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## BROTHERS OF THE SWORD, THE SINGING REVOLUTION & JOHN PAUL'S LAST BISHOP

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THOMAS BASIL

### A CHURCH RISES FROM THE RUINS

Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, looks like a movie set created by Walt Disney. Along its medieval walls are fortress towers and arched gates. Within is a maze of narrow lanes and ancient buildings. Its town hall, the oldest still standing in Europe, dates to 1404. A dozen church spires pierce the skyline. Here and there restored crucifixes and images of haloed saints peer down from old walls. On the steps of Tallinn's lone Catholic parish, I asked a young Estonian man why he came to Mass. "I'm a convert," he said. "I started reading philosophy. It all pointed to God. Why did I become a Catholic? Because it is the truth." He concluded wistfully, "But there are not many Catholics around here, at least for the past five hundred years."

Timing is everything. Nine hundred years earlier, my acquaintance would have witnessed the Viking lifestyle and the god Tharapita prevailing in this Baltic area. Those Estonians terrorized Christianized Swedes and Danes with coastal raiding parties. The evangelization of Estonia began in earnest in 1193 when Pope Celestine III called for a crusade against Europe's last pagan holdouts. Celestine's first episcopal appointee was speared by hostile Balts. The next, Bishop Albert von Buxthoeven, firmly estab-

lished a bishopric in Riga (Latvia) by 1201, helped by an army of fifteen hundred Germans.

The following year, Bishop Albert founded a new crusading order known as the Livonian Brothers of the Sword. In 1208 the order's knights turned against the tribes of modern-day Estonia, launching a war that lasted off and on for two decades. Pope Innocent III assisted by dedicating the land to the Blessed Virgin Mary in 1215. Conquered tribes accepted Catholicism under the terms of surrender. Naturally, some took to the faith better than others: The inhabitants of the island of Saaremaa, for example, twice renounced Christ and massacred the island's Catholic priests and resident Germans. But evidence suggests that Catholicism became normative from about 1227 on. Medieval Estonia became home to at least a hundred churches and a dozen monasteries and convents.

Alas, Martin Luther's revolution smashed all this. Estonia fell under Swedish rule in 1561. Tolerant Sweden was far in the future — Catholicism was a forbidden faith in the sixteenth century. Sweden forcibly expelled Estonia's last adherents to the old faith in 1626. For almost a hundred and fifty years, no record exists of any Catholic presence. But in 1770 Estonia was swallowed up by the Russian Empire. The czar granted religious freedom to ethnic minorities, and German and Polish migrants re-established Estonian Catholicism. Except that it was not truly Estonian. In the words of historian Msgr. Vello Salo, "For the Estonians, it remained a church of foreigners" (*The Catholic Historical Review*, April 2002).

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In 1918 Estonian nationalists declared independence from newly Bolshevik Russia. Within two years they won their freedom, helped by volunteer fighters from Scandinavia, France, Britain, and the U.S. The 1922 *Cross of Liberty* monument in Tallinn celebrates their victory. But many more crosses awaited tiny Estonia's 1.5 million inhabitants, due to their homeland's unfortunate location between Germany and Russia.

In 1939 the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact secretly divided Europe between communist Russia and Nazi Germany. Estonia fell into the Soviet sphere of influence. Estonia's prime minister accepted a "friendship pact" with the Soviets that allowed military bases inside Estonia, in order to prevent the slaughter of his tiny sixteen-thousand-man army. While the world was fixated on the fall of Paris to the Nazis in June 1940, Moscow seized Estonia outright. A puppet government demanded annexation by the USSR and launched "the red year of terror." Eight thousand were arrested and tortured; fifteen hundred were shot by NKVD secret-police tribunals. Additional thousands were awakened in the middle of the night and stuffed into boxcars destined for Siberia. Thousands more were forced into the Red Army and sent to war. Roving terror squads summarily executed hundreds in rural areas. Political, military, and intellectual leaders were targeted. Of eleven inter-war prime ministers, four were shot, five died in imprisonment, one committed suicide, and only one survived — by escaping to Sweden.

