisdom and prudence, to cleanse the concept of the "preferential option for the poor" of socialist ideologization and to prevent the Church from being reduced to a mere non-governmental organization (NGO) engaged in charitable work. Pope Francis himself draws attention to this — having personally encountered liberation theology and frequently addressing the poor in his teachings: "...we must heal the virus of social injustice, inequality of opportunity, marginalization, and the lack of protection for the most vulnerable. (...) The preferential option for the poor is not a political or ideological choice; nor is it a partisan one. It belongs to the very heart of the Gospel. The first to embody it was Jesus Christ himself..." (Catechesis of August 19, 2020). During one of his audiences, Saint John Paul II used the phrase "preferential love for the poor" (Audience of October 27, 1999).

of the Church — the People of God — so as to contemplate the face of Christ in those with whom He Himself chose to identify: "For I was hungry and you gave Me food, I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed Me, I was naked and you clothed Me, I was sick and you took care of Me, I was in prison and you visited Me" (Mt 25:35–36).

Returning to the parable of the Good Samaritan and reading it in the context of our times and the life of our Renovator, we continually ask ourselves: Who is our neighbor? We find the answer by observing the attitudes of the figures who passed by the beaten man: the robbers, whose hearts were filled with greed — "What is yours is mine; I will take it from you"; the priest and the Levite, with hearts filled with indifference — "What is mine is mine, and what is yours is yours," meaning: "Fend for yourself; deal with your own problems"; whereas the Samaritan says: "What is yours is yours, and what is mine is mine — but I can share what is mine."

Is there any barrier, any limit, when it comes to embracing others — women or men — whom we encounter on the paths of life?

Let us ask the Blessed Virgin Mary that the Marians may be Good Samaritans:

O Most Holy Mother, show Yourself to be a gracious Teacher to us.
We, too, call ourselves Your disciples,
yet instead of drawing holy wisdom from Your books,
we eagerly learn the false wisdom of this wicked world in its school.
Instead of swiftly following Your example along God's path after Christ,
we — like that man in the Gospel parable —
lie upon the ground, stripped by robbers, covered in the wounds of sin,
and bound by the chains of passion.

But You, O merciful Samaritan Woman, come to our aid!
Bind up our wounds, break our bonds,
and obtain graces and virtues for us from God.

Obtain for us love, O Most Loving One;
purity, O Most Pure One;
sweetness, O Most Sweet One;
perseverance beneath the Cross, O Most Patient One;
and true perfection — O most gracious and perfect Teacher.
Amen.[12]

[12] Sermon delivered on the Solemnity of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in: Selected Writings, in: E. Matulaitis (ed.), Prayers of Blessed George Matulaitis. Marian Fathers – Brazil.

Questions:

- Alongside "traditional" forms of poverty, new ones are emerging today, present in all walks of life. Are we able to recognize them where we carry out our apostolic ministry? If so, how do we respond to them, becoming an image of the Good Samaritan for others?
- To bear Christ everywhere, to renew and restore all things in Christ, and to win over and draw everyone to Christ. Ideologies constantly seek to inflame human hearts with ideas contrary to the Gospel — ideas that are increasingly atheistic. Some of these also penetrate Church circles, distorting the Gospel message and severing people from the sound Tradition of the Church. Today, the world of artificial intelligence is one of the new realms requiring the light of the Gospel. What are the Marians doing — looking to the example of their Renovator — to bring the light of Christ into these areas?

TOMASZ SEKULSKI, MIC

March 2027

Blessed George's Clinging to the Cross

The Word of God: Matthew 16:24-25

Then Jesus said to His disciples: 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.

Facing One's Own Cross

Facing one's own cross is one of the most important yet most difficult aspects of the Christian life. Firstly, because it entails confronting the mystery of the Cross of Jesus Christ — that is, answering why it was necessary for Him to take up His Cross, allow Himself to be nailed to it, and lay down His life for us. Secondly, because our natural instinct is to avoid what is difficult, to seek the easiest paths, and to resist struggle and suffering — yet precisely these things are bound up with the decision to take up one's cross.

Jesus Christ became man "for us men and for our salvation," as we profess in the *Creed*. Only in Christ is the truth about human life illuminated; only in Christ is there the fulfillment of humanity — eternal life in communion with God. It is significant that reading the Gospel passage above typically focuses our attention on the need to "deny oneself" and "take up one's cross." Yet, paradoxically, the joyful, positive message of this "Good News" stands at the forefront: after all, Jesus invites us to be with Him and, in doing so, to find the fullness of life!

The context of Jesus' words — the event after which they are spoken — is also significant. For the text says, "then Jesus said" — meaning: when, and under what circumstances? It was precisely when Jesus revealed to the disciples the mystery of His Passion, death, and Resurrection. Saint Peter reacted by opposing this way of thinking on Jesus's part. Christ firmly rebukes Peter, indicating that it is his own mindset that requires conversion — "Get behind Me, Satan"—and the adoption of a way of thinking that aligns with God's per-

spective. It is then that Jesus issues the invitation to follow Him and walk with Him — "whoever wishes, let him accompany Me"— so as to find true and eternal life in Him.

The call to "deny oneself" does not imply disparaging oneself or one's identity, nor does it mean rejecting one's sense of self-worth. In the Vulgate translation, St. Jerome used the Latin word *abnegare*; this, viewed alongside St. Peter's conduct, suggests a completely different message — one that points to the first of the deadly sins: human pride. Jesus invites us to negate the dominance of the *ego* and to displace it from the center of our lives. In this act of humility, the way opens to receive God's free grace and to make the most important and beautiful decision a person can make: to let Jesus Christ — Lord and Savior — reign at the center of one's life! Only then is a person able to discover the truth about themselves — their true worth — and only then does the path to eternal life open up for them.

The story of St. Peter reminds us that resistance to this "dethroning of the self" led him to deny Jesus three times — to betrayal. Yet Peter undergoes a transformation: the risen Jesus shows him His mercy. Now Peter is ready to take up his cross and allow Jesus to lead him wherever He sends him. For clinging to the cross is impossible without first clinging to Jesus — with complete trust and totality — an act expressed in the words: "You, Lord, know that I love You."

Blessed George's Paschal Journey

When we examine the life story of Blessed George Matulaitis, we easily perceive it as a kind of Paschal journey — a passage from death to life: a ceaseless ascent of Golgotha and an experience of the power of the Resurrection. On the one hand, it is a constant confrontation with physical and spiritual suffering, yet on the other, an experience of God's immense power. It was not without reason that Blessed George chose the words of Saint Paul — "Overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:21) — as his life's motto, his episcopal watchword, and his "Marian principle."

Indeed, the Apostle of the Nations was the Renovator's special spiritual patron. He is arguably the biblical author most frequently cited by him. We may surmise that he was deeply influenced by the testimony of St. Paul, who writes: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:19–20). Like St. Paul, the Renovator saw his spiritual power in the cross of Jesus Christ: "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been cru-

cified to me, and I to the world (Gal 6:14)." Blessed George himself writes in his *Spiritual Diary*:

> Following the example of St. Paul. We intend to look to the example of the Apostle Paul — to his active life, his courage, and his fortitude. Wherever we may find ourselves — whether in prison or in exile—we intend to proclaim Christ there and not depart from our way of life. We do not know what life may hold for us, or what hardships and persecutions we may have to endure for Christ's sake. We must be prepared for anything (no. 77).

From beginning to end, the life of Blessed George was marked by a Way of the Cross. He had to face numerous hardships from childhood onwards. His father died when he was three, and his mother passed away seven years later. To attend school in Mariampol, he had to travel about 10 kilometers daily, usually on foot. He encountered difficulties during his early school years that forced him to repeat the fourth grade. Throughout this time, he engaged in strenuous physical labor, helping to run the farm of his brother, who had taken young George into his care following their parents' deaths.

At the age of 15, a leg ailment manifested that threatened amputation. It was only years later that it was diagnosed as tuberculosis of the bone — a condition he would battle for the rest of his life. Yet, this was merely the beginning of his journey. The magnitude of the crosses he bore — throughout his priestly formation, his scholarly and pastoral work, and finally his episcopal ministry — becomes evident when reading his writings. The very task of renewing the Congregation of Marian Fathers was a saga marked by numerous anxieties and adversities, as well as experiences of uncertainty and failure. Amidst all this, his deep relationship with Christ — placing the Cross of Christ at the center and clinging to it — served as a source of extraordinary strength and hope.

The most abundant testimony regarding Blessed George's struggle with his crosses is found in writings from his time as bishop. Fr. Steponas Matulis, MIC notes:

> On the first anniversary of his installation in the Diocese of Vilnius, Bishop George wrote in his diary: "This year has been one of constant suffering — a year of the cross. Glory be to God." Some two years later, he wrote: "The third year of my time in Vilnius is drawing to a close; I have lived through this entire period (1918–1921) amidst constant changes, various troubles and hardships, ceaseless oppression and

misery, and at times even threats to my life." Yet the situation changed little throughout the remainder of his episcopal ministry. It is no exaggeration to say that Bishop George Matulaitis's ministry in Vilnius was an unceasing Way of the Cross and a bottomless chalice of sorrow, which the Bishop drained to the very dregs. His episcopal ministry was a martyrdom — a martyrdom that lasted seven years. Both the flock and the shepherd himself were enriched by its abundant spiritual fruits.[13]

Another Marian historian, Fr. Tadeusz Górski, MIC, writes:

> The bishop faced fierce opposition due to his nationality and his work in the spirit of the universal Church. Dishonest tactics were frequently employed against him. The campaign waged against him was organized in nature. Its aim was to vilify the bishop in the eyes of the faithful, thereby providing grounds to petition the Holy See for his removal on the basis that he was a hated figure who held no sway over the congregation. Bishop Matulaitis suffered greatly from the hostility directed at him and the obstacles placed in the path of his pastoral work; as he wrote to the Pope on June 27, 1925: "I am often beset by difficulties from all sides — difficulties that would leave me powerless were it not for the support of Christ and His Cross, as well as my obedience to the Holy See."[14]

"Lift up your hearts!'

Blessed George drew great strength from his many fraternal bonds and the support of friends and loved ones. In his own numerous letters, he frequently offered support to others by reflecting on the meaning of the Cross. He explained to others — and shared his own experience of — what it means to discover the power of Christ's Cross and to cling to it while grappling with the crosses of daily life. Here are some of the most significant words from the Renovator:

[13] S. Matulis MIC, *Marian Fathers on Blessed George Matulaitis-Matulewicz*, trans. from Latin by R. R. Piętka MIC, Marian Fathers Publishing House, Warsaw – Lublin 2008, pp. 71–72.

[14] T. Górski MIC, *Introduction*, in: J. Matulaitis, *Diaries*, Institutum Historiae Spiritualitatisque Marianorum, Licheń Stary 2009, pp. 16–17.

Do not let illness get the better of you, dear Father. For me, crosses and suffering often provide a fresh impetus for work. Lift up your hearts! The Immaculate Mother has watched over us so visibly; she will not forsake us now. A fundraising tour would be useful—it would get you moving a bit (to Fr. Kazimierz Bronikowski, MIC, in: *Polish Letters*, p. 71).

I work on our statutes day and night, making use of every spare moment. Besides, there are so many troubles! You write that there is no lack of crosses. These are minor ones; there will be more in priestly life. It is no wonder—we are priests of the Crucified One (to Fr. Józef Jarzębowski, MIC, in: *Polish Letters*, p. 250).

Misfortune is always misfortune; it always brings pain and suffering. Dark and gloomy thoughts assail one. Do not take them to heart; protest against them; in spirit, embrace the Cross of Christ; cling to the feet of the Crucified Jesus; unite yourself with Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane and bathed in a sweat of blood, and repeat with Him: "Not my will, but Yours be done!" (to Wanda Jeute, in: *Polish Letters*, pp. 256–257).

There is no shortage of crosses, Brother. I feel this truth more deeply and understand that *apart from Me you can do nothing*. Everything lies in the hands of Divine Providence. Prayer is our strength — and at times, our only help and weapon. It is difficult for a person to grasp, yet one must understand that the path to heaven is the Way of the Cross. *Was it not necessary for the Messiah to suffer these things in order to enter into His glory?* We, too, must pass through much suffering before reaching the Kingdom of Heaven. Yet Christ has promised us His help—*take courage: I have conquered the world. By your patience you will gain your souls* (to Bishop Francis Petras Bučys, MIC, *Lithuanian Letters*, p. 256).

Do not take every trifle to heart. Understand that one cannot live without the cross. Do not merely avoid fleeing from the cross; rather, desire and will to suffer for Christ. Rejoice if you are humiliated or crushed, for perhaps you will become, even if only a little, like Him. Strive to repay evil with good. See to it that you please God in all things. Seek only God and His glory in everything... (to Sister Petronela Uogintaitė, *Lithuanian Letters*, p. 796).

Clinging to the Cross of Christ

Blessed George's personal spiritual notes, collected as his *Diaries*, are filled with deeply personal and moving reflections on his spiritual clinging to the Cross of Christ. He openly shares the strength he draws from the act of pressing the crucifix to his heart and embracing it, from gazing upon the image of the suffering Jesus on the Cross, and from the practice of prostrating himself in prayer. In his entry "The Essence of Our Vocation," he shares:

> If I truly wish to follow in the footsteps of the saints, then the goal of Christ's life must become my goal as well, and the tools and means Christ employed must be mine too. What did Christ desire? To establish the Kingdom of God on earth — that is, our holy Church. By what path did He strive toward this? By the path of total self-denial, the path of labor, hardship, poverty, humiliation, persecution, and suffering. And He walked this path until He bowed His head, nailed to the cross. What follows from this? A duty for each of us to deny ourselves — voluntarily and completely—and to dedicate and surrender ourselves to the Church without reservation. In this, I see the meaning and essence of our vocation: we must voluntarily and willingly deny ourselves—our comforts and pleasures, our whims and indulgences. We must renounce this world — its riches, its goods, and its vain glory — and dedicate and surrender ourselves, along with all our talents and gifts of nature and grace, wholly and completely to the Church, for its good, defense, preservation, development, progress, and growth. May God grant that I never forget this (*Diaries*, pp. 26–27).

May the intercession of Blessed George sustain us, so that we do not fear confronting our personal crosses but courageously carry them alongside Jesus.

May we discover that the gesture of blessing — bestowed in the Church through the sign of Christ's Cross — is a promise of that very blessing, capable of being fulfilled in our lives each day.

Questions:

- In what ways — in what attitudes — does the dominance of my *ego* most often appear today? How do my pride and my stubborn insistence on my own human way of thinking manifest themselves?
- Do I clearly see what my cross is, and do I have the experience of taking it up and clinging to it, as Blessed George did?

DMITRIJS ARTIOMOVS, MIC

April 2027

Asceticism in the Spirituality of Blessed George Matulaitis. Asceticism in our Spirituality

The Word of God: Colossians 3:3–10

For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips! Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

The Theme of Dying

The theme of dying has been present in the tradition of Christian spirituality from the very beginning; the Sacrament of Baptism itself is viewed as an immersion into Christ's death — a dying together with Him — so it is hardly surprising that the path of spiritual growth entails an element of renunciation, that is, the loss of something, a kind of "little death."

The definition of asceticism that has become classic within the Lublin theological community describes it as an "effort (spiritual or physical) undertaken by a person to attain moral perfection, union with God, and salvation through the mastery of passions, self-denial, the limitation of life's necessities, the renunciation of pleasures, and the foregoing of comforts."[1] It should be added that this effort ought to be a regular practice rather than a one-time act

[1] Asceticism, in: "Catholic Encyclopedia", ed. F. Gryglewicz et al., Lublin 1989, Vol. 1, col. 938.

undertaken merely in a moment of religious emotion. One must also always bear in mind that no ascetic effort is — or can be — an end in itself; it always remains merely a means to achieve a goal that lies beyond it. Indeed, instances of veiled and subtle idolatry have occurred more than once when ascetic practices became an end in themselves.

It seems, however, that in the practice of our religious life, our basic needs are met; hardly anyone suffers from a lack of food, a place to sleep, or access to the internet. Moreover, thanks to the work of our confreres and the efforts of our bursars, the lives of many of us are organized in a manner that is truly Gospel-centered: "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear" (Mt 6:25). Therefore, we are at greater risk of a lack of asceticism than of an excess or idolization of it. Even when compared to the period following the renewal of our Congregation during the lifetime of Blessed George Matulaitis — a time when industrial society was already highly developed — our quality of life is far higher. Thus, the topic of asceticism seems even more relevant to us today.

Let us examine a few selected texts by Blessed George that can help shed light on what asceticism and mortification should mean for us today. Of course, this represents only a small fraction of the wealth of thought found in the writings of the Father-Renovator; nevertheless, I hope it suffices to provide us — contemporary Marians — with valuable guidance, enabling us, too, to use asceticism as a means of spiritual growth, just as he did.

