

Gratitude for Blessed George

Marians in the U.S. mark the Feast Day of their renovator

He was known for his courage and zeal, a priest whose efforts allowed the Marians of the Immaculate Conception to become the modern religious congregation it is today.

While his native land was under the oppressive domination of the Russian czar and nearly all Marian monasteries had been closed and confiscated, he saved the Marians from extinction.

Marians around the world marked the feast day Jan. 27 of Bl. George Matulaitis-Matulewicz (1871-1927), known as the "Renovator" of the congregation. The feast day comes amidst a year of thanksgiving that began Dec. 8, for the 100th anniversary of the renewal and reform of the Marians that Bl. George led.

"The miraculous deliverance of our Congregation from death 100 years ago and its reform seems to have been the strongest experience of God's mercy in our history, an important confirmation that God cares for us, that our charism is valuable for the Church," wrote Fr. John M. Rokosz, MIC, the Marians' General Superior, in a letter in December to his confreres.

Marians today continue to draw inspiration from Bl. George's spiritual writings. Perhaps most famous among his writings was his call of service to Christ and His Church. He wrote in his spiritual journal:

If I may ask, Lord, let me be but a dishrag in your Church, a rag used to wipe up messes and then thrown away into some dark corner. I want to be used up and worn out in the same way so that your house may be a little cleaner and brighter. And afterwards, let me be thrown away like a dirty, worn-out dishrag.

A New Spirit

The National Shrine of The Divine Mercy in Stockbridge, Mass., held a special Mass Tuesday, Jan. 27, marking the feast day for this holy priest who remains a cherished and inspirational figure in the Marian community and the Church at large.

"We really owe Bl. George so much gratitude for what he's done for the community — not only for renovating it, but for bringing a new spirit into the community," said Shrine Rector Fr. Anthony Gramlich, MIC. "He wanted the community to love and work for Christ and the Church."

Before blessing attendees with a relic of Bl. George, Fr. Anthony shared a history of the man whose motto was "to seek God in all things, to do all things for the greater glory of God."

Born in 1871 of peasant Lithuanian parents, Bl. George came of age knowing full well the struggles of living out the faith under a harsh political climate. His native land was under the domination of the Russian czar. By this time, the Marian Order — founded in 1670 by St. Stanislaus Papczynski — was on the verge of extinction. Nearly all Marian monasteries had been closed and confiscated. Only one survived — the monastery at Mariampole in Lithuania. Government edict permitted the remaining religious to live out their days in the monastery, but no new candidates could be accepted. This amounted to a death sentence for the Marians.

George was born only five kilometers from Mariampole. By age 10, he was an orphan who had already come to know the Marians well. He wanted to become a Marian, and he was deeply distressed to see the community gradually diminishing. He knew the risks and the dangers involved. But Fr. George felt inspired to revive the Order — even if in secret.

By 1908, there was one last surviving Marian living in Mariampole, Fr. Vincent Senkus-Sekowski. Humanly speaking, the end was near. But with Fr. Vincent, Fr. George discussed ways to revive the Marians. In July 1909, after prayer and consultation, Fr. George went to Rome to present the plan to Pope Pius X. He carried with him a letter of recommendation from Fr. Vincent with this heartfelt plea:

"... of all the Marians, I am the last survivor. All others have died. Since I am already an old man in frail health, it can safely be assumed that with my death the Marian Order will cease to exist — unless with the permission of the Apostolic See extraordinary measures are undertaken to remedy this situation."

In this letter, Fr. Vincent asked the Holy Father to dispense the Marians from wearing the white monastic habit, to allow Fr. George to make his religious profession without the necessary novitiate, and to secretly accept new candidates. He gave reasons for eliminating these customary external signs of a Marian vocation — "because of persecution by the government we cannot function otherwise."

Pope Pius X gave his personal approval, encouragement, and blessing. Thus began the great process of

renewal of the Marians. With Fr. Vincent's passing in 1911, many thought the Marians ceased to exist. But in reality, the order was just beginning a new phase.

His Special Mission

At the time, Fr. George was working as a professor at the St. Petersburg Academy and secretly forming the Marian novitiate with three new novices. But it was not safe to live in community in St. Petersburg. In order that the Marians could function and grow in freedom, Fr. George — who viewed reviving the Marians as his special mission in the Church — resigned from all his duties at the academy and transferred the Marians to Switzerland.

Before his death in 1927, the number of Marians reached 240 and would continue to grow over the next several decades, becoming a community of more than 500 priests and brothers at the present time.

In addition to being responsible for the renewal of the Marian Order, Bl. George revised Constitutions for several religious communities. In Lithuania, he founded the Congregation of Sisters of the Immaculate Conception and in Belarus, the Sisters Servants of the Jesus in the Eucharist.

Blessed George also proved to be an outstanding bishop of Vilnius, as well as a skilled and capable diplomat as an archbishop at the service of the Vatican in Lithuania. Pope Pius XI, who knew Archbishop George Matulaitis, described him as "God's man" and "a truly holy man."

To the Congregation of the Marians, Bl. George bequeathed a spirit of continuous renewal and generous effort "for Christ and the Church." On his deathbed, where he reiterated his conviction that self-sacrifice is the way most Christians carry their cross, he urged Marians to "close up the ranks and sacrifice yourselves."

On June 28, 1987, Archbishop George Matulaitis was beatified by Pope John Paul II.

In his feast day homily, Fr. Anthony said, "There are other religious communities that have died out in the history of the Church, but for some reason God wanted this little community, dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, to survive 100 years ago. And it is miraculous that this little community dedicated to Mary would be given the message of The Divine Mercy, this message that we proclaim here on Eden Hill at the National Shrine of The Divine Mercy. And if it weren't for Blessed George, I wouldn't be here, and the Marians wouldn't be here."

Prayer for a Special Grace through the Intercession of Blessed George

O God, our Lord and Father, You surround us always by Your care; receive our humble petition, and through the intercession of Blessed George, who suffered so much for Your glory and for the increase of Your Kingdom here on earth, grant me the grace for which I ask You with confidence, promising to live from now on with greater fidelity to Your commandments. Amen.

Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory be to the Father...