When the Nazis conquered Estonia in 1941, many saw them as liberators, and Estonian men readily enlisted under the swastika. The rapid shift in rulers meant that during World War II groups of Estonian men fought in opposing armies. But then communist brutality returned in 1944 with the Red Army's re-occupation. Men fled to hideouts deep in the woods and became known as "forest brother" guerrillas. They hoped the "White Ship" of Western powers would liberate them, but none came. What came instead was a retaliatory wave of deportations of thousands of civilians to Siberia in 1949, which broke the resistance. Prominent Estonians were enlisted as propagandists. Filmed appeals to entice war exiles back home intoned, "Dear compatriots, end your senseless and miserable existence abroad. The homeland will provide lodging and work."

Newsreel footage from the early 1950s show-

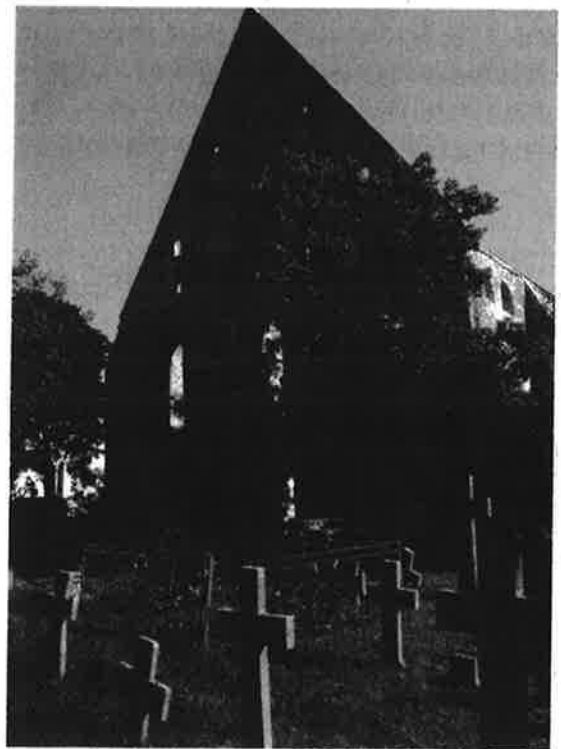
cases an Estonian women's chorus singing,

Stalin, great Stalin,  
you guide and encourage us  
Your thoughts make our hearts  
much stronger  
We sing to you great Stalin to thank  
you and the Party  
Nothing will ruin our joy.

Meanwhile, to receive their small monthly sugar ration, these women had to wait in line overnight in front of Tallinn's grocery stores. Hope flickered when Stalin went to his reward in 1953, but it died again three years later when the anti-communist uprising in Hungary was crushed while the West did nothing.

Estonia's Occupation Museum chronicles these waves of misery in a series of well-done documentaries, viewable for free online in English at [www.okupatsioon.ee/en/movies](http://www.okupatsioon.ee/en/movies). Reminiscences include that of a former factory manager who recounts how the hiring of one additional security guard at his plant required approval from Moscow, and the signature of Stalin himself — a backhanded tribute to the Catholic doctrine of subsidiarity.

The Estonian nation was devoid of hope, and



*The Ruins at Pirita*

the Catholic Church seemed to offer none. A German researcher counted only *five* ethnic Estonian Catholics in the 1970s. By 1977 there was just *one* Catholic priest in the entire nation. He lived in a closet behind the organ in Tallinn's lone parish. Government-enforced atheism had literally pushed the Church into a closet.

Yet, in the final decades of Soviet rule, a remarkable spiritual hunger arose. Between 1975 and 1990 some two hundred young, secularized Estonians did the unthinkable: They joined the Catholic Church. They adopted the Catholic faith despite facing certain expulsion from jobs or schools once they were discovered.

These conversions came partly as a spillover from nearby Lithuania, where the Catholic resistance to communism was overt. There locals blanketed Lithuania's famous Hill of Crosses with religious artifacts. They watched as the hill was bulldozed by the government, and they returned time and again to re-blanket it with crosses. Estonians took notice.

I glimpsed this continuous stream of converts during a weekend retreat led by Estonia's sole Catholic bishop, Phillippe Jourdan, for his Sunday school teachers. None of the retreatants appeared much over age 30. But that befits a youthful bishop. Consecrated at age 45, Jourdan was the very last bishop appointed by St. John Paul II — a mere nineteen days before the Pope's death in 2005.