Love for God Above All Else

In one of his letters to Jonas Totoraitis, Blessed George writes: "Thus, Brother, we shall not be able to surpass other religious orders in the austerity of our lives, in bodily mortification, or in fasting; yet we shall stand on equal footing with them in loving God, working for His glory and the good of our neighbor, and consecrating our entire lives to Him."[2] It seems that this counsel remains relevant today. We are still a small Congregation compared to others, yet the point is not to make comparisons; for we shall be judged neither by the number of works we undertake nor by the severity of the mortifications we practice — if indeed we practice them at all — but rather by what we did out of love for God, as opposed to what we did for the sake of other, lesser "loves" — things we sometimes deem very important, yet which stir our emotions and can even blind us.

[2] *Blessed George Matulaitis. Lithuanian Letters*, ed. J. Kumala, Licheń Stary 2015, p. 713.

Let me cite an example here that can also serve as a litmus test for one's love for God. A certain priest (I will omit his name and even his country of origin for obvious reasons) recounted how he once had a conflict with a fellow religious — as sometimes happens in our communities. Yet, despite everything, he decided he had to make peace with him. He went to him and said, "For the sake of Jesus, forgive me," thinking that if he could find no other grounds for reconciliation, perhaps this one — the most devout — would suffice.

However, the fellow brother was still too agitated by the conflict and — brace yourself, this might be shocking — replied: "Get lost, you and your Jesus!" Although this response might be shocking, it lays bare a truth: even the holiest motive can be rejected when some other, lesser thing seems more important — such as wounded pride or the conviction that one is right.

Many people can likely relate to this particular example. Sometimes, emotions, a sense of being offended, and a feeling of having been wronged can be so blinding that the argument of "doing something for the love of Christ" remains merely a pious slogan that adds nothing to one's life. It is precisely in such tense situations that one can see whether my love for God is merely a declaration or a motive for making decisions that truly lead to salvation — despite my own limitations and the conditioning shaped by my personality and worldview.

In short, what guides me — my wound or my love for God — even though that wound still hurts and hinders my life?

Here, it is worth recalling that love for God — if it is truly to surpass all else — cannot exist without pain. Let us remember Saint Paul the Apostle, who asked the Lord to remove a "thorn in the flesh"—an unspecified difficulty in his life (cf. 2 Cor 12:7–9). God's response was not to resolve the problem, but to make him realize: "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Cor 12:9).

Thus, we see that love for God is not only the source but also the goal of ascetic effort. If I place this love at the center of my life within my hierarchy of values — if it truly takes the first place — then difficulties and pain, even though they will not cease to hurt or trouble me, will no longer paralyze my will; I will become capable of choosing the greater good.

Active Asceticism

Let us recall the lectures on the theology of the spiritual life: "Active asceticism consists in the voluntary undertaking of specific practices of self-re-

straint."[3] In the collection of notes from the years 1910-1914 — known today as the *Spiritual Diary* — Blessed George sought, in an entry dated November 29, 1910, to express as fully as possible his understanding of mortification, that is, the physical aspect of so-called "active asceticism": the voluntary and conscious renunciation of a lesser good for the sake of a greater good. As part of a day of recollection, it might be worth reading this entire section;[4] here, however, we shall limit ourselves to a single quotation: "Mortification must render the body a more docile instrument of the soul," pointing to the immediate purpose of bodily mortifications; yet this same logic guides every ascetic effort.

Here we see the paradigm mentioned at the beginning: asceticism is not an end in itself; the mortifications and acts of self-denial one undertakes cannot be a source of pride, nor are they something to be put on public display to attract attention or impress others. After all, when we get into a car, adhering to traffic regulations is also a form of ascetic effort — a self-imposed restraint on the urge to drive faster — in order to reach our destination safely. Yet, once we arrive, no one usually boasts about having driven according to the rules.

Due to our nature wounded by original sin (*peccatum originale*, as theology terms it, following St. Augustine), we harbor within ourselves a concupiscence that makes it easier for us to choose the lesser good. Therefore, one cannot avoid the struggle of making decisions that are demanding, unpleasant, and — in the eyes of this world — often downright illogical. Among these is the conscious renunciation of a temporal good that offers immediate joy and relief.

I am not speaking of sin, for we are duty-bound to renounce sinful pleasures by virtue of being human and Christian; moreover, each of us has made this very promise to God through the profession of the evangelical counsels. On the one hand, foregoing a lesser good for a greater one becomes an exercise of the will — cultivating the ability to resist immediate gratification and practicing hope in God as the supreme reward. On the other hand, it leads to the freedom to make decisions that draw one closer to salvation, rather than merely providing temporal joy.

Indeed, such decisions are meant to be part and parcel of religious life; after all, upon entering an order, we declare — perhaps not always explicitly — that we do so out of love for God. This, in turn, entails renouncing other loves: the narcissistic focus on oneself and one's own supposedly infallible views; the

[3] M. Chmielewski, *Vademecum of Catholic Spirituality. 101 Questions About the Spiritual Life*, Lublin 2004, p. 197.

[4] See Bl. George Matulaitis, *Diaries*, ed. J. Bukowicz and T. Górski, Licheń Stary 2009, p. 54.

emotional attachment to that "beautiful soul" who is surely seeking spiritual support and whom one simply cannot leave alone for the night without sending a "goodnight" text; and the desire to order some highly useful gadget from Amazon without having to ask a superior for permission...

Thus, active asceticism — both in the time of Blessed George and today — is a path to freedom, to shedding one's dependence on the good things to which we feel "entitled." In religious life today, the most common trap seems to be precisely that lesser good — which is entirely legitimate — such as the opportunity for rest, personal growth, autonomy, or the pursuit of evangelization projects. It is indeed difficult to give something like that up; however, if I can forgo eating pork on Fridays, then in time I will also be able to give up a "lesser" good that is subjectively more important.

This is the path to answering the most important question of our religious life: myself or God? It is precisely here that the capacity for ascetic effort truly frees the religious from lesser goods; the ability to renounce reveals the extent to which the heart is genuinely free and ready to be filled by God alone.

I deliberately avoid discussing specific ascetic practices here, as each of us has our own particular circumstances, preferences, and weaknesses; consequently, what might benefit one person could prove harmful to another. This leads to the first question for reflection: What ascetic practices do I regularly undertake as a religious to learn to choose God in all things?

Passive Asceticism

In a letter to Fr. Honorat Koźmiński, our Father Renovator writes: "Perhaps God visits me with illness because things go well for me in the world; otherwise, I would not know what mortification is, for by yielding to the suggestions and advice of well-meaning people, I did not impose upon myself the mortifications regarding food that I ought to have imposed."[5] This statement also aligns with the Christian ascetic tradition, for the ascetic endeavor encompasses not only actively undertaken acts of renunciation but also the trusting acceptance of limitations and hardships arising from life's circumstances, so that these, too, may be offered to God as spiritual sacrifices.[6]

Of course, this is just one quote from one of Blessed George's many letters and notes, but it demonstrates that the Father-Founder confirmed the value of this approach in the dynamics of spiritual growth through his own life. We

[5] *Bl. George Matulaitis, Polish Letters*, ed. J. Kumala, Licheń Stary 2012, p. 352.
[6] Cf. M. Chmielewski, *Vademecum…*, p. 197–198.

likely all remember from his biography — dating back to our novitiate days — that, starting in his secondary school years, he suffered from tuberculosis of the bone, a condition that was not diagnosed until several years later. It was an illness he did not choose for himself, yet one he bore patiently, trusting in God. Nowhere in his letters do we find self-pity or complaints about his lot in life; nor, in the accounts of the hardships he faced at various stages of his life, is there a trace of bitterness over those struggles.

In our times, this type of ascetic effort has not lost its significance either, even though we live in a different context and under different conditions. Accepting the hardships life brings us seems so obvious that it goes unspoken, yet this is precisely the type of asceticism we encounter most often. For those with a "night owl" rhythm of life, rising early for prayers does not come easily; those who shoulder various pastoral duties often sacrifice their free time to them as well; those tasked with pursuing further education must attend lectures — even those that offer no real benefit but simply must be completed. If any of us were to make a thorough examination of conscience regarding the past month, we could find several areas of our religious life where we face difficulties — challenges we did not choose ourselves, yet must confront.

The trouble with life's hardships is precisely this: In the case of active asceticism, we can choose the time and nature of the mortification, making it easier to endure — especially since the chosen ascetic practice can be stopped at any moment. In passive asceticism, however, there are things beyond our control: generally, no one chooses their illnesses or character limitations — we receive what we receive almost by chance. Yet, within this very form of asceticism, there is one aspect that allows us to avoid remaining merely passive recipients of these hardships.

In the case of our Renovator, we see that it is he who decides to accept his illness, to live through it with God, and even to interpret it in an ascetic and soteriological light. In this way, it becomes a truly salvific instrument, even though it remains burdensome.

In our religious life, we have a choice regarding how we understand our difficulties and how we live through them. If any of us has ever had the opportunity to provide pastoral care to the sick in a hospital, we have surely encountered patients who seemed to radiate peace and light. Of course, this did not mean that they suffered less. One also encounters patients there for whom the only solace lies in ceaselessly blaming everyone around them — God included — for their suffering. Why does this happen? It appears to be a matter of choice. Let us call it the transformation of passive asceticism into active asceticism — that is, a form involving an act of will, the capacity to choose.

Let's be honest: religious life, like any other, is not easy. It involves things beyond our control — we may encounter insufferable confrères, unpleasant duties, or imprudent superiors. Of course, this is not about condoning evil, but there are sometimes burdensome situations that cannot be changed immediately. Yet, we can choose *how* to navigate that experience.

Lest this not sound like moralizing or a cheap platitude, yet everything hinges on my decision: can I interpret this difficulty of mine prophetically — through the lens of my own salvation history and my journey toward God? The attitude of the biblical Job serves as a fitting example here: Despite his initial certainty that his suffering was undeserved and his conviction that he could demand an answer from God, in the end, he receives none; God does not explain why this befell him or why he became the subject of a dispute between God and Satan. Job must fall silent before the mystery. Thus, passive asceticism (which has the potential to become active) does not consist in eliminating or understanding suffering; rather, through an act of will, it consists in accepting — in faith — that what is happening to me now has meaning, and in trusting God despite the lack of certainty. Indeed, that is a hallmark of faith: a persistent lack of certainty.

This leads to a second question for personal reflection: What difficulties in my life within the Congregation am I unable to accept, yet ought to? And I should try to interpret them in the light of faith.

If this succeeds, there is a chance to become free from the world while remaining in the world.

Our Losses and Gains

In light of the foregoing, it must be noted that stoic ideas — which emphasize the necessity of self-restraint and self-mastery — have long enjoyed great popularity in the modern business world. Even if someone has the means to satisfy most of their needs or can afford a luxurious life full of pleasures, it turns out that they do not actually become any happier. Moreover, recent years have seen a sharp rise in the number of people with mental health issues; this is driven not only by improved diagnostic capabilities but also by the fact that an increasing number of people struggle to cope with life in a world that stokes desire — thereby subjugating the individual — and offers no real choice to opt out of the products being pushed: material goods, food, short videos on the phone.

All the more so in our religious life — immersed in this world, yet grounded in faith and the evangelical counsels — it is impossible to avoid asceticism if we are to mature into the freedom to which Christ invites us.

Of course, asceticism always entails the loss of something we consider good. And although values such as a sense of security, comfort, certainty, and predictability are indeed good — and should not be labeled as sinful — these very good things can sometimes become obstacles to attaining higher values. Therefore, if someone decides to follow Christ — to undertake the effort of asceticism — they must be prepared to accept the loss of those lesser values.

From a worldly perspective, this logic seems unacceptable; yet, upon closer inspection, the loss of these values is necessary. Saint Augustine illustrates this well when he compares the human heart to a vessel that must be emptied of other contents before it can be filled with God.[7] Of course, this process is not painless, for in a sense, asceticism runs counter to our nature; yet its aim is not destruction, but rather the discovery and strengthening within us of the supernatural light of God, which leads man to his true calling — to be with God as the supreme Value.

If, as a religious, I undertake an ascetic effort and am able to forgo a lesser good, the gains far outweigh the losses. God Himself becomes my portion and leads me along the path of salvation — I realize this sounds overly abstract, and therefore unconvincing — so I will venture to say that the divine salvation we attain through His grace and ascetic practice is not merely about entering the Kingdom after death; that Kingdom can be experienced in this life as well. These are the fruits of the Spirit of which the Apostle Paul writes in the Letter to the Galatians (see Gal 5:22–23).

I invite you to meditate on this passage on your own; here, however, let us focus on just one of these fruits — one that we seem to lack greatly: Peace.

The first benefit to which asceticism leads is peace with oneself. When we see things we disagree with, we know all too well what emotions arise within us and what kind of complaining and swearing we become capable of. Then the valid question arises: is such inner peace even possible in such an assembly, in such a community, with such confrères? Yes, it is possible, provided that my own view of reality does not become an idol to me and that I can sincerely say to God: I do not agree with this, but I believe, God, that You are in control of it; I do not understand it, but I believe that You have it all in hand. Peace does not consist in the absence of stimuli, but in experiencing them with God, according to His plan.

The second benefit is peace at home. I remember my mother saying that home shouldn't be a battlefront — it should be a place of respite. You might face conflict at work or in a shop, but if you come home only to find a war zone there too, then you are just a step away from sin or a nervous breakdown.

[7] See Aurelius Augustinus, *In epistolam Ioannis ad Parthos tractatus decem*, 4, 6.

Yet, it is precisely an ascetic approach to one's own vision of life — accepting that another person not only can, but has the right to, think differently, and relinquishing any claim to omniscience or absolute righteousness — that leads to peace. This peace arises not because we think alike within the community, but because, despite our differences, we are moving toward God. He is more important than who is right.

Let us imagine a community where everyone is capable of foregoing a lesser good for the sake of a greater one — where everyone puts God first. This is possible; God does not stint on grace.

Yet, am I willing to embark on the path of asceticism, following the example of the Father-Founder?

Questions:

- What ascetic practices do I regularly undertake as a religious to learn to choose God in all things?
- What difficulties in my life in the Congregation am I unable to accept, yet ought to?

ANDRIS ŠEVELS, MIC

May 2027

Blessed George Matulaitis and the Blessed Virgin Mary

The Word of God (Jn 2:5):

His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

To God through Mary

Dear Brothers, when we look at the life of Blessed George Matulaitis, we see a man completely devoted to Christ, the Church, and the cause of human salvation. His life was not easy. It was marked by illness, misunderstanding, conflict, difficult decisions, heavy responsibilities, and deep concern for the Church. Yet, amidst these experiences, he maintained an extraordinary inner freedom and the capacity to surrender himself completely to God through Mary.

We find his fundamental spiritual principle right at the beginning of the *Spiritual Journal*: "Let my motto be: to seek God in all things, to do everything for the greater glory of God, to bring the spirit of God into everything, to imbue everything with the spirit of God. Let God and His glory become the center of my entire life."[1]

Mary holds a special place in this spirituality. Yet, she does not compete with Christ. On the contrary — for Blessed George, Mary is a path to ever-deeper union with Him.

We can therefore ask a very concrete question, one of particular importance to us Marians: "Does my Marian devotion truly help me to live more fully in Christ, to love Him more, to serve Him more, and to proclaim Him more?"

[1] *Spiritual Journal*, Marian Fathers Publishing House, Warsaw 1988, no. 1 – hereinafter referred to as Journal.

In the life of Blessed George, the response was unequivocal. His Marian devotion led from contemplation to imitation, from prayer to service, and from personal holiness to concern for the Church. Let us try to follow this path in five steps.

Remembering Christ with Mary

Mary is the first person to keep Christ in her heart. Saint Luke emphasizes this twice, noting that "Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Lk 2:19) and that "His mother treasured all these things in her heart" (Lk 2:51). This means that Mary lives by the memory of God acting in history. She treasures His word, events, encounters, joys, and sufferings. Her heart becomes a place where the events of life are interpreted in the light of God's Word.

For us, this is an incredibly important lesson. We can speak of Christ daily, pray the Liturgy of the Hours, celebrate the Eucharist, preach homilies, hear confessions, conduct retreats, and provide catechesis — yet inwardly lose sight of the One for whom we do all this. A priest can be deeply occupied with "God's affairs" while living less and less by God Himself. He may speak much about God, yet spend little time with God. Therefore, the primary task of a Marian is to keep the Person of Christ and His Word in his heart.

