



## Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on religion in Lithuania

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### 1. General presentation:

- General data regarding the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on religion: restrictions, main events related to the topic, statistical data (if any) etc.

In Lithuania, the first case of Covid-19 was confirmed on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2020. The Corona virus-related extreme situation was lifted by the government of Lithuania on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2020. Since that day, the country had two lockdowns. The first one lasted from 14<sup>th</sup> of March to 17<sup>th</sup> of June 2020. The second lasted from 4<sup>th</sup> of November 2020 to 31<sup>st</sup> of May 2021.

Due to lockdown, some rights have been restricted in Lithuania. For example, during the first wave of the pandemic, the movement right was restricted by the prohibition to go to abroad. During the second wave of Covid-19 the adopted measures were stricter, and the government approved the prohibition of moving from one municipality to another and from one household to another<sup>1</sup>.

Religious communities met restrictions as well. During the first wave of the coronavirus, the government recommended to religious communities not to organise religious rites<sup>2</sup>. During the second national lockdown, it was recommended for the religious communities to organise the religious rites and recollections remotely (online)<sup>3</sup>.

To stop the spread of the virus, governments of countries took measures, following the recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO). Lithuanian government urged people to wash their hands more often, wear face masks, maintain physical distance, and avoid large gatherings. Also, considering these instructions, the order of activity of religious

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<sup>1</sup> S. Voveriūnaitė (3 January 2021). Oficialu: judėjimo ribojimai tarp savivaldybių lieka iki sausio 31 dienos [Official: Restrictions on movement between municipalities remain until 31 January], Delfi <<https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/oficialu-judejimo-ribojimai-tarp-savivaldybiu-lieka-iki-sausio-31-dienos.d?id=86142221>>.

<sup>2</sup> Lietuvos respublikos vyriausybė [The Government of the Republic of Lithuania] (14 March 2020). Dėl karantino Lietuvos Respublikos teritorijoje paskelbimo [The Government of the Republic of Lithuania. Decision on the declaration of lockdown in the territory of Lithuania], Mano Vyriausybė [My Government] <<https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/73c0b060663111eabee4a336e7e6fdab>>.

<sup>3</sup> The Government of the Republic of Lithuania. Nationwide lockdown as of Saturday (5 November 2020) <<https://sam.lrv.lt/en/news/nationwide-lockdown-as-of-saturday>>.

communities was changed. The physical distance between believers was increased in places of worship, for example, by marking the seats at an appropriate distance.

WHO recommended that religious communities avoid touching other members of their community, kissing objects of worship, promote hygiene, and maintain cleanliness in places of worship and meetings. In Lithuania, these instructions were followed by wearing masks in places of worship, providing the opportunity to disinfect hands, and changing the order of rituals. For example, in the Roman Catholic Church, communion was placed in the palm of people (instead of usual reception of communion in the mouth). In Catholic and Orthodox churches, there was no more holy water, people were asked not to kiss crosses and other relics, and during services, handshakes and hugs were replaced by head nods when wishing for peace. As the number of infections increased states tended to tighten conditions. This happened in Lithuania as well, where it was decided to stop live services during the main holidays of the year<sup>4</sup>.

- The density and scale of public debates on religion in the context of the pandemic, main points of interest in the debate.

The case of Catholic Church during the second lockdown which included only recommendations (no prohibitions) for religious communities. Catholic Church supported the decision of the Government of Lithuania and announced a temporary halt of the public masses from December 16<sup>th</sup><sup>5</sup>. However, after the Christmas feasts, the Episcopal Conference announced the return of masses in church with restrictions<sup>6</sup>. This decision caused severe critics from society<sup>7</sup> and insistent requests from the government, which produced a change in the decision of the bishops<sup>8</sup>. Eventually, once again, the 28<sup>th</sup> of January the Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė imperatively required not starting public mass<sup>9</sup>. The Episcopal Conference agreed to this request and the renewal of public mass was postponed. The Lithuanian

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<sup>4</sup> J. Tamošiūnaitė (18 May 2021). Religinės bendruomenės pandemijos metu [Religious communities during pandemia]. <<https://religija.lt/religines-bendruomenes-pandemijos-metu>>.