John Paul visited Estonia only once, on September 10, 1993. So significant is this date for Es-

tonians that Bishop Jourdan chose September 10 for his own consecration in 2005. On that same day in 2013, Estonia's modest nineteenth-century cathedral hosted a celebration marking the twentieth anniversary of the papal visit. A who's who of Estonian Catholicism was on hand for a Mass, speeches, exhibits, and a catered reception. The Polish ambassador gave a speech praising the late Holy Father. Lutheran, Baptist, and Orthodox delegations were also present, a testimony to Estonia's seemingly robust ecumenism. The passage of these twenty years has not dimmed the intensity and emotion surrounding John Paul's visit.

Secularism made deep inroads into Estonian life in the fifty years before the war, in the next fifty years of communist materialism, and in the following twenty years of consumerist materialism. This latter manifestation is visible in the heavy patronage of SexMax.ee and similarly themed nightclubs in Tallinn so at odds with their medieval Catholic setting. Thus, to attend a Christian church of any variety is to share an uncommon bond. The Catholics I met spoke with admiration, not mistrust, of Baptists, who they said ran the best Christian youth groups. A priest from the Estonian Orthodox Church, the seventeenth in rank among autocephalous Orthodox bodies, chatted amiably with Bishop Jourdan after Mass. This future priest had been raised by his grandmother while both parents worked — the communist norm. Grandma was a Baptist and she read to him from the Bible. Religious stirrings arose, he met an elderly Orthodox priest, and his vocation manifested. But Baptists and Catholics are for him brothers of the sword and not the enemies of Orthodoxy.

I also met an American with the Sisters of the Most Precious Blood who arrived in 1946 in nearby Helsinki to teach and care for war orphans. At age 70 Finland deemed her of retirement age, so she crossed the Baltic to Tallinn and began a second career teaching at the city's only Catholic school. Now age 90, she climbs four flights of stairs to her classroom every day, and she moved with the agility of a far younger woman as she hobnobbed at the reception in honor of John Paul's visit.

The ten nuns from the Order of the Most Holy Savior of St. Bridget in attendance were even more conspicuous. These modern descendants of Sweden's medieval saint wear long grey robes,



*Tallinn: City Gate*

capped by a headdress that looks like a medieval warrior's helmet, complete with leather straps and metal studs. But underneath are smiling, diminutive nuns from India whose dual vocation is prayer and hospitality.

One of them recommended their guest house to me, with its overnight price of 37 euros — a bargain compared to my hotel's 130 euro rate. So I headed for Tallinn's outskirts to experience this dark-age hospitality. What I found was a modernist three-story convent named Pirita, a chapel of stark Vatican II design, and a dozen nuns gliding about in gown-length robes. Their smiles were unceasing, as was their spirit of helpfulness. Adjacent to their twenty-first-century convent stand the ruins of its medieval predecessor. The medieval church is in ruins except for its outer walls, which include a steeply peaked front wall that towers more than five stories high. It provides a distinctly shaped landmark visible from all around. The modern convent and its park-like medieval ruins host pilgrims, tourists, and music concerts, including retreats for Estonia's Lutheran bishops.

Back in its dark-ages heyday, Pirita was home to monks and nuns who began chanting Psalms at 4:00 AM — men on one side of the choir and women on the other. Co-ed choir chant scandalized outsiders, who denounced it. But perhaps because both men and women alike were governed by a female abbess, the co-ed singing continued until 1577, when a Russian army massacred Pirita's residents and torched its buildings. The site remained abandoned for the next four hundred and twenty-four years.

Yet the sixteenth-century martyrs at Pirita may have helped spark a rebirth of Estonian freedom in the twentieth century. Echoing Pirita's ancient choirs, in 1869 Estonia began a tradition of large public singing festivals that are now on UNESCO's list of notable cultural traditions. These have been held every four years since, though a few had to be skipped due to world wars. In June 1988 Estonians protested the Russian occupation with three nights of singing in Tallinn — yes, *singing*. The quadrennial *Eestimaa Laul* ("Estonian Song") took place that September, and three hundred thousand Estonians — twenty percent of the populace — showed up to sing, and they sang for days. A KGB witness radioed that "Soviet power has

just gone down the toilet." Estonia became free in 1991 without a single act of violence, and the documentary film on its liberation, titled *The Singing Revolution*, is viewable on YouTube. (The singing continues: The twenty-seventh such festival will take place this year.)