Blessed George kept a *Spiritual Journal* because he wanted to interpret his life in the light of God's Word. It was not a matter of merely recording events; rather, it was about discernment: Where is God at work? What does He want of me? How am I to respond to His grace? His prayer was imbued with an awareness of God's presence: "I kiss the hand of Your Providence and surrender myself entirely to You, Lord. Lead me, Heavenly Father; do with me whatever You please" (*Journal* 41). This is a priestly remembrance of God, modeled on Mary — seeing God even in what I do not understand.

Mary asks us, the Marians: "Do I remember for Whom I am a priest? Amidst the busyness of pastoral work, do I remember Jesus? Does my priesthood flow from a personal relationship with Him? Do I treasure and ponder experiences of God in my heart? Am I able, at the end of the day, to look back and say: 'Lord, where were You in my life today?'"

We need a "memory of the heart," for it is possible to keep track of all parish matters yet forget Christ.

Learning Christ from Mary

Mary is Christ's first disciple. Therefore, we can say: If we wish to learn from Christ, we must enter the school of Mary. What does Mary teach the priest?

Above all, it is a matter of availability to God. Her life is summed up in the words: "I am the Lord's servant" (Lk 1:38). A priest, too, is a man who has said to God: "I am." Yet this "I am" is not a one-time event — that of ordination. It must be renewed every day. Blessed George wrote: "I am Your servant; send me wherever You will" (*Journal* 41). This is a profoundly priestly prayer. Not: "Lord, send me where I will be comfortable." Not: "Send me where I will be appreciated." But rather: "Send me wherever You will." This is the spirit of Mary.

Mary also teaches us the virtue of hiddenness. A priest may be tempted to seek recognition: a good reputation, pastoral success, large numbers of the faithful, status, or influence. Mary, however, shows the opposite path. Her greatness is hidden. She has no need to be at the center; she leaves that place to Christ and points to Him. At Cana in Galilee, she said to the servants: "Do whatever He tells you" (Jn 2:5). As Benedict XVI said: "Mary is great precisely because she seeks not her own greatness, but God's" (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 41).

This should also be the deepest desire of a priest: May people not stop at me. May they discover Christ through my priesthood. A priest is not the owner of Christ; he is His servant.

Becoming Like Christ with Mary

The priesthood is not merely a function but a becoming like Christ. It is not enough to speak about Christ — one must become like Him. The goal of the spiritual life is not to become "stronger," but to become "more like Christ." Therefore, the central question of a priest's life is not, "How much have I done?" but rather, "Am I becoming more like Jesus?"

Mary helps us answer this question, for she herself is the most perfect image of a human being shaped by the grace of Christ.

Blessed George held a special devotion to the mystery of the Immaculate Conception. His testimony is deeply personal: "I thank You, Lord, for the special sentiments of love You have granted me toward the Immaculate Conception of the Most Holy Virgin Mary" (*Journal* 42). He then describes how prayer before Mary became, for him, an experience of profound closeness to God.

Why was the Immaculate One so important to him? Because the mystery of the Immaculate Conception speaks of the primacy of God's grace. Mary

is a reminder that holiness is not primarily our own achievement, but a gift from God and the fruit of His action. It has its source in the initiative of God, who reveals His inner self to us, bestows His friendship upon us, and invites us to share in His divine life (cf. *KO* 2). It is God who loves first. It is God who chooses first. It is God who calls first. It is God who gives grace first. It is God who empowers and sends.

A priest must never forget that his priesthood is a grace. I am not a priest because I am better than others. I am not a priest because I am stronger. I am a priest because Christ chose, loved, and sent me. Joseph Ratzinger wrote aptly about this in his book *On the Meaning of Being a Christian*: "God does not love us because we are exceptionally good, virtuous, or deserving, or because we have been in some way useful or even necessary to Him—God loves us not because we are good, but because He is good."[2] Mary helps us maintain humility regarding our own vocation.

In one of his writings, Blessed George prays: "Grant that our lives may be pure and immaculate" (*Journal* 84). This is an important prayer for a Marian as well. Purity signifies not only the struggle against sin but also an undivided heart. Our heart cannot belong simultaneously to Christ and to our own "ego." It cannot be divided between Christ and a career, the Gospel and comfort, service and the need for recognition, prayer and activism, pastoral love and personal ambition. Mary teaches us to have a heart entirely devoted to God.

To Ask Christ with Mary

One of the great temptations for a priest is self-sufficiency. Over time, we may begin to think: "I already know everything." "I can handle this." "I have experience." "After all, I am a priest or a religious brother." Yet, Blessed George was keenly aware of his own weakness. That is why he prayed: "Lord Jesus, strengthen me, grant me perseverance. Immaculate Virgin, support me" (*Journal* 85). And elsewhere: "God, You know my frailty; support me. Most Holy Virgin, I entrust myself to your care" (*Journal* 96). These are the prayers of a man who knows himself. A priest is not a man without weaknesses; a priest is a man who knows where to seek help.

The life of Blessed George was filled with difficult decisions. He had to take the risk of renewing the Marian Fathers, operate amidst persecution, lead the community, and later — as a bishop — care for the Church in Vilni-

[2] Joseph Ratzinger, *On the Meaning of Being a Christian*: trans. J. Merecki SDS, Kraków 2006, p. 69.

us, all while facing conflicts and tensions. Yet, he did not attempt to control everything. His prayer — "I kiss the hand of Your Providence and surrender myself entirely to You, Lord" (*Journal* 41) — serves as a school of trust for us.

Mary teaches us to say: "I do not understand everything, but I trust You." This is especially important when we experience fatigue, misunderstanding, loneliness, conflict, a lack of fruit, a sense of failure, or difficulties within the community. At such times, we must return to Mary's attitude: "May your word to me be fulfilled" (Lk 1:38).

Proclaiming Christ with Mary

True Marian devotion always leads to mission. After the Annunciation, Mary does not keep Jesus to herself. In the Gospel of Luke, we read: "At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea" (Lk 1:39). She brings Christ to Elizabeth and John. This is a beautiful image of the priesthood. A priest is a man who carries Christ within himself and brings Him to the people.

It is precisely here that the greatness of Blessed George's spirituality is most clearly evident. His love for Mary did not confine him to a private devotion; on the contrary, it led to immense apostolic activity.

In 1909, he secretly joined the Marian Fathers, undertaking — together with Fr. Francis Bučys — the task of saving the nearly extinct Congregation. It was an extraordinary undertaking. The goal was not merely to preserve the institution for its own sake; rather, it was to ensure that the charism served Christ and the Church. Consequently, Marian devotion became an apostolate in his life.

One of Blessed George's most characteristic statements is: "The glory of God and the salvation of souls! Could there be any other goal higher or nobler than this?" (*Journal* 1). This statement can fittingly be regarded as a program for his priestly life. Not my glory, not my parish, not my success, not my work — but the glory of God and the salvation of the human person. It was precisely in this spirit that Mary shaped the life and spirituality of Blessed George.

In one of the most moving entries, Blessed George prays to be an instrument in the Church entirely devoted to God (cf. *Journal* 41). This is a radical spirituality of service. A priest does not exist so that people might say, "What a wonderful priest!" A priest should desire for a person to be able to say, "Through this priest, I encountered Christ." This is a priesthood that is both Christocentric and Marian.

Mary does not keep people focused on herself. She says: "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2:5). Thus, a priest's greatest success is not that people will remember his name. His greatest success is that they will remember Christ and bear witness, saying, "Through this priest, I encountered Jesus."

Dear Brothers, the life of Blessed George Matulaitis poses a very concrete question for us: "What does my priesthood, lived with Mary, look like? Is Mary present only in my prayers? Is she also present in the style of my priestly life? Do I learn from her silence, listening, humility, obedience, purity of heart, readiness to serve, faithfulness, and service?"

Blessed George shows us that Marian devotion is not an addition to the priesthood. Rather, it helps one to live out the priesthood according to its deepest logic: to be completely devoted to Christ and the Church.

We may therefore conclude with five prayerful petitions:

- Mary, teach me to keep Christ in my heart.
- Mary, teach me to know Christ and to listen to Him.
- Mary, form within me a heart like the Heart of your Son.
- Mary, pray for me, that in moments of weakness I may not rely on myself, but on Christ.
- Mary, help me to bring Christ to the people to whom I have been sent.

That is precisely why the life and spirituality of Blessed George Matulaitis can serve as a school of Christocentric, Marian, and apostolic priesthood for every priest.

Questions:

- What does my priesthood, lived with Mary, look like?
- Does my Marian devotion truly help me to live Christ more fully, to love Him more, to serve Him more, and to proclaim Him more?

ELI CARLOS ALVES DE SOUSA, MIC

June 2027

Blessed George Matulaitis – Deeply Devoted to the Church

The Word of God: Ephesians 5:25–33

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband!

Christ Loved the Church

In the Old Testament, the prophets used the image of marriage to illustrate the covenant of love between God and the people of Israel. Drawing on this tradition, the author of the Letter to the Ephesians relates the love between spouses to Christ's love for the Church. Just as Christ loved the Church, so husbands ought to love their wives.

The phrase "gave himself up for it" specifies the nature of Jesus's love for the Church. The Greek text employs the verb *paradidōmi* (παραδίδωμι — "to give up," "to hand over"). In many passages of the Gospels, particularly in the Gospel of John, this term refers to the Passion of Christ. It signifies, among other things, the act of Judas in handing over his Master, but also Jesus's final act on the Cross — surrendering his spirit to the Father (cf. Jn 19:30).

Judas and the leaders of the Jewish people *hand* Jesus *over* to the secular authorities. Jesus, however, *entrusts* His life into the hands of the Father. This is the true self-surrender that reveals the fullness of Christ's love for the Church. As He Himself said: "No one takes it [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (Jn 10:18).

We can therefore state that the author of the Letter to the Ephesians, in saying that Christ gave Himself up for the Church, wishes to emphasize that He died for it. Paraphrasing John 13:1, one might say that *Christ loved the Church to the end*, and also that He showed the Church the "greatest love" (Jn 15:13).

We must understand, however, that Jesus's love for the Church was not limited solely to the supreme act of His death on the Cross. Every miracle, every teaching, and every gesture of Jesus was a concrete expression of that love. In other words, before He died for the Church, Jesus lived for it (cf. *Gospel according to St. John*, p. 330). The Church, therefore, becomes the fruit of that grain which is Jesus (cf. Jn 12:24).

The Church Beloved by Blessed George Matulaitis

"Holy Catholic Church, true Kingdom of Christ on earth, my most ardent love! If I should forget you, let my right hand be forgotten. Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not regard you as my dearest Mother, as my greatest consolation" (*Spiritual Diary*, no. 24). Following the example of Jesus, Blessed George Matulaitis loved the Church every day of his life. In his *Spiritual Diary*, we find several descriptions of the Church left to us by the Renovator:

The Church is holy. The source of the Church's holiness is Christ Himself, who gave Himself up for her (cf. Eph 5:25–27). "United with Christ, the Church is sanctified by him; through him and in him she also becomes sanctifying" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 824). United with this Church, Blessed George strove each day to grow in holiness. The Renovator desired to share in the holiness of the Church, knowing it to be a sure path to sharing in the holiness of God Himself.

The Church is the true Kingdom of Christ on earth. Jesus begins His mission by proclaiming the nearness of the Kingdom of God (cf. Mk 1:15). The Church, continuing Christ's mission, is "Christ's Kingdom already present in mystery" and "constitutes the seed and beginning

of that Kingdom on earth" (*Lumen gentium*, 3 and 5). Whoever looks upon the Church contemplates the Kingdom of Christ; whoever lives in the Church lives in the Kingdom of Christ. Blessed George, aware of this truth, dedicated his entire life to the growth of this Kingdom.

The Church is "my deepest love." This is a beautiful declaration of love. Blessed George was not ashamed to publicly profess his profound love for the Church. With these words, he makes St. Paul's teaching his own: "Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her" (Eph 5:25).

The Church is a most beloved Mother. Hearing Blessed George call the Church "Mother," we can see that he not only loved her himself but also felt loved by her. As Saint John Paul II said, he was "a son of the Lithuanian nation — a great son — and at the same time a great son of the Church of Christ" (*Address to Poles*). As a faithful son of this most beloved Mother — in whose bosom he was born to the faith — he allowed himself to be nurtured, formed, guided, and instructed by her (cf. *Mater et Magistra*, 1).

According to Blessed George, it is not enough to say that one loves the Church. One must demonstrate this love in the right way; one must "know how to love," because "there are Catholics who ardently love the Church and Catholicism, yet do so imprudently and inappropriately that they cause it more harm than good" (*Spiritual Diary*, p. 67, no. 70). We shall therefore present two characteristics of this authentic love, evident in the life of the Renovator.

Love That Renews

During one of his general audiences, Pope St. Paul VI repeatedly voiced the call: "Love the Church!" This audience took place on October 13, 1965 — two months before the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council — against the backdrop of the Council's reflection on *aggiornamento*, or the renewal of the Church.

While encouraging the faithful to show authentic love for the Church, the Holy Father warned against a serious danger: making "temporal realities" the basis for renewal, which could lead the Church to reject its own Tradition. According to the Pope, true renewal of the Church is achieved through its "ability to make the Gospel living and relevant."

While still a priest, Blessed George dedicated himself to the work of *aggiornamento* within the Congregation of Marian Fathers, viewing this mission

as a concrete way to revitalize the Gospel of Christ and express his love for the Church.

He had known the Congregation since childhood, as the Marians served in the parish in Mariampol, his hometown. It was a Marian — Fr. George Česnas — who administered the Sacrament of Baptism to young George.

> Through one of those wondrous workings of Providence — by which God occasionally intervenes in the course of history to take up causes lost by men — it can be said that on that day, young Matulaitis received not only baptism but also, in a sense ahead of time, the mission of renewing the Marian Family, to which he would later dedicate all his energies.[1]

The connection between the moment of his baptism and the subsequent renewal of the Congregation invites reflection on how God, in His Providence, prepared the Renovator for this mission. Love for the Marians was born and matured in his heart from his earliest years.

In his beatification homily of June 28, 1987, Pope St. John Paul II highlighted Blessed George's zeal for the renewal of consecrated life. This virtue is clearly evident in his efforts to renew the Congregation; indeed, that zeal was an expression of his love.

The Renovator knew that by undertaking this mission, he might sooner or later face accusations from the secular authorities and suffer the consequences: imprisonment or exile (*Spiritual Diary*, no. 16). Yet the love that guided him proved stronger than the fear of persecution and punishment.

As Pope Francis said, Blessed George "knew how to revitalize the community by updating its Constitutions and fearlessly promoting its activities — even to the point of having to operate in secret and risk arrest—without ever ceasing to foster love and unity among the religious and the faithful" (*Address to the participants of the General Chapter*).

The need to carry out the renewal in secret stemmed from the fact that the Russian government had suppressed religious congregations within its territories and banned the admission of new candidates. Dispensing with the outward signs of religious life — such as the habit — enabled the Congregation to survive persecution by the Russian authorities, while it continued to grow within the heart of Fr. Matulaitis and those who, like him, had answered God's call. The Renovator worked in silence, just as God Himself usually works in silence.

[1] *Innamorato della Chiesa*, p. 14.

As he undertook the work of renewal, he was also convinced that the Congregation was beloved by God and that its continued existence was the Lord's will. The love of Blessed George is, therefore, a love that renews.

It can also be said that, in renewing the Congregation, Blessed George himself underwent renewal. A testament to this personal transformation was the "special devotion" to the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary with which God had graced him. He himself admits that he initially experienced difficulties, yet later "how sweet it was to pray, prostrate at her feet" (*Spiritual Diary*, no. 42). For him, renewal was not merely an external undertaking; rather, it began within, in the depths of his own heart.

Love That Leads through Suffering

"May God grant that we be swept up by this one great thought: to work for the Church, to endure hardships and sufferings, and to take the affairs of the Church so deeply to heart that the Church's sufferings, cares, and wounds become our own cares, sufferings, and wounds of the heart" (*Spiritual Diary*, no. 24).

This thought of Blessed George, presented in the form of a prayer, calls to mind the opening words of the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*:

> The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well; and nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts.

The Constitution of the Second Vatican Council sets forth the relationship of Christ's disciples to the world. Fifty-five years earlier, and in the same spirit, Blessed George spoke of the Christian's relationship to the Church.

The beautiful words of the Renovator regarding suffering out of love for the Church are not merely the fruit of theoretical reflection; he wrote of what he himself had experienced. When he speaks of the necessity of enduring suffering and making the Church's suffering his own, he is, in essence, describing his own life. Yet no suffering could ever separate Blessed George from his love for Christ and the Church.

