

## LITHUANIA TEACHING EXPEDITION JULY 3-19, 2009



On Friday, July 3, Sister Jeanette Lucinio SP (Chicago), and I (Sister Dorothy Jonaitis OP – Grand Rapids Dominicans) flew from Chicago to Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. Our purpose was to participate in the education of Lithuanian teachers from many different places in their country. The organization that sponsored the educational venture, the [Association of Partners in Lithuanian Education \(A.P.P.L.E.\)](#) began in 1990 shortly after the end of the Russian occupation.

During that occupation, Lithuanian schools and education were limited and neglected. An American woman educator of Lithuanian ancestry named Vida wanted to assist in building up the educational system. Eventually, and with the assistance of the Lithuanian Ministry of Education, A.P.P.L.E. was born.

Each summer since 1990, approximately 300 American and Canadian teachers and educators volunteer their time to teach in the program. Some are of Lithuanian ancestry and speak the language, while others are looking for opportunities to utilize their skills. The A.P.P.L.E. staff recruits many volunteers and other persons hear about the program through those who have been previously involved or through the internet. A.P.P.L.E. runs on a shoestring budget. Nevertheless, the educational system throughout Lithuania has benefitted from the assistance of this dedicated group of teachers.

From the beginning, the program concentrated on educating the teachers who would be in the schools each year. Areas of study include science, world history, elementary/secondary education/administration, computer skills, special education, and religion/ethics. In its early years, the administrators made an effort to travel around the country with these offerings. Recently the budget has limited the program to Lithuania's two main cities of Vilnius and Kaunas.

What I find most interesting is that the Minister of Education is actively involved in this venture. Grateful for the volunteer services, he has supported the program in many ways, primarily in providing the space for housing and the building for the classes.

My involvement in this program was at the invitation of Sister Jeanette Lucinio, CDP, who taught at Catholic Theological Union when I was working on my Masters degree in theology. I never had Jeanette as an instructor and I did not know that each summer she went to Lithuania. About two years after graduation, I found out about her participation. I was at CTU for summer classes and sat down in the dining room for lunch. Jeanette was talking with others about going to Lithuania and I said, "My grandparents were from Lithuania and I would love to go there someday." Jeanette said that she would keep my request in mind for a future date.

I forgot about that conversation until 2003 when Jeanette contacted me to see if I was still interested. Was I interested? Of course I was! My first opportunity to participate came in 2004 when Lithuanian Catholic Aid, an organization that gives financial assistance to various ventures, sponsored us. That time I taught a basic introduction to the Bible. Jeanette and I coordinated our presentations of Bible/ethics and it went very well.

I was very surprised that I could actually teach with the assistance of a translator who was able to keep up with everything that was going on in the classroom. My teaching was much slower, as were my attempts to rephrase English idioms so they were able to understand concepts in their Lithuanian experience. I later found out that my translator studied her theology each evening in order to be prepared for the next day.

This summer, through the generosity of those who contribute to our ministry fund, I was able to return to Lithuania—again with Sister Jeanette, who has conducted this sectional every summer except one since 1994. She wanted me to have the opportunity to teach Apocalyptic Literature. She was sensing that this summer would be her last year and did not know about the future of this particular “strand,” as they call it.

What completely amazed me about our two topics is how closely they molded together. When I taught about Apocalyptic Literature as a response to crisis, she taught about suffering and related it to the experience of the Lithuanian people. When I taught about use of symbolism in this writing, she spoke about ritual and symbol in the Catholic liturgy. When I presented the letters to the seven churches, Jeanette talked about the ways that architecture either enhances or detracts from our liturgical attitude. We even went to Old Town the next day and studied the architecture of the ancient, but still very active, churches.

Both times that I participated in this educational project were times of much joy in the midst of a great deal of work. The joy came from the participants in the program, elementary and secondary teachers who were hungry for further education not afforded them through their own colleges at a time when they could take a course. They were grateful to us for our time with them. They even had an “agape” the last morning of our week together.

This summer we had two different groups, one each week. The 23 students were gems and they obtained an amazing amount of information and formation from our work together. They were interested in everything that we were presenting. At the end of the week, they were sad that it was ending.

One thing I noticed from my time there is that the people are suspicious of visitors because of their problems with the Russian occupation. I understand the fear that is present in the people with their experiences during occupation, and I hope that we are helping break down that fear. In our classrooms, we are accomplishing great good. In the public arena, much more education must take place in order to break down attitudes built up over many years.

Currently, with their acceptance into the European Union, many are weary of what will happen. The government is being sensitive by easing in the Euro as currency and is showing in many ways how their participation in the Union will enhance their lives.

Overall, it was a wonderful experience of service for me. I wished while I was there that I could meet someone connected to my grandparents’ families. Jonaitis is a very common name in the country and, until I am able to search out baptismal records or marriage licenses, the information I have is inadequate for a search—perhaps another time.

For information on the A.P.P.L.E. program, please link to their website at <http://applequest.org>.  
Dorothy Jonaitis, OP