Around the time of independence, an enterprising Bridgettine nun with a long memory appealed to Estonia's new government, asking if the sisters could have their convent back. The new minister of the interior decided that religion helped and did not hurt civic life, perhaps because she herself had been imprisoned by the communists. One of the world's only Estonian Catholic priests, the aforementioned Msgr. Salo, joined the nun in this cause. In 1945 Salo, age 19 but already a veteran of two armies, had ended up as a displaced person in Rome. He had come upon a Bridgettine convent led by an American nun who was caring for Jews and war refugees like him. The nun's kindness had led him to become a Catholic, then a priest, and finally to a new life ministering in Canada. But Salo returned to Estonia in 1993 and helped orchestrate the rebirth of the Pirita convent.

The return of Catholic leadership was also a work of centuries. Two Estonian bishops from medieval times are known by name. But following the Reformation, the Estonian episcopacy stood vacant until the 1930s, when Fr. Eduard Proffittlich, S.J., a German, was named apostolic administrator for Estonia. He offered what were probably the first Masses ever in the Estonian language, translated catecheti-



Tallinn: Old World Meets New World

cal materials into Estonian, began an Estonian-language Catholic magazine, and roamed the country as an evangelist. In 1936 Pope Pius XI named Profitlich the nation's first post-Reformation bishop. His reward from Stalin was a death sentence as a foreign agent. Mercifully, Profitlich died in prison before the firing squad could do its work. A large memorial tablet at the entrance to Tallinn's cathedral bears his name above the inscription "Martyr." His burial place is unknown.

All Masses at this cathedral, for which Profitlich gave his life, end with the *Salve Regina*, with the priest facing the altar. A statue of Our Lady of Fatima resides in a side altar, with its own altar candle lit and extinguished with each Mass. I've been told that Eastern-bloc Catholics attribute their deliverance from communism to Our Lady of Fatima, and the altar-candle ritual speaks to this.

Bishop Jourdan, only the second Estonian bishop since the Reformation, is a native of France, a member of Opus Dei, and a man who looks like he could have been an actor. He was named apostolic vicar for Estonia in 1996, thanks in part to his fluency in French, English, Italian, Spanish, German, and Russian. Linguistic skill is needed to master Estonian, which is reportedly one of Europe's most difficult languages to learn.

Jourdan's Franco-Estonian blend is perhaps behind the book and prayer cards I saw devoted to St. Thérèse of Lisieux, whose patronage of foreign missions might help explain the return of Estonian Catholicism from oblivion. I heard jokes about how the bishop's flock originally consisted of fewer souls than the Apostles had but now numbers around six thousand, with a steady stream of converts still incoming. But the acid of modernity has cut deep: The culture of marriage has collapsed into ruins,

and only one in ten Estonian children lives with both parents.

Where once communist watchtowers along the coast guarded against attempted boat escapes to Finland, today massive ferries thirteen decks high transport twenty-five hundred passengers at a time back and forth to Helsinki. Only two decades removed from economic misrule, Tallinn appears to be in far better repair than much of urban America. Reports in the business press indicate that Estonia is the most economically advanced of the former Eastern-bloc nations. It is a world leader in wireless technologies; Skype was founded here. Tallinn's new airport gleams with modern construction, including a beautiful indoor playground that would be the envy of any in the U.S.

Yet the airport playground was empty, as was every playground I saw in Estonia. The national birthrate is far below replacement level at 1.5 births per woman, and the population has shrunk by two hundred thousand — nearly fifteen percent — since the Pope's visit. *Businessweek* lists Estonia among the fastest-shrinking countries in the world. Estonia's population loss since gaining its freedom is roughly the same as its loss during the years of World War II.

But there is a palpable spirituality here. At the dawn of the twentieth century, this was a country where Catholicism had been forcibly extinct for centuries, and the secularism of the nineteenth century was dominant. By the mid-twentieth century, it had been ravaged by two world wars and was in the grip of the most totalitarian government ever seen. Education, the media, the arts, and the labor market were aggressively hostile to faith. Approaching the eighth decade of that century, Catholicism in Estonia amounted to one shunned priest living in a closet; his Estonian flock numbered fewer than a half dozen souls. Then, during the last two decades of that century, Estonia was deluged by the pansexual consumerist hedonism of Western modernity.

And yet, out of that ruinous, century-long concoction, a small trickle of the young and educated felt a spiritual awakening. They began a pilgrimage into the Catholic Church. They re-opened a monastery left in ruins for centuries. They hosted the global Pope. And they grew one thousand percent in four decades. Welcome to Estonia, a sign of hope and rebirth in what was once Christendom. ■

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