He suffered from health problems from his youth, primarily due to tuberculosis of the bone, a condition he battled throughout his life. He endured a particularly difficult period in 1904, when the illness worsened significantly and required specialized treatment. Yet, he did not respond with despair or

discouragement; instead, he interpreted the meaning of his suffering through the lens of faith. "The experience of illness contributed to his profound spiritual maturation. Convinced that God had restored his strength, from that moment on he desired to live and work solely for His glory."[2]

The unstable political situation was also a source of great suffering. A case in point was the series of events that unfolded shortly after his episcopal ordination, when the city of Vilnius —entrusted to his care as a successor to the Apostles — was occupied by the Bolshevik army. Persecution, arrests, the confiscation of church property, and repressions against the clergy ensued, plunging the city into an atmosphere of constant tension.

Bishop George found himself in an extremely difficult position. He faced provocations and intimidation, yet remained faithful to his pastoral mission, defending the rights of the Church and society. Although he was offered the chance to leave Vilnius, he chose to stay despite all the dangers.[3] Faced with this complex situation, he resolved to endure suffering out of love for Christ and the Church.

At the same time, he had to contend with conflicts among Poles, Lithuanians, and Belarusians, who constantly accused him of failing to devote sufficient attention to them. Yet, as a shepherd of souls, his desire was to love everyone equally, for his love — like God's — makes no distinction between people (cf. Acts 10:34). He himself admitted: "My position was extremely difficult: what pleased some displeased others. There was no way to satisfy everyone. Everything around me was in turmoil. I held fast to Christ and the Church."[4]

As Pope St. John Paul II said: "Great were his faith and his hope, and his love for God and for people — for all people without exception. That love was always greater than all the divisions and tensions amidst which he had to live, and that love was also the source of all his sufferings" (*Address to Poles*).

Bishop George did not remain indifferent to all these conflicts. "His love was neither ecstatic nor rhetorical; it was a strong and aggressive love."[5] Yet, it was not an aggression that breeds death. In this context, his motto stands out — inspired by St. Paul, who also had to contend with divisions in the early Christian communities: "overcome evil with good!" (Rom 12:21). That good is love, which renews human hearts.

He suffered because he did not remain indifferent to the sufferings of the Church or the suffering of his people. Yet he knew that his suffering was not

[2] *Beato Giorgio Matulaitis*, p. 21.
[3] Ibid., pp. 57–58.
[4] Ibid.
[5] *Innamorato della Chiesa*, p. 24.

devoid of meaning, for it was an expression of love, as he always experienced it in union with Christ. He was able to transform his own suffering into a path to holiness, laying down his life for Christ and for the Church.

A Gift of Love

Inspired by the conclusion of the Gospel of Saint John, we might say: Blessed George accomplished many other deeds that were expressions of his love. Those presented here already enable us to understand how he was able to make his life a gift of love.

The Renovator sought to manifest his love in all things, living it out as true self-giving. In his life, we find confirmation of the teaching of St. John Paul II, who said that "it is love that causes man to find fulfillment through the sincere gift of self. For love is a giving and receiving of a gift; it can neither be bought nor sold; it can only be given as a gift" (*Gratissimam sane*, 11). Blessed George lived and suffered *for Christ and the Church*, and in all things, he strove to do good.

His love for the Church, like the love of Christ, was a faithful love. The Church held a central place in Blessed George's heart; he never forgot it and regarded it as the source of his greatest joy (Ps 137).

Neither suffering, nor cares, nor adversities could extinguish this love (Song of Songs 8:7).

No human reality could separate Bishop George from the love of Christ and the Church (Rom 8:35–39).

Questions:

- What within us and/or our community requires renewal so that the work of Blessed George may continue in our times?
- Following the example of Christ, Blessed George lived and suffered out of love for the Church. What sufferings do we experience today, and how should we act so that they, too, may become an expression of love for Christ and the Church in our lives?

MACIEJ ZACHARA, MIC

July 2027

Blessed George as a Good Shepherd – Bishop

The Word of God: 1 Peter 5:2

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be.

Historical Context

From the autumn of 1918 until the summer of 1925, Blessed George Matulaitis served as the Bishop of Vilnius while simultaneously remaining the Superior General of the renewed Congregation of Marian Fathers. His appointment by the Holy See came on October 23, 1918, and his solemn installation in the Vilnius Cathedral took place on December 8.

In a letter to Pope Pius XI dated June 27, 1925, Blessed George requested to be relieved of his duties, providing a detailed explanation for his decision. The Holy Father accepted his resignation, and Blessed George was informed of this in a letter dated July 14, written on the Pope's behalf by the Holy See's Secretary of State, Cardinal Gasparri. This period of nearly seven years of pastoral service in Vilnius was an exceptionally difficult time for Blessed George, yet it was also a time during which his holiness undoubtedly matured.

To better grasp the full drama of the situation Blessed George faced as Bishop of Vilnius, one must briefly outline the historical context of his ministry. At that time, Vilnius was the subject of an intractable Polish-Lithuanian conflict. From the first half of the 14th century until 1795, the city served as the capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which had been in a union with the Kingdom of Poland since 1385. It was a union of two states, transformed in 1569 into a single political entity known as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, while retaining a degree of distinctness for Poland and Lithuania. The Commonwealth came to an end in 1795, when it was partitioned among Tsarist Russia, the Kingdom of Prussia, and the Austrian Empire. Vilnius fell under Russian rule.

World War I resulted in the defeat of all three partitioning powers, creating an opportunity for Poland and Lithuania to regain their independence. However, a dispute arose between Poles and Lithuanians regarding the vision for the reborn states and the status of Vilnius. For Poles, the ideal was to restore Poland within the borders of the pre-partition Commonwealth, with Lithuania either incorporated into Poland or retaining autonomy while remaining in a federation with it. Vilnius — which, along with its surrounding region, was at the time inhabited predominantly by Poles — was intended to belong to Poland. For their part, the Lithuanians were determined to establish their own state, completely independent of Poland — forming no union or federation with it — and with Vilnius as its restored capital. The situation was further complicated by the victory of Bolshevism in Russia, which very quickly began attempting aggressive expansion to spread the communist revolution to other European countries. During World War I, the Vilnius region came under German occupation, a state of affairs that lasted until the autumn of 1918. Germany supported Lithuanian aspirations for independence, seeking to establish Lithuania as a buffer state separating Germany from Russia and keeping it within the German sphere of influence.

Following their definitive defeat in World War I, the Germans withdrew from the Vilnius region, and the question of the city's national affiliation had to be resolved through a conflict involving the resurgent states of Poland and Lithuania, as well as Bolshevik Russia. Between the winter of 1919 and the autumn of 1920, Vilnius changed hands several times before finally being occupied by Polish troops. The Polish Sejm ratified the city's incorporation into Poland in April 1922, and this status was approved a year later by the Conference of Ambassadors representing Great Britain, France, Italy, and Japan. Lithuanians did not recognize these decisions and, throughout the interwar period, regarded Vilnius as their capital — illegally occupied by Poland. A state of cold war persisted between Poland and Lithuania until the spring of 1938; the two countries maintained neither diplomatic nor economic relations, and the border between them was completely closed.

Poland's resolution of the question of the Vilnius region's national affiliation through the use of force, combined with the conclusion of the March 1921 Polish-Soviet treaty ending the war between Bolshevik Russia and Poland, stabilized the national borders until the outbreak of World War II. This border stabilization had profound consequences for the Diocese of Vilnius: while the majority of the diocese lay within Poland, certain areas fell within Lithuania, effectively cutting them off from the diocesan seat. This situation persisted until 1925, when the Holy See aligned the diocese's boundaries with the prevailing national borders.

The Vilnius diocese was also home to a Belarusian population experiencing an awakening of national consciousness. This, too, became a source of conflict involving the Church. Belarusians increasingly voiced a desire for pastoral care in their own language, whereas Poles tended to view them not as a distinct nation, but as a group of indeterminate national affiliation that ought to be Polonized as quickly as possible.

The Episcopal See at the Center of National Disputes

The episcopal see of Vilnius had effectively remained vacant since 1907. The incumbent bishop, Edward Ropp, had been forcibly removed from Vilnius by the Russian authorities, and the German forces occupying the city during World War I also refused to allow his return. The Holy See entrusted the duties of diocesan administrator to Prelate Kazimierz Michalkiewicz on a temporary basis and began searching for a suitable candidate for the Bishop of Vilnius.

Amidst the Polish-Lithuanian disputes over the Vilnius region, Fr. George Matulaitis was considered well-suited for this office. He was a Lithuanian who nonetheless possessed extensive experience working in Polish lands and among Poles; a man of broad horizons and — most importantly — a priest of deep faith, utterly devoted to the cause of Christ and the Church. Amidst rising nationalism — with opposing sides seeking to view the Catholic Church as an ally or even an instrument of their national aspirations — the bishop's ministry became extremely difficult, a fact of which Blessed George was keenly aware. Poles wanted to see the Church as a force strengthening the Polish character of the Vilnius region, while Lithuanians, conversely, viewed it as a force reinforcing its Lithuanian character.

Blessed George— who regarded his episcopal ministry as a service to the salvation of all the faithful alike, regardless of nationality, and who consciously strove to avoid entangling the Church in national and political disputes — became an easy target for resentment and accusations from various quarters. For many Poles, the very fact that a Lithuanian was appointed to the See of Vilnius was an offence, regardless of Blessed George's actions or words. Some Polish politicians and officials told Blessed George — even after he had left Vilnius — that their attacks on him were not personal; the only issue they had with him was his nationality. Conversely, a significant number of Lithuanians felt that Blessed George lacked sufficient patriotism and maintained ties and relationships with Poles that were too strong and too close.

Another area of conflict between Blessed George and the Poles was his attitude toward the Belarusian population. Blessed George acknowledged the national awakening of the Belarusians as a fact and maintained that the Church should accompany them in this process, ensuring that the awakening took on a distinctly Catholic character. He therefore sought to prudently accommodate Belarusian requests for pastoral care in their own language. Poles viewed this as an act of hostility toward Polish identity on the part of Blessed George, perceiving the Belarusian national awakening as a threat to the cohesion of the newly-reborn Polish state. Conversely, some Belarusians felt that Blessed George, as the shepherd of the diocese, failed to adequately address their needs and yielded too readily to Polish pressure.

The Most Important Areas of Blessed George's Work as Bishop of Vilnius

Without going into excessive detail, let us outline the primary areas of Blessed George's work as the shepherd of the Church in Vilnius. The issue of ethnic tensions marked the entire ministry of our "Renovator" in Vilnius; all his decisions, initiatives, and public statements were judged by many individuals and groups through this lens. Nevertheless, Blessed George's ministry cannot be reduced to this single matter alone.

As shepherd of the diocese, Bishop Matulaitis was a zealous proclaimer of the Word of God and a minister of the Sacraments, devoting himself wholeheartedly to this ministry. He knew that his primary task was to lead the people entrusted to his care toward salvation and to form them in the faith. He exercised this ministry primarily in the Vilnius Cathedral, but also — on various occasions — in other churches throughout Vilnius and the diocese. This ministry of the Word and of the Sacraments was, for him, a form of spiritual respite. As he noted in his diary regarding a Passion sermon delivered on a Palm Sunday, contrary to appearances, there are many people who deeply desire and need a strictly religious message — one that shapes faith and directs the spiritual gaze toward God and into one's own conscience. If someone wants politics, Bishop Matulaitis wrote, they can go to a rally; in church, however, they receive spiritual nourishment for eternal life.[1]

It would be a mistake to view Bishop George's predilection for focusing on strictly spiritual matters as a form of religious escapism. Blessed George was aware that by concentrating on spiritual concerns, a person allows themselves

[1] Tadeusz Górski, *Blessed George Matulaitis*, Warsaw 2005, pp. 249–250.

to be shaped by God's grace in the spirit of Christ, thereby becoming capable of permeating — from within — all the earthly affairs they engage in throughout their life with that same spirit of Christ. In his pastoral letters to the faithful, Blessed George emphasized the need to imbue every sphere of life with the spirit of Christ, drawing attention to various moral and social issues. He regarded the upbringing of the younger generation as one of the most urgent matters, reminding parents of their rights and duties as the primary and most important educators of their children. He considered drunkenness to be the most serious social scourge.

For a considerable time, the Diocese of Vilnius had been effectively without a bishop, and the years 1914–1921 were a period of war — first World War I, and subsequently the Polish-Bolshevik War. Consequently, many matters within the diocese required reorganization, including structural reforms to align church life with the requirements of the Code of Canon Law promulgated in 1917. These issues were very close to Bishop George's heart. He wished to convene a diocesan synod and made preparations to that end, yet he was unable to bring it to fruition before the conclusion of his ministry. He regarded the formation of candidates for the priesthood, the religious education of children and youth within the school system, and the organization of a theology faculty at the Stefan Batory University in Vilnius — opened in 1919 — as matters of particular urgency.

In his dealings with priests, he strove to act in a fatherly manner whenever possible, always presuming their good will. When dealing with priests who committed infractions, he preferred gentle persuasion and allowed time for amendment, viewing recourse to punitive measures as a last resort. As both the laity and the clergy belonged to various nationalities, Bishop George ensured that priests were trained from their seminary days to live with respect for this ethnic and linguistic diversity. He also endeavored to guarantee pastoral care in their own languages for the faithful in parishes of mixed nationality. This was, of course, a highly difficult and delicate matter that easily became a source of conflict.

Blessed George, himself a religious, strove to promote religious life within his diocese. Following the collapse of Tsarist Russia — which had persecuted religious orders — it became possible to gradually organize religious life in the Diocese of Vilnius, an effort Blessed George zealously supported. When he arrived in Vilnius, there was only one Franciscan friary with four friars; during his tenure, however, the Jesuits, Salesians, Dolorists, and Discalced Carmelites arrived in the diocese, as did the Salesian Sisters and the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Furthermore, Bishop George himself founded the Congregation of the Sisters Servants of Jesus in the Eucharist (Eucharistines),

which collaborated with the Marian Fathers. Basilians of the Eastern Rite also worked in the diocese for a time, but were expelled for political reasons.

Although Bishop George was of Lithuanian nationality, as the shepherd of Vilnius — which belonged to Poland — he actively participated in the work of the Polish Episcopate, taking part in the meetings of the Bishops' Conference. He spoke up on the matters at hand, making no secret of his criticism regarding the way the meetings were conducted and the attempts to treat the Conference as a body superior to individual diocesan bishops. In 1919, he was selected as a member of a delegation sent to the Head of State, Józef Piłsudski, regarding Church properties seized by the partitioning powers. The memorandum submitted by the delegation to the Head of State was written in Bishop George's own hand; it can therefore be assumed that he was responsible for drafting the document.[2]

A Spiritual Lesson from This Period of Blessed George's life

We reflect on the life and ministry of our Renovator not merely to learn or recall facts about his life. The lives of the saints and the Blessed — in whom the holiness of Christ and the power of His Gospel were revealed — serve as a form of catechesis for us. In the final part of this reflection, let us consider how Bishop George grew in holiness during this period of his life and what spiritual lesson we can draw from it.

Seek first the kingdom of God (Mt 6:33).

Blessed George accepted the appointment to the See of Vilnius because the pursuit of God and dedication to the affairs of His Kingdom were at the center of his life. As is well known, he did not desire this appointment himself, for he discerned God's will for him to be the work of developing the renewed Congregation of Marian Fathers. However, he did not treat his own discernment as absolute; he was convinced that God's will is also revealed through the decisions of the Church's shepherds. One might well argue that, given he had received a clear message from the Holy See stating that any refusal to accept the appointment would not be entertained, it made no difference whether he personally accepted the nomination or not, since he was bound to carry out the decision regardless. However, this is not the case.

It makes a significant difference whether one lives out obedience to the Church in the spirit of a slave — carrying out an assigned mission solely under

[2] Ibid., p. 366.

compulsion and without identifying with it — or in the obedience of a child, striving with the utmost openness to embrace a mission that was not previously planned. Although Blessed George ultimately requested to be relieved of his duties as Bishop of Vilnius — a request that was granted — this step, too, was motivated by a desire for God's glory and the greatest possible good of the Church. It was not driven by a wish to impose his own will or to flee from difficulties. Blessed George never spoke in the vein of, "I shouldn't have been appointed; I said right from the start that it would only lead to trouble."

I have come that sheep may have life (John 10:10).

The Son of God revealed Himself so that all people might be saved, and He continues His mission through the Church until the end of time. Blessed George clearly understood this, and therefore leading people to salvation was the absolute priority of his episcopal ministry. Pope St. Gregory the Great said in one of his homilies that the traveler who forgets the goal of his journey at the sight of flowering meadows is foolish.[3] This vivid statement aptly highlights the risk of confusing the path with the goal.

Amidst temporal affairs, the Christian journeys toward their ultimate goal: salvation. The temporal serves the supernatural, not the other way around. There is a danger of using the Church and the faith as a means to promote various earthly values, even very noble ones. In the time of Blessed George, these were primarily patriotic values and the desire for national self-determination. Bishop George respected these values but simultaneously warned against treating them as the ultimate goal.

