

Daniel S. Johnson

- Catechist to Siberia & Baltic Churches

Garbė Dievui aukštybėse

ὁ πιστεύσας καὶ βαπτισθεὶς σωθήσεται

Χριστος Воскрес!

April 2013

Daniel.Johnson@lcmsintl.org

Dedication of New Church and Diaconal Center in Palanga, Lithuania



Church officials from the Lithuanian, Latvian and Siberian Lutheran churches frequently visit the United States. If you wish to invite one of these church officials to visit your congregation, please contact me at:

Daniel.johnson@lcmsintl.org

On March 11, 1990, the Lutheran Church in Lithuania announced her independence from foreign domination and 50 years of suppression and persecution. When the “bells of freedom rang” on that day, only 27 parishes of the 59 which had existed prior to WWII remained.

The *ministerium* in 1990 consisted of 8 clergy, compared to 71 prior to WWII. Today there are 18 clergy serving the Lutheran Church in Lithuania.

“Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy!” -- The Litany

To be added to or removed from this mailing list, send an email message to Daniel.Johnson@lcmsintl.org with the word ADD or REMOVE in the subject line.

A Lutheran congregation in Palanga, Lithuania existed, but she had no church building to call her own. The previous church building had burned down in 1938, forcing the congregation to worship in a “house church.” Since the Lithuanian culture only recognizes

congregations with a bona-fide church building as a legitimate church, evangelism was very challenging for the Palanga Lutheran congregation. Without a legitimate building, the Lutherans in Palanga, existing in a predominantly Roman Catholic and Orthodox environment, were often mistaken as a cult or a sect.



The Lutheran Church in Lithuania had from the beginning been a minority church, with few people aware of who and what the Lutheran Church believes, teaches and confesses. Therefore, the public dedication of a Lutheran Church would do much to alleviate the public misconception of Lutherans in Lithuania. On July 14, 2012, an historic event occurred in Palanga, Lithuania. A new church and diaconal center was dedicated to replace the “house church.”

In 1940 German Lutherans were repatriated and forced to leave the country, and during the Soviet occupation many of the Lutherans who remained were sent to Stalinist work camps in Siberia and other central Asian regions. Today, due to the Stalinist purge and repressions of Lutherans, the Lutheran Church in Lithuania is a fraction of the size it was prior to WWII. [For a short history of Lutheranism in Lithuania, see my December 2012 newsletter.] The dedication, on Saturday, July 14, began at the house church, with a decommissioning service, led by Bishop Mindaugas Sabutis and assisted by the pastor of the Palanga Lutheran church, Rev. Dr. Darius Petkunas. Following the service, a procession, led by a crucifer and about 60 clergy in white albs and red stoles, processing two by two, followed by the bishop and approximately 300 laity, singing Lutheran hymns in the Lithuanian language, moved from the old house church to the new church and diaconal center, two miles across town. As the procession passed, people came out of their homes and peered out of windows to see this rare event. Many people, driving their cars, parked them to allow the procession to pass. Exiting their cars, they stood in solemn respect, with their heads bowed. **continued on next page**





Prayer Requests, Praises, and Thanks

Pray for the congregation in Palanga. Pray for her pastor and church leaders to remain faithful to the confession of the Church. Pray for faithful catechumens to study the Word and make a bold confession of Christ to a secular world. Pray for the Palanga community, that she hear and believe the Gospel.

Many Lithuanian pastors serve multiple congregation parishes. Pray for safe travel as these dedicated clergy travel to provide care for their parishioners. Also, pray for the laity as they travel to attend liturgy.

WR/HC met Pastor Darius Petkunas. After the meeting, he contacted his friend Rev. Gary Arp, then District President of Iowa District East (IDE) of the LCMS. It was agreed upon that IDE and LCMS WR/HC team-up with the Palanga Lutheran congregation to raise the funds necessary to finance the building of a new church and diaconal center. The July 2012 dedication was the result of this joint effort. [An edited video of the Palanga Lutheran Church and Diaconal Center dedication may be viewed at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOHUNscIfpk>] ✳DSJ

Great respect was given to the church, remembering a time when such a procession would not have been permitted.

As the procession turned to walk the last quarter mile, a singular bell, ringing in the newly built belfry, called out to the city. Echoing off the city buildings, the cacophony of sound gave a sense that this lonely bell, had multiplied into a bell choir, singing a song of new life. It was as if the church was shouting to all who could hear, “He is Risen! And with Him, also His Bride, the Church!” The gates of hell, working in collusion with evil men, could not continue to muffle the church’s message. Like the stones, which Jesus said, would have cried out in praise and adoration to Him, “Who comes in the name of the LORD,” the bell now fulfilled the dominical prophesy. The Lutheran Church and Her Gospel confession was again introduced to the Palanga community. Her seventy years of muffled silence is over. She now sings her resurrection song from a new location, built to be an ever-present icon to the community of the Gospel of Jesus.



As the procession approached the steps to the church doors, the two lines of clergy split to form parallel lines streaming down the steps. The bishop, passing through the middle, approached the door. Turning, he addressed the hundreds gathered for the dedication.

After addressing the crowd, he turned again toward the doors. Lifting his bishop’s staff, while evoking the Trinitarian Invocation, Bishop Sabutis knocked three times. The doors opened, the bishop led the people into the sacred halls and the liturgy of dedication was prayed.

The dream of the Palanga Lutherans receiving a new church building, first received hope in 2003, when President Matthew Harrison, then Director of LCMS World Relief & Human Care (LCMS

World Relief & Human Care (LCMS



The Palanga “House Church”



To support my work financially, you may send a tax-deductible gift to:

**The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
P.O. Box 790089
St. Louis, MO 63179-0089.**

Make checks payable to “The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. “ Write “Support of Rev. Daniel S. Johnson” on the memo line. Gifts can also be given securely online through the LCMS website, on my online giving page at www.lcms.org/Johnson.