With your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation (Rev 5:9).

The era in which our Renovator lived was a time marked, on the one hand, by the rise of nationalisms and, on the other, by the growth of a false internationalism in its Bolshevik form. For Blessed George, the spiritual homeland was the Catholic Church, uniting the faithful of diverse nations and languages, all redeemed by the Blood of the same Christ. This did not imply a disregard for patriotism or national values. On the contrary, Blessed George loved his earthly homeland and was a Lithuanian patriot; yet, over the course of his life, he learned to live out his patriotism within the context of Christian universalism. As he himself recalled, he once harbored a particular aversion

[3] *Homily* 14, 6, in: St. Gregory the Great, *Homilies on the Gospels*, Warsaw 1998, p. 117; see Fourth Sunday of Easter, Office of Readings: *Liturgy of the Hours*, Vol. II: *Lent. Easter Season*, Poznań 1984, p. 594.

toward Poles, Russians, and Jews, but was healed of this through the grace of Christ;[4] consequently, he proclaimed with deep conviction that Christian love for one's own homeland opens the human heart to other nations as well.[5] As a bishop, he strove to serve — with love —t he salvation of Poles, Lithuanians, Belarusians, and members of other nationalities living within the diocese. He also desired for priests to participate in the national movements of their respective countries in order to imbue them with the Catholic spirit.

We live in a different era today, yet the problems of ethnic tensions and various forms of non-Christian internationalism remain relevant. Therefore, the way Blessed George lived out patriotism — within the context of Catholic universality — remains ever timely. For us Marians, a particular sign of the times in recent decades has been the expansion of the Congregation into new countries across various continents. We see with our own eyes how our prayer for the Congregation — "gather us from all tribes, peoples, and nations" — is being answered.

And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple (Lk 14:27).

One of the things that most distinguishes a Christian from a pagan is the ability to accept suffering as a share in the Cross of Christ. From his youth, the life of Blessed George was marked by the cross of illness and the early loss of his parents, while his time in Vilnius brought further trials associated with his ministry in an exceptionally difficult setting. Our Renovator became a shepherd in a place that did not welcome him with open arms — a place where many circles viewed him with suspicion and interpreted his every move through the lens of nationalistic conflict rather than the Gospel. His rootedness in Christ enabled him to be "courageous and strong" (cf. Josh 1:6) amidst these trials — not by his own strength, but by the power of Christ revealed in human weakness. Blessed George neither sought out suffering nor fled from it; his calm fortitude in the face of hardship was a worthy way of bearing the cross.

For every Christian, recognizing and embracing the cross of one's own life is a matter of profound existential importance. It is not a question of cultivating suffering, seeking out pain, or forcibly depriving oneself of all the legitimate joys of life. Embracing the cross means accepting one's life — including the suffering inevitably woven into it — and experiencing that suffering along-

[4] Górski, *Blessed George Matulaitis*, p. 19.
[5] Ibid., p. 32.

side Christ, thereby transforming it into a privileged place of encounter with God and His love.

Love your enemies (Mt 5:44; Lk 6:27).

At the very heart of Christ's Sermon on the Mount stands the commandment to love one's enemies — not merely a higher form of spiritual life reserved for a select few, but the hallmark of the authentic Christian. Love for one's enemy is love modeled on God Himself (Mt 5:45–48), and it is evident that such love must be put to the test.

For Blessed George, his time of ministry in Vilnius was, in this regard, a period of trial. In the most literal sense, his adversaries were the Bolsheviks, who briefly occupied Vilnius in 1919 and 1920. During the Bolshevik occupation, Blessed George strengthened the faithful through a pastoral letter and sermons at the cathedral; in these addresses, he bolstered their spirits, urging them to remain steadfast in their faith and to defend their right to profess it — all while maintaining peace, avoiding provocation, and refraining from actions unworthy of a Catholic. He also made a direct appeal to the Communists to respect the religious convictions of believers. He anticipated the possibility of arrest, appointing deputies for both the diocese and the Congregation.[6] Yet, Blessed George also faced adversaries among those who — driven by political and nationalistic motives — challenged his ministry and misrepresented his decisions and initiatives, attempting to turn the ordinary faithful against their own bishop. These detractors included Polish politicians (particularly from the National Democracy movement) and officials, as well as a significant number of priests — including some holding positions of responsibility within the diocese. Rumors circulated regarding a potential assassination attempt against Blessed George; while he himself rightly dismissed these as a bluff intended to intimidate him, one could never be entirely certain.

Faced with these attacks, Blessed George adhered to the principle of not letting himself be discouraged by evil, but rather overcoming it with good; regarding his detractors, he would say, "May God forgive them everything."[7] As for the accusations leveled against him — alleging that he acted to the detriment of Poland and the Polish people — he addressed these matters in his correspondence with the Nuncio and the Holy See. Regarding specific attacks, he discerned when the situation required a public response and an explanation of his position, and when it called for patient, silent endurance. He did not demonize those who attacked him. In a 1924 letter to Fr. Bučys, he wrote that

[6] Ibid., pp. 164–166.
[7] Ibid., p. 392.

some of his detractors were personally very good people, convinced that they were acting out of love for God and the Church.[8] After stepping down from the See of Vilnius, Blessed George traveled to Rome and deliberately stayed at the Polish Resurrectionist house; he also took part in a Polish pilgrimage for the Holy Year, thereby demonstrating his goodwill toward the Polish nation. In letters from that period, he wrote that the wrongs he suffered in Vilnius came not from the Polish people, but from certain Polish politicians — for whom he would pray fervently — and that he would strive to ensure no feelings of resentment took root in his heart.[9]

Amidst all these experiences, Blessed George bore witness to evangelical perfection, which consists in the love of enemies (Mt 5:48; Lk 6:36).

Questions:

- What experience do you have in accepting decisions made by your superiors regarding the location or nature of the work that were difficult for you?
- How do you experience issues of nationality, both within the Congregation and outside it? Do you consciously harbor resentment toward any countries or nations? In which countries would you never wish to work due to national prejudices? How do you interpret the witness of Blessed George Matulaitis's life in this context?
- What experience do you have in enduring hardships and suffering caused by demanding work, humiliations, difficult relationships, physical ailments, or other factors?

[8] Ibid., pp. 414–415.
[9] Ibid., pp. 450–451.

JOÃO CARLOS ROMA LEITE RODRIGUES, MIC

August 2027

Mercy in the Spirituality of Blessed George

The Word of God: Romans 12:14-21

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

A Proactive Spirituality of Overcoming Evil with Good

> Once again I looked more deeply into my life. Lord, what terrible corruption of human nature I find everywhere. What weakness. How many imperfections and faults there are in every part of my life. Despair would overwhelm me were it not for my boundless trust in Your ineffable mercy. I see, Lord, how Your abundant graces, flowing as though in mighty streams, ceaselessly cleanse and wash away from my soul the dust of imperfections and the mire of transgressions. I thank You for this, O merciful God. (*Journal*, no. 87)

As it is well known, Blessed George Matulaitis chose as his episcopal motto the Latin phrase *Vince malum in bono* ("Overcome evil with good"), taken from the Vulgate translation of Romans 12:21. It is worth noting that the Apostle to the Gentiles exhorts Christians to overcome evil with good within the context of his teaching on showing mercy to all, encouraging the practice

of works of mercy even toward one's enemies. This Pauline admonition clearly points to the radical commandment of love for one's enemies: "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt 5:44).

In one of his ascetical conferences, Blessed George teaches that responding to evil by doing good is a manifestation of perfect charity after the example of Christ, who went about doing good, always with a Heart full of tenderness and mercy, ultimately laying down His life for all people:

> Although Christ was surrounded by sinful people, often perverse and obstinate, He was never discouraged by them. He continually gave Himself for them because He was God and loved His Father. Thus He overcame evil with good and gave His life for mankind. If we truly come to love God, we too shall not be discouraged by any ingratitude. We shall learn to sacrifice ourselves for our neighbor and shall pass through this life doing good.[1]

Following in the footsteps of the Merciful Jesus, Bishop George devoted his earthly life to the love of God and neighbor, striving in all things to overcome evil with good. His episcopal motto was not merely an inscription on his coat of arms; rather, it was a genuine reflection of his personal spirituality and the fundamental principle of his pastoral ministry. He also sought to make this guiding principle — overcoming evil with good — an essential element of the charism and mission of the Marian Fathers:

> Whether within the Congregation or outside it, never repay evil for evil. Rather, strive always to overcome every evil with good. Do not lose heart in the face of hardships, persecutions, opposition, or other sufferings that may affect individuals or the whole community. Instead, allow yourselves all the more to be animated by the spirit of Christ and of the Church, labor tirelessly for the glory of God and the salvation of souls, accept your crosses as signs of God's blessing and of His special grace, and pray to God for your persecutors.[2]

This exhortation to conquer evil through goodness was incorporated into the first Constitutions of the Congregation after its renewal and continues to be reflected in Article 32 of the current Constitutions as one of the characteristic spiritual teachings of the Restorer of the Marian Congregation:

[1] *The Attainment of Holiness*, in *Ascetical Conferences*, Warsaw, 2002, pp. 198–199.
[2] *Instructiones Marianorum*, I, 19, Rome, 1959, pp. 21–22.

> They should readily forgive wrongs they have suffered, never repay evil for evil, but strive to overcome evil with good, praying for their opponents, persecutors, and slanderers.

It is worth emphasizing that Blessed George frequently offered this counsel in the context of spiritual direction. Thus he wrote to his friend, Fr. Francis Bučys, MIC:

> If someone has offended us, or if we hear anything harmful about ourselves, any slander or false accusation, let us strive, as far as we are able, to repay such a person with good for evil. Or at least let us try to bring to light that person's good qualities, praise him for whatever is good, or at the very least pray for him.[3]

He gave similar advice to Sister Wanda Jeute, the first Superior of the Sisters of the Eucharist: "One must never become discouraged by evil; rather, evil must be overcome with good."[4]

If we wished to summarize Blessed George's spiritual exhortations to his fellow Marian Fathers, we could scarcely find more fitting words than those he wrote several months after his re-election as Superior General to Fr. Kazimierz Bronikowski, MIC, General Councillor and Major Superior of the Marian Fathers in Poland: "Please do not forget the Marian principle: *Vince malum in bono*."[5]

After leaving the Diocese of Vilnius, Bishop George recorded the following words in Rome in his episcopal journal: "As a priest, I always tried never to harm anyone. On the contrary, as much as I could, I sought to serve people and to do them good. *Vince malum in bono*."[6]

Considering both his merciful manner of serving others through works of charity and his tireless encouragement of others to show mercy to their neighbor, we may confidently conclude that mercy constitutes one of the defining characteristics of the spiritual profile of Blessed George.

According to the theological vision of the Restorer of the Marian Congregation, Divine Mercy may be understood as the triumph of good wherever evil prevails; it is the victory of grace wherever the human condition appears hopeless — in sin, weakness, poverty, suffering, and despair.

[3] Letter to Fr. Pranciškus Bučys, MIC, 13 March 1914, no. 101, in *Lithuanian Letters*, Licheń, 2015, p. 141.

[4] Letter to Wanda Jeute, 4 November 1921, no. 227, in *Polish Letters*, Licheń, 2012, p. 289.

[5] Letter to Fr. Kazimierz Bronikowski, MIC, 11 November 1923, no. 43, in *Polish Letters*, pp. 69–70.

[6] *Episcopal Journal*, 6 August 1925, in *Journals*, Licheń, 2009, p. 277.

Reflecting on the love of neighbor, he observed that accepting the saving grace of the Merciful God enkindles in the human heart feelings of tenderness and compassion, which naturally lead to acts of charity and goodness toward others:

> Compassion is the response of a heart sensitive to the sufferings of others. Self-sacrifice, heroism, and zeal are noble impulses of the heart — spontaneous impulses that must be directed along the right path. We must also learn to think well of others, to wish them every good, sincerely to rejoice in their success, to take the initiative in serving them without being intrusive, to make their sufferings our own, and always to preserve a spirit of tenderness, delicacy, and discretion, never forcing our way into the hidden depths of another person's heart.[7]

The Spirituality of Drawing Others to Christ and to the Church

Divine Mercy inevitably leads to merciful love of neighbor, for mercy opens the human heart to a self-sacrificing and self-giving love for the good of others. Blessed George's merciful sensitivity to the good of others inspired him to cultivate an authentic, proactive spirituality of overcoming evil with good. This is evident throughout the pages of his *Journal*, where it appears as a "great initiative" that urges him to risk everything for the greater glory of God, for the good of the Church, and for the salvation of souls (cf. *Journal*, no. 25).

His effort to overcome evil with good is not merely a positive response to adverse negative circumstances, but above all a proactive apostolic attitude of one who knows his goal and is not afraid to take risks:

> We must advance boldly and courageously toward our goal along the path God shows us and wherever the Spirit of God leads us, paying no attention to obstacles and fearing nothing. If we are filled with the Spirit of God, in the end we shall overcome everything. For no one can bind the Spirit in chains, imprison Him, or confine Him in exile. He always breaks free and makes His way through everything. (*Journal*, no. 22)

Here we see how Blessed George understood the fundamental role of the Holy Spirit in the victory of good over evil. The Holy Spirit is not only the One who leads us along the path of God's will, but also the One who grants the gift

[7] *On the Love of Neighbor*, in *Ascetical Conferences*, Warsaw, 2002, p. 155.

of fortitude and the virtue of perseverance, so that we may remain faithful to our vocation and not fear risking everything for Christ and His Church.

In Blessed George's vision, to overcome evil with good requires men and women who have completely denied themselves and surrendered themselves to God; who have stripped themselves of self-love and their fallen nature and have been clothed with the grace and Spirit of Christ; who are continually aflame with the fire of apostolic zeal, desiring to raise the whole world to Heaven and to offer it as a sacrifice at the feet of the Most High (cf. *Journal*, no. 52).

Within this atmosphere of proactive apostolic zeal, the Renovator of the Marian Congregation teaches that a true religious is one who seeks God and strives to lead others to God; one who does not grow negligent in his vocation, but who through the witness of his life awakens in others the noblest aspirations and helps them discern their own vocation:

> We need people full of energy, active, capable of acting independently, resourceful and prudent; people who know how to live and, when necessary, earn their daily bread; people who look upon the world and upon others with wisdom and benevolence; people who never abandon their duties and goals, but who always and everywhere persevere toward their end — even unto death — toward union with God in eternity. (*Journal*, no. 77)

To overcome evil with good also means embracing the entire Church and the whole world with a truly Catholic heart in order to continue the work of Christ:

> Let us stir up the spirit so that among us there may be as many as possible who would willingly go to serve not only their own people but also others. … Grant us, O Lord, an apostolic spirit, the spirit of true zeal embracing all souls! (*Journal*, no. 51)

From the perspective of Blessed George, authentic Catholic and apostolic spirituality cannot be reduced to loving God and the Church alone; it also requires the capacity to love well and wisely. As he notes: "There are Catholics who love the Church and Catholicism fervently, yet in such an imprudent and inappropriate manner that they do more harm than good." (*Journal*, no. 70)

His pastoral concern has nothing in common with proselytism. It flows instead from a zealous care for souls, especially for those who are filled with prejudice against the Church, who neither love her nor tolerate her, and who

may even oppose her. Even among the Church's enemies and persecutors, Christians are called to bring the teaching of Christ and to seek the salvation of their souls. In this spirit, Blessed George writes: "Let us be like that good and merciful father of the Gospel, who stands at the door awaiting the return of the prodigal son; and when he sees him, he goes out to meet him, embraces him, kisses him, leads him into his house, clothes him with new garments, and prepares a feast for him." (*Journal*, no. 45)

It is therefore not surprising that his attitude toward those who persecute the Church is more proactive than reactive. The most effective way to counter harmful organizations that seek to weaken the Church and society is the positive development of Catholic life and apostolic activity (cf. *Journal*, no. 22).

Within this merciful approach toward those who wander far from Christ and the Church, one can better understand the Renovator of the Marian Congregation's recommendations to engage in various associations and institutions across countries and nations, especially in large cities and near universities, among the youth, so that the true teaching of Christ may resound where deceptive ideologies prevail. Likewise, he encourages engagement near labor unions so that they may cease to be instruments of revolutionary movements and may instead, in some places, become a support and defense of the faith of Christ and of the Church (cf. *Journal*, no. 20). He further urges going wherever the need is greatest, without hesitation in leaving one's homeland, overcoming national prejudices and conflicts, and going to places where the Church is most persecuted and where religious life is prohibited (cf. *Journal*, no. 43), "so as to serve all equally, going above all to where the greater glory of God calls us" (*Journal*, no. 51).

Such a vision avoids restricting the scope of evangelization and promotes the good of society without political or national divisions, striving not only to "perfect ourselves more and more, and to live ever more devoutly according to the spirit of the Gospel" (*Journal*, no. 18), but also to "become for others a support, a source, and a center of spiritual life" (*Journal*, no. 33).

With regard to this noble commitment to interior renewal leading to external transformation, Blessed George emphasizes that the work of spiritual renewal must not begin with condemnation, humiliation, or contempt for others. Rather, it must begin with the search for true light by immersing the mind, will, and affections of the heart in the merciful love of God. Only then does one open oneself to fraternal charity, seeking others who also desire the renewal of their lives in a fervent striving to follow God's ways and to inspire others with the same ideal of the renewal of society (cf. *Journal*, no. 34).

Apostolate of Example: Mercy Above All

In the concluding prayer of his *Journal*, Blessed George expresses profound trust in Divine Mercy, imploring forgiveness in the firm conviction that the love of God is stronger than human weakness and more powerful than all evil: "Lord, enter not into judgment with Your servant, but have mercy on me and grant me forgiveness. Look upon my contrite heart and forgive all my sins, all my imprudent actions, every word spoken without reflection. Repair my faults and any scandal I may have given to others." (*Journal*, no. 104)

He believed that the power of God's merciful love is at once the source of forgiveness and the principle of spiritual renewal: "O Lord God, have mercy on me, have mercy on me, a sinner, according to Your great mercy. Despise not a contrite and humbled heart, O Lord. Renew a right spirit within me." (*Journal*, no. 100)

Convinced that grace surpasses sin, Blessed George not only cherished in his heart an unlimited trust in the ineffable Divine Mercy (cf. *Journal*, no. 87), but also encouraged others to place their trust in it. This is evident in his correspondence with Sister Wanda Jeute:

> As for the sins of your past life, remain at peace; trust in the infinite mercy of God…[8]
>
> Place your trust in the goodness and mercy of God; little by little you will attain everything.[9]

Moreover, his personal experience of God's merciful love led him to greater understanding toward others and to ongoing self-formation: "If we see faults and weaknesses in our neighbor, let us not cast a stone, but be understanding; let us commend those who err to the mercy of God, while carefully guarding ourselves against those same faults."[10] Furthermore, the motivation to forgive offenses committed by others flows from a deeper awareness of human sinfulness and imperfection, which fosters greater patience toward others and fulfills the commandment of Christ's love:

> God alone is absolutely and infinitely good, whereas we are all weak. Whoever among us thinks he has no sin is not in the truth. Therefore, Holy Scripture exhorts us to bear one another's burdens and thus fulfill the law of Christ's love, frequently saying: forgive us our trespasses

[8] Letter to Wanda Jeute, 18 September 1913, no. 203, *Polish Letters*, p. 274.
[9] Letter to Wanda Jeute, 9 November 1925, no. 255, *Polish Letters*, p. 308).
[10] *On Sisterly Love*, in *Ascetical Conferences*, p. 34.

as we forgive those who trespass against us, truly forgiving one another from the heart. [11]

According to Blessed George's spiritual wisdom, gentleness must always prevail over severity, for "before God it is less serious to err through excess of mercy than through excess of severity."[12] Likewise, in situations of conflict, one should exercise meekness and humility, cultivating the same dispositions as Christ the Merciful, and placing reconciliation and mercy above all.[13]

Blessed George consistently sought to live according to the moral principle *caritas super omnia*, considering it a fundamental rule of his spiritual life and pastoral ministry. A concrete example of this approach can be seen in his conversation with the Jesuit Fr. Sergiusz Grum, whom he encouraged to visit his elderly and ill parents.[14]

In conclusion, it may be stated that Divine Mercy played a decisive role in the life of Blessed George Matulaitis. It not only gave his spirituality a profoundly pro-existential dimension, but also enlivened his pastoral activity. It is therefore not surprising that the apostolate of Divine Mercy became, almost providentially, one of the most characteristic and distinctive elements of the charism and mission of the Marian Fathers of the Immaculate Conception.

Following in the footsteps of our Renovator, we strive to live our Marian vocation by witnessing to mercy both through personal example — expressed in piety, living faith, ardent charity, and good works — and through communal witness marked by fraternal unity, justice, mutual kindness, and evangelical joy (cf. *Constitutions,* II, 125). For our apostolic labors, we expect no other reward than Jesus Christ Himself, "who through Divine Mercy will be for us an infinitely great reward for all eternity."[15]

Questions:

- How do I seek to live out in community life and pastoral ministry the Marian principle of overcoming evil with good? Do I act more reactively or proactively?
- To what extent can the Marian apostolate of mercy — rooted in personal example and communal testimony — become an inspiration for the spiritual renewal of contemporary society?

[11] *Letter to Fr. Eugeniusz Kulesza, MIC*, 23 January 1925, no. 297, *Polish Letters*, p. 363.
[12] *Letter to Fr. Marian Wiśniewski, MIC*, 27 November 1924, no. 493, *Polish Letters*, , p. 598.
[13] Cf. *Letter to Fr. Józef Vaitkievičius, MIC*, 31 January 1924, no. 560, *Lithuanian Letters*, p. 826.
[14] Cf. *Travel Journal from Freiburg to Rome*, 24 November 1911, in *Journals*, Licheń 2009, p. 125.
[15] *Instructiones Marianorum*, I, 20, Rome 1959, p. 22.

YVES OUMAROU, MIC

September 2027

Blessed George, Formator of Religious and Marians

The Word of God: Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail." "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

An Authentic *Fiat*

The above description of the Annunciation aptly illustrates the model of formation developed by Blessed George. The fundamental goal of his pedagogy was to lead every person entering the path of consecrated life in the general sense of the word, and particularly in the Congregation of Marian Fathers, to pronounce an authentic "*fiat*." This formation bases the entire process of entrusting oneself to God in consecration and draws the joy flowing from them

on the "*Fiat*" and "Magnificat" of the Blessed Virgin Mary.[1] Mary lived in a state of total self-offering, in spiritual and personal communion with Jesus. Therefore, docility during the formation process entails embracing this same method of entrusting oneself to God — a method that involves both personal transformation and the renunciation of sin in order to bear the fruits of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Jn 3:7–10).

In other words, it is a matter of "following the example of Mary of Nazareth, the first disciple who agreed to become the handmaid of the Lord through the total gift of herself."[2]

From an affirmative answer to God's proposal, two concrete fruits follow: the first is interior, that is, a life totally dedicated and consecrated to God; the second is exterior, linked to the practice of the ten Evangelical Virtues of the Blessed Virgin Mary and to the acceptance of God's gift.[3] The Marian charism invites us to contemplate the outward aspect of the Blessed Virgin Mary's attitude — an attitude that reveals the human being as God intended at the beginning of creation: a holy person capable of responding to God with an unconditional "*fiat*."

In a contemporary world marked by individualism, in which "yes" is too often synonymous with self-absorption and in which the answer to God and neighbor is most often "no," Blessed George's pedagogy proposes the Immaculate Conception as a new model capable of liberating man from individualistic indifference to God's call, and introducing us to a more human and sensitive world.[4]

Only in a more human world can the value of the human being — created in the image and likeness of God — be fully appreciated. For the unconditional "*fiat*" restores the proper relationship between the Creator, humanity, and creation — a relationship severed by original sin. Mary is Immaculate because she was called to bear Jesus in her womb; she is thus a perfect image of God — *Imago Dei.*[5]

[1] Cf. T. Lancton, *L'Oblatio et les conseils évangéliques. De la consécration à la profession des conseils évangéliques*, in: A. Pakula (ed.), *HICM oblatio et consécration*, General Curia of the Congregation of Marian Fathers, Rome 2020, pp. 159-160.

[2] Cf. Yves Oumarou, *Transformation de la personne par le charisme. Proposition de formation des Pères Mariens au Cameroun*, Saint Paul, Yaoundé 2024, p. 283.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Cf. Michèle Reboul, *L'Immaculée Conception. Clé de voûte de la Création*, introduction by Cardinal Robert Sarah, Via Romana, Le Chesnay 2018, pp. 10-11.

[5] Cf. 2 Cor 4:4 and Yves Oumarou, *Transformation de la personne par le charisme*, op. cit., p. 213.

Blessed George built a formation structure around the mystery of the Annunciation (Lk 1:26–38), thereby giving the religious a key to becoming fully conformed to Christ in the school of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Formator of Religious

From the autumn of 1904 until 1907, Father George stayed in Warsaw for tuberculosis treatment. The sisters from Piękna Street arranged for him to be based at the educational institution founded by Cecylia Plater-Zyberkówna, which had a branch in Chyliczki. Whenever his health permitted, he heard the teachers' confessions and gave them spiritual talks. Even then, he had gained renown as an outstanding spiritual director who guided souls into a deep spiritual life. He ministered, among others, to members of the clandestine religious congregations founded by Father Honorat Koźmiński, OFM Cap, with whom he had maintained excellent relations for many years. At that time, he also led a group of diocesan priests associated in the Secret Society of Marian Priests. These young priests aspired to live in a religious congregation, practicing poverty and asceticism.

Father George also devoted great effort to the upbringing and religious formation of young people. Father Aleksander Wójcicki, Rector of Stefan Batory University in Vilnius, commented on Father George's influence on his students:

> Father Matulaitis radiated a beautiful priestly character, knowledge of the modern world, personal refinement, and fidelity to ideals. Thanks to these qualities, Father Matulaitis commanded a level of respect and affection among the students that no one at the university had enjoyed since the time of Rector Symon... Nor did any of his successors exert such a profound influence on the youth. In 1909, Father Matulaitis began lecturing on dogmatic theology, and a year later, he became the vice-rector of the Theological Academy in St. Petersburg.[6]

During this period, Father George also ministered to numerous women's religious congregations. In June 1917, he was elected chairman of the congress of priest-prefects of the Kingdom. In his inaugural address, he stated:

[6] Jean Bukowicz MIC, Introduction: *Journal spirituel*, Georges Matulaitis, CFM Pères Mariens CANA – Kibeho, 2008, pp. 7–8.

"Two words — God and Fatherland, symbolized by the cross and the white eagle — must always go hand in hand."[7]

Formator of Laity

Blessed George did not limit himself solely to the formation of the Marians; he also accompanied laypeople as well as other religious men and women. As a witness and educator, he made this work an absolute priority in his ministry. "Formation is thus a sharing in the work of the Father who, through the Spirit, shapes the thoughts and feelings of the Son in the hearts of young men and women" (*VC* 66). Pope St. John Paul II reminded the Marians of this, stating: "Formation is more important than ever for the future of the Congregation."[8]

In Blessed George's view, this matter is important for both the Church and society. He believed that the process begins with an initial stage aimed at enabling the young person to consent to being formed throughout their entire life. However, this is not merely a transitional phase, as the process of learning this capacity continues for a lifetime. Blessed George particularly emphasized the need to enhance religious upbringing as well as school and extracurricular education in the pursuit of full spiritual maturity. He knew how to foster a holistic dynamic that integrated the dimensions of initial and ongoing formation for the consecrated person through talks and lectures, hearing confessions, and providing spiritual accompaniment. Despite his frail health, he undertook these duties whenever his condition permitted.

The model of formation proposed by Blessed George went beyond earlier frameworks and offered a modern approach — centered on internal integration rooted in the individual's personal and anthropological reality — aimed at achieving the intended outcome. In other words, Blessed George was ahead of his time, emphasizing the need for formation within the context of daily life and through the giving of witness.

In his pedagogical approach, he also emphasized the importance of social bonds and communication, enabling the modern Christian to build fruitful relationships with others and undertake the challenging task of personal and communal conversion. In his view, the primary goal of formation is to accompany another person in building and rebuilding their life's path — drawing upon both adverse and positive events, which serve as a bridge leading to

[7] Ibid., p. 12.

[8] M. Waclaw (ed.), *Capitula generalia Marianorum 1702-1999*, Editio ad usum Sodalium Studiosorum, Puszcza Mariańska 2001, p. 793.

fulfillment; that is, to the Paschal Mystery. The spiritual path thus becomes a daily effort directed toward the Cross of Christ — what Amedeo Cencini termed the "center of gravity."[9] This center of gravity points to an evident continuity that imbues all life events — whether joyful or painful — with profound meaning.

True joy during formation cannot be forced; it can only arise from an inner assent — an authentic "*Fiat*" — that paves the way for personal fulfillment while pointing toward the Paschal horizon. Awareness of the Paschal mystery heals a person's individual history and enables them to bear witness everywhere to the joy of their calling, thereby bringing about an authentic personalization of faith. Only under this condition will a person's life speak while their heart listens; for a listening heart is infinitely more open to being shaped by God.

Formator of Marians for the Offering of Life

As Novice Master of the Marians, Father George returned to the Academy, where he turned his attention to the newly revised *Constitutions of the Congregation of Marian Fathers*. Upon his return to Fribourg, he dedicated himself exclusively to this task. At that time, he served as spiritual director to 10 priests in the novitiate and several candidates. Fathers and Professors Bučys and Totorajtis had remained in the occupied territories.

Meanwhile, new candidates from Poland and Lithuania continued to arrive in Switzerland; some of them were already acquainted with Father George. The material living conditions of the novice priests were very modest, in contrast to the high level of their spiritual life. They possessed a very strong sense of community life. They also undertook pastoral work in the parishes of Fribourg with great zeal.[10]

Let us be inspired by advice on formation from Blessed George:

> To sustain and perfect itself, our Congregation should never hesitate to dedicate its best, most pious, prudent, capable, and suitable members to the task. Particular attention should be paid to the formation of novices, the education of the brothers, and other similar endeavors. It would be beneficial to visit other congregations from time to

[9] See Amedeo Cencini, *The Tree of Life. Towards a Model of Initial and Ongoing Formation*, trans. Krzysztof Stopa, Salwator Publishing House, Kraków 2006.

[10] Bl. George Matulaitis, *Diaries*, op. cit., pp. 8–9.

time and observe their way of life, in order to identify good practices that could be adopted and implemented among us, as well as to learn how to avoid various difficulties and mistakes. Care must be taken not to burden novice masters and house superiors with other, extraneous tasks, so that they may serve the Congregation diligently and exclusively. Next in importance are all the works and activities conducted by the Congregation. Here, too, the principle of excellence and constant progress must be applied, ensuring that in our work we do not fall short of laypeople but — whenever possible — surpass them and serve as an example to them.[11]

Just as we neglect our spiritual lives because of external tasks, so too do we quickly relegate the affairs of our Congregation to second or third place — or even to the very bottom of the list — for the sake of that same work. Such a course of action cannot be beneficial — not for the Congregation, nor for ourselves, nor even for the very undertakings that prompt us to be so ready to neglect our spiritual duties. The Congregation serves as a source of stability for us, for our works, and for our activities; indeed, it is the foundation of our life. The better the Congregation is organized and led, the more the Spirit of God will dwell within it, and the more we ourselves will be able to grow spiritually and find fulfillment; our labors, too, will be beneficial and fruitful, resting upon a solid foundation. No organization can exist or flourish without people dedicated to it.[12]

It sometimes happens that a person feels the need for a more perfect life—to join others, to enter a religious order. They would gladly do so, yet various obstacles rise up before them. How many ties bind a person! If you begin by trying to free yourself from all these difficulties first—waiting until you are completely unencumbered before deciding whether or not to join an order, or which one to choose — who knows if you will ever make that decision at all? Entangled in difficulties like a trapped animal, you will perish.[13]

One should train oneself in constant prayer in the spirit — whether walking or performing some task, especially one that does not require mental effort, or during moments of free time, particularly when moving from one task to another or conversing with people; in short, always and everywhere.[14]

[11] Ibid., no. 10, p. 31
[12] Ibid., no. 12, p. 32.
[13] Ibid., no. 15, pp. 34–35.
[14] Ibid., no. 35, p. 52.

Seeking out as many people as possible — and subsequently nurturing, educating, and preparing them for whatever tasks are currently most essential to the Church — should be our primary concern. After completing the novitiate and the necessary studies, no one should neglect further education. It would be advisable to appoint academic visitors to visit the brothers and their houses, offering appropriate guidance and advice on what and how to study, and ensuring that the brothers do not neglect their continuing education but rather constantly supplement it and make progress.[15]

Would it not be beneficial to introduce a custom in our Congregation whereby brothers, upon completing their studies and before embarking on their work, would undergo a three-month second novitiate? In this way, they would renew their spirit and rekindle the fire of zeal. Undertaking such a brief novitiate would also be advantageous for brothers already engaged in active ministry, after a certain period of time; they could complete this three-month novitiate every six, or at least every ten, years. Just as soldiers are periodically recalled to military service to refresh what they have learned, so too should a religious be called upon from time to time to undergo a novitiate, in order to renew and strengthen his spirit. I believe that introducing such a custom would be of great benefit to the individual brothers, as well as to the Congregation and its work. Naturally, a novitiate of this kind would need to be conducted separately from the novitiate proper for young men.[16]

Living Reminders

An African proverb says: "When walking with companions through marshy terrain, one must watch the person ahead so as not to fall into the same hole — or any other." Applying this principle to the spiritual life — and specifically to the life of a Marian — it is worth paying attention to situations where genuine dangers to one's vocation may lurk.

Let us recall the Apostle's powerful words: "Be sober! Be vigilant! Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour" (1 Pt 5:8). Even though the threat posed by the devil is formidable, we must remember that his power vanishes in the face of firm spiritual resistance.

[15] Ibid., no. 90, p. 96.
[16] Ibid., no. 88, pp. 94–95.

Resisting the devil's temptations is rooted in the dynamics of formation and in fidelity to models of holiness. Foremost among these models are our holy Founder and other Marians raised to the altars by the Church. Their number includes Blessed George, a formator whose pedagogical approach brilliantly illustrates the method of oblation.

This method involves guiding a person to undertake all their activities, responsibilities, choices, and decisions with love. The goal of our spirituality is to shape a person who will be like God, becoming a living reminder of the mystery of the Immaculate Conception. Regarding this profound intention, Fr. Andrzej Pakuła writes: "The purpose of *oblatio* is such a transformation that the religious becomes solely and completely the servant (*totus servus*) of the Almighty and the Blessed Virgin Mary."[17] For every Christian — whether layperson or religious — who wishes to live out this spirituality, the offering of oneself is a *sine qua non*. By offering himself in this way, the professed religious becomes an icon of the Son of the Immaculate Virgin Mary, who was obedient to God in all things — in times of trial and in moments of joy alike.

It is precisely through this openness to self-offering that Jesus Christ transforms the life of every religious during formation. Upon its completion, the Marian is not merely to be a disciple; rather, he should become a man completely transformed into Christ.

As a formator for the Marian Fathers, Blessed George emphasized that the *Constitutions* should be bedside reading for every formator — a document demanding his special attention. His pedagogical approach took into account the situational and theoretical realities of the modern world without losing sight of the integral formation of the person. This approach encompasses all dimensions of the individual: the human, spiritual, intellectual, and communal. He also strongly emphasized the sense of belonging, giving absolute priority to the Congregation's own works. Any Marian who wishes to grow in responding to his vocation must, from the very beginning of his formation, detach himself from those ties that hinder his progress. Interior freedom is essential to respond fully to the Lord's call and to belong wholly to Christ, born of the Immaculate Virgin Mary.

Today, candidates for the Congregation of Marian Fathers must contend with pitfalls such as dishonesty, hypocrisy, cultural rootlessness, a lack of discernment, and existential disorder, as well as an unbridled pursuit of power and material goods. In the face of these distortions, Blessed George held that,

[17] Andrzej Pakula, *La spiritualité Oblative dans l'enseignement de Saint Stanislas Papczyński*, p. 68; cf. Yves Oumarou, *Transformation de la personne par le charisme*, op. cit., p. 280.

upon completing his formation, a Marian should be capable of recognizing and analyzing the needs of the Church — and of meeting them.

Prayer is the weapon of choice in this struggle. That is why Blessed George placed such great emphasis on the necessity of ongoing formation — spanning one's entire life — for it is through this that a Marian is able to constantly rekindle the original zeal of his vocation to offer himself completely to Christ and the Church.

In summary, the model of formation bequeathed to us by Blessed George aims to shape a person capable of self-giving — of becoming an oblate, that is, a gift. Pope Francis spoke on this subject, noting that the secret of the Church's unity with the Holy Spirit lies within this gift: "It is important to believe that God is gift, that He does not act by taking, but by giving. If we realize that what we are is His gift — a gratuitous and undeserved gift — then we, too, will want to make our lives a gift. And by loving humbly and serving selflessly and joyfully, we will present a true image of God to the world."[18]

Every Marian should take deeply to heart the oblation method, rooted in the spirituality of St. Stanislaus Papczyński and developed by Blessed George Matulaitis. It charts a path of friendship, involvement, and loving response to God through offering oneself to Him in an attitude of gratitude for the graces received. For a Marian is called to the constant deepening of the doctrinal and spiritual richness of his charism.[19]

Questions:

- In what way was the Blessed Virgin Mary a model of formation for Blessed George, and what kind of model is she today for the Marians?
- Can it be said that formation, as envisioned by Blessed George, aimed to shape Marian Fathers who lived out their Founder's *Oblatio*?
- How can we form Christians and religious today, drawing upon the model of Blessed George?

[18] Francis, *Homily on the Solemnity of Pentecost, May 31, 2020*, accessed June 25, 2026: *www.vatican.va/content/francesco/pl/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200531_omelia-pentecoste.html*.

[19] Yves Oumarou, *Transformation de la personne par le charisme*, op. cit., p. 284.

JACEK RYGIELSKI, MIC

October 2027

Blessed George's Ideal of Religious Community

The Word of God: Col 3:1–17

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

The Love of God

Blessed George Matulaitis was in contact with religious life from an early age, having grown up in a Marian parish; he harbored a desire for the religious life

— a sentiment he expressed, among other places, in a letter to Fr. Sękowski. He fulfilled this aspiration by joining the Marian Congregation while already a diocesan priest and university lecturer, thereby saving the order from extinction. As he reorganized the life of the religious community, he remained open to any comments or criticism from his brethren, demonstrating that the well-being of his fellow religious was paramount — for through community life, they ought to constantly grow and strive for perfection. He likely took to heart the advice he received from a cardinal in Rome — where he was holding discussions on the renewal of the Marian Fathers — urging him to foster the communal life, without which no religious order can exist.

For Blessed George, the love of God was the foundation and meaning of life — both Christian life and the communal life of the religious order. It is God who first reaches out to man with His love and seeks a response: a love for Him and a steadfast clinging to Him. A religious community, too, should fulfill its vocation by first receiving the gift of God's love and then — bearing that love in its heart — carrying out all works that serve the salvation of souls and the good of the Church.

The Renovator encouraged shared responsibility in building the community, as the quality of communal life depends on personal commitment. He viewed every brother joining the order as a gift from God. He desired the order to be regarded as a home where everyone has assigned tasks and duties, performed for the good and benefit of all. Furthermore, he encouraged building community relationships upon the foundation of fraternal love, so that the brothers might support one another. Such an attitude would also lead to fruitful external ministry, for the witness of the community's life is vital to the apostolate.

Furthermore, the Renovator exemplified openness to the various suggestions of his confrères, viewing them as inspirations from the Holy Spirit or as matters requiring discernment. He believed that various ideas and initiatives should not be dismissed out of hand but rather given careful consideration. At the same time, he emphasized that the final decision should rest with the superior, who bears responsibility for the community. He also stressed that a superior ought to be a prudent and resolute individual, one who would not yield to external pressures, as doing so could undermine the unity of the community.

It is also beneficial to establish shared goals within the community — objectives that everyone then strives to realize under the guidance of a superior. Gatherings and meetings, which facilitate the exchange of ideas and experiences, also serve to strengthen community bonds. Furthermore, one of the means of regulating community life — in his view — is fraternal correction

based on the Gospel; rooted in love, right intention, and faith in God, its aim is to win over the brother and offer him assistance.

Another important matter is for the community, together with the superior, to strive to create an atmosphere of kindness, love, and mutual support amidst weaknesses and difficulties; it is important that confrères take an interest in the work and undertakings of others. Father George urged confrères to live within the community not merely alongside others, but for others, in a spirit of fraternal service and mutual friendship, respect, and unity.

Prayer — understood as a conversation with God within the religious community and a means of receiving grace — serves to unite the community and foster mutual love. It enables the religious community to discover God's presence in its midst and to praise Him for all His gifts, while also revitalizing religious consecration. In addition to communal prayer, Fr. George urged the faithful observance of other shared and individual spiritual practices; one should not too readily seek exemption or justification for skipping them, as these religious acts safeguard and strengthen communal life. According to Blessed George, communal prayer and other spiritual practices play a fundamental role in shaping a healthy religious community.

Another means of fostering community is shared recreation, which, according to Fr. George, should be just as mandatory as practices like meditation — and yields equally blessed fruit. Recreation allows for time spent together in casual conversation, fostering a spirit of joy within the community.

The Founder also recommended that Marian communities adopt and live out a Marian way of life, for it was Mary who fully responded to God's gift and serves as a model for following Christ. Mary also teaches everyone how to accept God's will amidst life's various circumstances and how to open themselves to both the cross — suffering — and joy.

Striving for Perfection

Father George himself was aware that, despite good intentions, a religious community is not a community of perfect people, but rather of those striving for perfection. He sought to strengthen those facing crises or wavering in their vocation, believing that every person sent by God must be respected. He emphasized that temptations and difficulties would inevitably arise, but that God also grants the grace to overcome such trials; he also encouraged open dialogue and seeking help from fellow religious brothers.

A crisis can also affect a specific community. Such a situation gives rise to considerable tension, complaining, and mutual recrimination, all of which weaken the community spirit. There is a danger of factions forming within the community — factions that destroy unity and breed rivalry and hatred. In such a community, there is no room for the Spirit of God. According to Blessed George, the way out of such a situation — and the path to restoring unity and fraternal love — lies in each individual seeking God's true light through prayer, then personally striving for a perfect life and avoiding the evil that has infiltrated the cloister. Furthermore, one should encourage fellow religious to live according to the Spirit of God; in this way, the religious community can be rebuilt person by person. Father George termed this approach a work of renewal in Christ — a process that should not begin with condemning, belittling, or despising others, but rather with oneself: walking in God's ways and then drawing others along through one's own example.

Blessed George was also aware of the many threats to religious life that stem from human nature — wounded by weakness and sin — and he warned against seeking a comfortable, pleasant niche within the religious community where a brother might focus solely on himself and his own affairs. He emphasized that one enters the religious order to dedicate one's life, plans, and comforts to building the community and working together for Christ and the Church. Confrères should not content themselves with mediocrity, but should constantly strive for maturity in religious life, utilizing their spiritual and intellectual gifts and abilities in the service of community life and the apostolic ministry.

One threat to community life is individualism — a challenge also present in Fr. George's time, particularly given that many candidates entered with established life experience, and many were already priests, making community life not always easy for them. Nevertheless, the Renovator exercised great patience and endeavored to organize communities in such a way that each member could fulfill his duties and calling while simultaneously striving to adapt to life within the community.

Everyone is aware of their own flaws and weaknesses — struggling against them — and notices similar issues in their fellow brothers; however, it is important to focus less on failures, dissatisfaction, or judging others — attitudes that negatively affect community life — and instead concentrate on gratitude to God for the gift of one's own vocation and that of one's brother. It is also worthwhile to recognize the good God has bestowed upon each of us and the entire congregation, as well as the good in a fellow brother, and to seek peace and trust in God together.

Proper Organization

The Renovator also emphasized the importance of all regulations and documents concerning religious life, for communal life within the congregation cannot be a matter of chance or happenstance but requires proper organization. At the same time, the aim was not to impose uniformity upon everyone; he believed it was essential to recognize the personal aptitudes of each confrère and — alongside the religious formation common to all — to foster the abilities, talents, and various gifts that a brother brings to the congregation and uses to enrich the religious community.

At the same time, it is certainly necessary to foster in everyone a love for the congregation and for religious discipline, as well as an acceptance of the authority of superiors. He also urged superiors not to attempt to do everything themselves — failing to entrust various tasks to their confrères or insisting on controlling every detail — as such behavior neither inspires trust nor fosters a sense of responsibility. Confrères who had the opportunity to undergo formation under the guidance of the Renovator emphasized that his approach was characterized by dynamism and freedom.

Blessed George emphasized that, although we were called by God as sinners, if we continually progress and strive for perfection along the path of our vocation, the Lord will be able to accomplish great things through us and our congregation. He also noted that by advancing in love and fraternal unity, we would shape a community that grows in divine strength, ready to face adversity.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the Renovator highly valued community life as a fundamental element of religious life. The quality of this life depends, on the one hand, on participation in all spiritual exercises and, on the other, on the personal commitment and effort of each confrere who contributes to the work of building the community.

When facing the various difficulties, threats, and crises that stem from our sinful nature, Blessed George recommends greater gratitude to God for one's vocation and for the Congregation, as well as a high regard for religious life. Each confrère is a part of the community — beloved and chosen by God. He also encouraged the continuous intellectual and spiritual development of every confrere, a process that serves to enrich the community as well.

Questions:

- What is my attitude toward the community, and how do I perceive the brothers in my specific local community?
- What can I offer the community? How can I enrich it?

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November 2027

Blessed George and the Apostolate

The Word of God: 1 Corinthians 9:22-23

I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

"One who makes new again"

The word *renovator* means "one who makes new again." Blessed George is our Renovator because, in a certain sense, he brought a newness to our Congregation. This newness was not an erasure of what had come before, but a real adjustment of the form, structure, and methods of our Congregation to better share the grace of our charism in the context of the modern world.

In his work as Renovator, Blessed George did not have access to the writings of Fr. Founder to be able to know his teaching and speak about it as we can today.[1] Saint Stanislaus, though, left us God's Providence as our inheritance,[2] and part of this Divine Providence for our Congregation was the Renovation brought about by Blessed George. Both men were led by the same Holy Spirit and so we should expect to find genuine connections between our founding and our renovation.

Therefore, part of enriching our understanding of the renovation is studying the ways in which Blessed George's teaching and example fittingly build upon that of our Fr. Founder. The purpose of this brief reflection is to take up this task in reference to Blessed George's understanding of the apostolate.

[1] Cf. Letter to Stanukynas, February 8, 1912: "[…] you could say that from the old Marians we inherited only the name […] The old Marians have destroyed all their documents and papers and archives because they feared searches. We have now to arrange everything from the beginning […]."

[2] Cf. *Selected Works,* The Second Testament, n. 12: "To all my present and to each of my future brothers and companions, I allocate the most magnificent foundation: the Providence of our most gracious Father."

The Interpretive Key

Now, if we could ask Blessed George: "Father Renovator, how can we better understand the apostolic dimension of our vocation as Marians?", how do you think he would answer? I am convinced that he would answer: "Meditate on the life and teaching of St. Paul the Apostle." Blessed George's devotion to St. Paul is like an interpretive key which can be applied to all the teaching that he gave to us about the apostolate, both by his words and his life.

His desire for Marians was that in our apostolic labors we strive to be imbued with the spirit of St. Paul. This is testified to in the prayer that we recite every day after Vespers, in which we pray:

> Blessed Archbishop George, help us in our service for Christ and the Church, after the example of Mary Immaculate and St. Paul the Apostle." (*Marians at Prayer*, p. 24).

Saint Paul alone of all our patrons is given the singular honor of being named beside the Blessed Virgin Mary as an example of how we ought to serve Christ and His Church.

Even in the edition of our Constitutions published in 1930, which were written by Blessed George, we find the following distinction given to St. Paul after the patrons of our Congregation have been enumerated:

> Above all, however, let them set before their eyes Saint Paul's many and great labors and sufferings, constant worries, vigils, prayers, journeys, dangers, efforts, illustrious disputes and revilings for Christ and the salvation of souls — let them be kindled by all these things to work and suffer for the name of Christ. (*Constitutions of 1930*, n. 15).[3]

The goal of this reflection is indeed to set before our eyes the love that our Father Renovator had for the Apostle Paul. During this year of Blessed George may we kindle anew in our heart the apostolic fire that animated his life, a fire which he drew in large part from his devotion to St. Paul.

But as I initially stated, the goal here is not to see the life of Blessed George in isolation from that of St. Stanislaus, but rather as being connected by the same Divine Providence which guided them and the same Holy Spirit which inspired them in their pivotal roles in the life of our Congregation.

[3] The original Latin text: "*Imprimis tamen ponant sibi ob oculos S. Pauli Apostoli plurimos eosque maximos pro Christo et animarum salute labores et dolores, perpetuas curas, vigilias, orations, itinera, pericula, conatus, praeclaras contentions et facinora, eisque accendantur ad agendum et patiendum pro Christi nomine.*"

St. Paul in the writings of Father Founder

The only other writer in the history of our Congregation that I am aware of who rivals or even surpasses Blessed George's ability and propensity to quote extensively and regularly from St. Paul, is Fr. Founder. Throughout his *Collected Writings,* St. Stanislaus references and quotes St. Paul dozens of times, and while there isn't time to go through these references in detail, the one section of them that I would like to point out are the quotations found in *Norma Vitae*.

Father Founder quotes St. Paul at least six times in *NV*. Furthermore, the location of these quotations is very important: From Chapter 2 to Chapter 5 of *NV* (the chapters which lay the foundation for the spiritual life of the Congregation), Fr. Founder begins every chapter by quoting St. Paul.[4] This is extremely significant, because it shows that for Fr. Founder, St. Paul was one of the principal influences that guided him in the very earliest days of our founding.

Therefore, in God's wonderful Providence, the emphasis which Blessed George placed on St. Paul at the renovation can truly be seen as an organic unfolding of what was already present in a seminal way in the foundation laid by Fr. Founder. There is much more that could be said about Fr. Founder's love for St. Paul, but this is a subject for future articles dedicated to the topic. We turn now to the life of Blessed George.

St. Paul in the early life of Blessed George

The first point to be examined is how exactly Blessed George came to adopt St. Paul as his great patron. Where did this devotion originate in his life?

From the documentation available, it is not easy to discern exactly when or how Blessed George began to form this devotion. However, we can reasonably conclude from the frequency with which he quotes St. Paul in his Journal and Letters, that during his time of seminary and early formation, he must have become very familiar with the Pauline Epistles of the New Testament. Sister Viktorija Plečkaitytė, MVS, expounds on this:

Blessed George's Journal and letters, both business and personal, are strewn with quotations from St. Paul. The abundance and precision are truly

[4] In the first paragraph of Ch. 2 (Love), Fr. Founder references 1 Corinthians 13:1 and quotes 1 Corinthians 16:14. In the first paragraph of Ch. 3 (Vows), he quotes from Romans 13:1-2 and Philippians 2:8. In the first paragraph of Ch. 4 (Mortification), he quotes from Colossians. 3:5. Finally, in the first paragraph of Ch. 5 (Recollection), he quotes from the words of St. Paul in Acts 17:28.

remarkable; clearly, he did not specifically consult the Scriptures when writing in his Journal or composing a letter to a friend. The many quotations and paraphrases from the letters of the Apostle Paul that poured out from his memory, from the depth of his heart, demonstrate that he was truly captured by the spirit of this great Apostle (*Blessed George Matulaitis*, p. 144).
So, we can see that St. Paul was already a guiding influence during the time of Bl. George's formation.

However, it's important that we don't think of his devotion to St. Paul as merely an intellectual interest or a theological preference. It was something that truly welled up from his heart and played a vital role in his spiritual life. In a letter to Fr. Bučys, Bl. George describes how it is that he came to select the words of Paul from Romans 12:21 as his episcopal motto, and the story is quite moving. These events took place in Warsaw in 1905[5] when he was serving there as a young priest before his decision to renovate the Marians:

> I was struck like with a thunderbolt, when … I heard that it is being discussed in the Archbishop's office to dismiss me and forbid further ministry. It was as if the earth had been pulled out from under me; I lost my entire foundation. … I had to deal with this blow. For over a week, I didn't leave my room. While suffering that trauma, God allowed me to understand a bit of the meaning and significance of a cross and suffering. And by God's grace, I was healed. I began to disregard, almost completely, what people think, say, or write about me: I look only for the glory of God and the good of the Church; I took for myself the motto: *Vince malum in bono* (*Listy Litewskie*, n. 157).

We can see in these words that his love for St. Paul was cemented by this pivotal moment in his life, a moment in which he was allowed by God to experience the mystery of the Cross, but also the power of grace, which makes it possible to bear such moments in the path of our vocations. He said: "By God's *grace*, I was healed." And for him the fruit of this healing was found in the words of St. Paul: *Vince malum in bono*, which from this moment forward became his life's motto and were later engraved in his episcopal coat of arms. If he already had a deep love for St. Paul, this moment of suffering and grace confirmed in his heart the Pauline spirit that we later find so present in his journal and other writings.

[5] Though the date is not stated in the letter, we can deduce the year from the fact that Blessed George states that these events occurred in the first year of the Russian Revolution in Warsaw, which began in 1905.

St. Paul in the Writings of Blessed George

Having now seen some of the historical and personal context of Blessed George's devotion to St. Paul, I would like to conclude by offering for your reading and reflection two passages of Blessed George's journal. These passages show with particular clarity how this devotion shaped Blessed George's understanding of the apostolate.

The first passage is from an entry in his Journal dated January 25th, 1911. In this entry Bl. George reflects on the missionary ardor that ought to animate the work of the Marians. He quotes 2 Corinthians 6:3-10[6], in which St. Paul describes his own approach to the apostolate. After quoting the passage, Blessed George writes the following:

> Let us make sure that we walk along this road shown us by St. Paul, taking long strides to reach our heavenly home more quickly and drawing others to walk along the same path, helping them in whatever way we can, always mindful of the greater glory of God. If only we could, we would take the whole world up to heaven with us! We would place it at the feet of our Lord as a gift for Him. O Lord, help us to become such people, always on fire with holy zeal (*Journal*, p. 69).

The second passage is from March 7th of the same year and contains perhaps the most important words that Blessed George has left us on this topic. Because, in this passage, Blessed George situates his focus on St. Paul within the context of our striving to imitate the example of Jesus. Everything that Blessed George wants us to admire and strive to imitate about St. Paul is for the sake of becoming more like Christ as we live out our Marian vocation, particularly through our apostolic work.

> Our model is Jesus Himself not only working quietly in His home in Nazareth, not only the Jesus who mortified Himself spending forty

[6] 2 Corinthians 6:3-10: "We do nothing that people might object to, so as not to bring discredit on our function as God's servants. Instead, we prove we are servants of God by great fortitude in times of suffering; in times of hardship and distress; when we are flogged, or sent to prison, or mobbed; laboring, sleepless, starving. We prove we are God's servants by our purity, knowledge, patience, and kindness; by a spirit of holiness, by a love free from affectation; by the word of truth and by the power of God; by being armed with the weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left, prepared for honor or disgrace, for blame or praise; taken for impostors, while we are genuine; obscure yet famous; said to be dying, and here we are alive; rumored to be executed before we are sentenced; thought most miserable, and yet we are always rejoicing; taken for paupers, though we make others rich; for people having nothing, though we have everything."

> days in the desert, often passing entire nights in prayer, but also the Jesus who worked hard, who wept and suffered; Jesus out among the crowds visiting the towns and villages, reaching out to sinners and the simple folk as well as to the learned, the righteous, and the rich; Jesus teaching and refuting the objections of the Pharisees; Jesus seeking the lost sheep; Jesus suffering persecution and being forced to go into hiding to avoid the hatred of His enemies. We also intend to follow the example of St. Paul—his active life, his boldness, and fearlessness. Wherever we happen to be, even in prison or in exile, we intend to preach Christ and not to abandon our way of life. Who knows what we shall encounter in this life for the sake of Christ? What hardship and persecution lie in store for us? We must be ready for anything. And so, we need people who are filled with energy, active and independent, but also prudent and resourceful, able to see this world and people with the eyes of faith and always remaining steadfastly intent on achieving their goal, faithful to the spirit of their enterprise until death, until they are eternally united to God (*Journal,* pp. 84-85).

As our Congregation experiences this moment of grace in its history, celebrating 100 years since the death of Blessed George, may the words of this great man call us once more to be courageous in bringing Christ to the world.

Following his example and that of our Father Founder, may we see in St. Paul an inspiration and model for carrying out the mission entrusted to us by Divine Providence.

Questions:

- What are principal challenges that we face in our apostolic work today? How can Bl. George and St. Paul show us the way forward?
- Bl. George was emphatic that he wanted the Marians to be marked by holy zeal in how we carry out our apostolic work. What does it mean to live a zealous life? If this zeal has faded, how can it be rekindled in us?

SEBASTHI STALIN CHINNAPPAN, MIC

December 2027

Life of Vows in the Spirituality of Blessed George

The Word of God: Ecclesiastes 5:4-5

When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you wow. It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay.

Numbers 30:1-2

This is what the Lord has commanded. If a man vows a vow to the lord, or swears an oath to bind him by a pledge, he shall not break his word. He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.

Deuteronomy 23:21-22

If you make a vow to the Lord, your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin. But if you refrain from vowing, you will not be guilty of sin.

A Vow Born from Persecution

One of the distinctive characteristics of the spirituality of the religious life is a Christian's dedication to God, who is beloved above all things, through the profession of the evangelical counsels. For this very reason, nearly all of the written works of St. Stanislaus Papczyński addressed to the religious, as well as the other documents of the early tradition of the Congregation of Marian fathers, treat the matter of the religious vows programmatically. Papczyński sees the three vows, understood as a concrete sign of the religious profession and entrance into the life according to the evangelical counsels, primarily as the distinctive mark of the religious life, and he places them in a Christological perspective. To him, they are the most perfect form of the Christian life, the prototype of which he sees in the life of Christ and his first disciples. By entering the path of the evangelical counsels and making the

religious profession, the religious strives to faithfully imitate the life of Christ, who taught "obedience, poverty and chastity" "by example and word." — *Spirituality of the religious life according to Saint Stanislaus Papczyński and the early tradition of the Congregation of Marian Fathers (by Fr. Andrzej Pakuła, MIC, PhD).*

The Congregation gives a man new strength, the vows through which you bind yourself to God detach and pull a man away from any wickedness, from flimsy everyday mundane concerns and lift him up to a new, nobler life and, what is most important, in a special way they direct the whole man, his thoughts, will and emotions towards God. Although I am still a poor religious, I can already see that through these vows with which I tied myself with my dearest savior pledging to him: [*Dilectus meus mihi et ego illi*] my love is mine and I am his; song 2:16), my life has changed. I have noticed that I do things I could not force myself to do before. —*Blessed George Matulaitis, Saint Petersburg, a fragment of the letter to Fr. Jonas Totoraitis, October 18-31, 1909.*

Blessed George Matulaitis (1871–1927), known as the "Renovator of the Marian Fathers of the Immaculate Conception," lived a deeply spiritual life rooted in his commitment to religious vows. He strongly valued religious life and believed that the Church must always have people who seek holiness through the evangelical counsels. In his article for the Catholic encyclopedia, he stated that "a part of holiness of the Church is that she shall never lack striving for perfection on the road of following the evangelical counsels." He emphasized that religious communities are powerful instruments for renewing the life and mission of the Church.

His own journey — from a physically fragile orphan to a bishop and renovator of religious life — shows how poverty, chastity, and obedience shaped both his personal holiness and his apostolic mission. For Blessed George, the vows were not merely obligations or restrictions. They were a means of encountering Christ, growing in holiness, serving the Church, and renewing religious life. He understood both the value of religious vocation and the urgent need for renewal within religious communities.

The circumstances surrounding Blessed George's religious profession were extraordinary. In 1909, he secretly made his religious vows because the oppressive Russian government prohibited Catholic religious Congregations from accepting new members. On August 29, 1909, in Bishop K. Ruszkiewicz's private chapel in Warsaw, in the presence of the bishop himself and Fr. F. Bučys, he took his vows before the last Marian, the Superior General, Fr.

W. Sękowski. Through this act, Blessed George helped preserve the Marian religious community from complete extinction.

Blessed George had known the Marian Fathers from his childhood. Although he admitted in his journal that he was afraid of binding himself to God through vows, he nevertheless surrendered himself completely to God's will. His spiritual motto expressed this commitment: to seek God in all things, to do everything for the greater glory of God, and to bring the spirit of God into everything so that all things may be filled with Him.

His secret profession therefore had a profound spiritual meaning. He compared his hidden vows to a grain of wheat that falls into the ground and dies. In the same way, he believed that by surrendering his own desires and accepting self-denial, his life could bear abundant fruit for God.

Fully and Completely

At the center of Blessed George's spirituality of religious vows was the idea of total and unconditional self-giving to God and the Church. In his journal he expressed the conviction that every religious must freely and completely renounce self-centeredness and dedicate himself to the Church. He considered this total consecration to be the heart and essence of religious vocation.

For him, spiritual growth and personal holiness had to come first. At the same time, a religious person had a responsibility to contribute faithfully to the discipline, unity, and spiritual life of the community.

Blessed George understood that making a vow meant offering one's whole life to God. He rejected a hesitant approach in which a person merely "tries" religious life while keeping other possibilities open. Instead, he chose complete commitment. This surrender was not motivated by fear or sadness, but by love. He trusted in God so deeply that he described himself as a little child placing himself into God's hands and allowing God to carry him. He believed that divine love could heal the wounds of the past and transform human weakness into a source of strength.

Facing Suffering with Faith

Blessed George's spiritual journey was closely connected with suffering. From the age of 15, he experienced severe physical suffering because of tuberculosis of the bone. He also experienced opposition, misunderstanding, betrayal, and criticism from others who questioned his intentions and even threatened his

ministry. Nevertheless, his vows gave him strength to face these difficulties with faith. He followed the teaching of St. Paul: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

When some Church authorities threatened to remove him from his work, he did not react with anger or fear. Instead, he spent time in prayer and reflection and experienced God's grace as a source of healing and strength. Gradually, he learned not to be controlled by the opinions or judgments of others.

His vows became a source of inner freedom:

- Obedience freed him from excessive concern about public opinion and taught him to seek God's will.
- Poverty freed him from dependence upon material security and worldly possessions.
- Chastity enabled him to love others generously and freely, without possessiveness.

He understood that when a person dies to selfishness and personal desires, he becomes capable of receiving new life and producing spiritual fruit for God.

The Apostolic Dimension of the Vows

For Blessed George, religious vows were not intended only for personal holiness. They also directed him towards generous service of the Church. He declared that the Catholic Church was his true homeland, and that his entire life belonged to her service. His love for the Church was expressed through humble and selfless service. In one of his prayers, he asked God to make him like a simple cloth used to clean and remove dirt from the Church. He wanted to be completely spent for the sake of God and the Church.

This prayer does not represent self-hatred. Rather, it expresses deep humility and complete availability for service. His obedience placed him at the disposal of the Church, and he regarded this as a privilege.

The motto of the renewed Marian Congregation expresses this spirit clearly: "*Pro Christo et Ecclesia*" — "For Christ and the Church." For Blessed George, the purpose of religious vows was to establish a life totally offered to Christ and to His Church. His love for Christ naturally became love and service for the Church.

The Vow as the Foundation of Renovation

Blessed George's vocation was closely connected with the renewal of a religious Congregation that was on the verge of disappearing. His secret profession of vows in 1909 became like a seed from which a renewed Marian religious family would grow.

He revised the Congregation's constitutions and adapted its way of life to the needs of the modern world while preserving its essential charism. He established novitiates in Switzerland, the United States, and Poland. He also founded two communities of sisters and contributed to the renewal of several other religious Congregations.

His work of renewal was the direct result of his total commitment to God through his vows. He understood the mission of the Congregation as a call to work tirelessly for the salvation of souls and for the good of the Church, especially in situations where the needs were greatest.

Conclusion

Blessed George Matulaitis lived his religious vows so faithfully that his own life became an example of the renewal of religious life. His spirituality was not merely theoretical. It developed through persecution, illness, suffering, rejection, sacrifice, and the demanding task of rebuilding a religious community.

His final exhortation to his fellow religious — "Close ranks; sacrifice yourselves" — expressed the heart of his spirituality. It was a call to unity, self-sacrifice, perseverance, and complete dedication.

For Blessed George, religious vows were not simply promises made at the beginning of religious life. They were a life-long path of transformation. Through poverty, chastity, and obedience, a person learns to die to selfishness and rise to a deeper life in Christ.

His life reminds religious today that authentic vocation requires complete self-giving. Just as a grain of wheat must fall to the ground and die in order to bear fruit, so too must the religious person surrender himself to God in order to become fruitful for the Church and for the salvation of others.

Questions:

- How can we faithfully live our religious vows while maintaining the discipline and responsibilities of vowed life?
- How can we discern that our religious vows are truly an expression of our perfect and unconditional love for God?

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I offer you these 12 spiritual conferences as we begin to celebrate the 100th Anniversary of the death of Blessed George on January 27, 2027, and the 100th Anniversary of the Concordat which he prepared as the Apostolic Visitator to Lithuania. During the last year of his life, he expended his last bit of energy and endured very difficult sufferings and challenges (which he likened to the fires of hell) in order to save the Catholic Church in Lithuania from breaking away from Rome.

The Parliament in Lithuania offered a special resolution recognizing the 100th Anniversary of the death of Blessed George as well as the 100th Anniversary of the Concordat. Lithuania will release a special 2 Euro coin in 2027 in honour of the Concordat.

I am certain that these 12 conferences will offer us good fruits for our monthly retreat days during this Jubilee year. I thank the 12 Marians who prepared these conferences. They offer us varying perspectives from around the world on the spiritual life of Blessed George and the lessons that we can draw from him in order to grow spiritually. In his writings, Blessed George urged us to place our own growth in holiness as the priority in our lives.

From the Foreword by the Superior General, Fr. Joseph G. Roesch, MIC