<sup>5</sup> Delfi, (December 2020) Vyskupų konferencija: nuo gruodžio 16 d. iki sausio 3 d. stabdomos viešos pamaldos bažnyčiose [Episcopal conference: from 16 December until January 3 public worship in church is stopped], Delfi <<https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/vyskupu-konferencija-nuo-gruodzio-16-d-iki-sausio-3-d-stabdomos-viesos-pamaldos-baznyciose.d?id=86004301>>.

<sup>6</sup> I. Naureckaitė (6 January 2021). Lietuvos vyskupų konferencija išgirdo aštrią kritiką: viešos pamaldos nebus atnaujintos

[Lithuanian Episcopal Conference heard sharp criticism: public services will not be renewed], Lietuvos Rytas <<https://www.rytas.lt/lietuvsdiena/aktualijos/2021/01/06/news/po-kilusio-pasipiktinimo---lietuvs-vyskupu-konferencija-nusprende-neatnaujinti-pamaldu-17793102>>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> ELTA (28 January 2021). Šimonytė prašo Lietuvos vyskupų konferencijos kol kas neatnaujinti pamaldų bažnyčiose [Šimonytė asks Lithuanian Episcopal Conference Conference not to renew services in church yet], Delfi

<<https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/simonyte-praso-lietuvs-vyskupu-konferencijos-kol-kas-neatnaujinti-pamaldu-baznyciose.d?id=86342213>>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Episcopal Conference announced its newest decision to start public mass from the 17<sup>th</sup> of February<sup>10</sup>, but under strict requirements and conditions (Narbutas 2021, 12-13).

- The interest of researchers or state institutions to measure the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on religion reflected in publications, articles, studies, surveys, conferences, etc.

So far, the interest of researchers or state institutions to measure the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on religion in Lithuania has been minor and fragmental (information provided in bibliography).

## 2. Legal aspect:

- Was there already legislation in place to regulate religious life in the event of a pandemic / natural disaster?

Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania<sup>11</sup> allows limits on the freedom to profess and spread religious beliefs when necessary to protect health, safety, public order, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others. Under the Constitution, the government may temporarily restrict freedom of expression of religious belief during a period of martial law or a state of emergency.

- Main legal texts, drawn up to fight the pandemic, which have affected religious life. Are legislative changes related to religious life temporary or permanent? What restrictions have most affected religious life?

Legislative changes related to religious life were temporary. To stop the pandemic, the Government of Lithuania announced two quarantines, during which the major holidays of the year took place. During the first wave of the coronavirus, the Government of Lithuania recommended to religious communities not to organise religious rites<sup>12</sup>. Religious organisations agreed with recommendations. During the second national lockdown, no gatherings in public places for groups of more than five people, except for family members, observing in all cases the distance of at least two metres from other people or groups of people were allowed. It was recommended for the religious communities to organise the religious rites and recollections remotely (online)<sup>13</sup>. Religious communities sought to communicate and take care of people's spirituality as before. Nevertheless, they faced certain limitations and the form of their activities had to change.

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<sup>10</sup> Lietuvos vyskupų konferencija [Lithuanian Episcopal Conference] (12 February 2021). Lietuvos vyskupų laiškas tikintiesiems (INFO 33 [Letter from Lithuanian bishops to believers (INFO 33)] <<https://lvk.lcn.lt/naujienos/448>>.

<sup>11</sup> Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania (Approved by the Citizens of the Republic of Lithuania in the Referendum on 25 October 1992) (as amended by 20 March 2003, No. IX-1379) <<https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalActPrint/lt?jfwid=rivwzvpng&documentId=TAIS.211295&category=TAD>>.

<sup>12</sup> Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybė [The Government of the Republic of Lithuania] (14 March 2020) Dėl karantino Lietuvos Respublikos teritorijoje paskelbimo [Regarding the declaration of lockdown in the territory of Lithuania], Mano Vyriausybė [My Government] <<https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/73c0b060663111eabee4a336e7e6fdab>>.

<sup>13</sup> The Government of the Republic of Lithuania (5 November 2020). Nationwide lockdown as of Saturday <<https://sam.lrv.lt/en/news/nationwide-lockdown-as-of-saturday>>.

- Regulations concerning specific areas of religious life, including hospitals (chaplancies and rights of ministers of religion) and funerals.

### Hospitals

During the second lockdown, visits to social care homes and residential social service establishments were banned, except when visiting residents in terminal condition or when a visit was related to the performance of duties. Hospital visits were banned too, except when visiting terminally ill patients, children under 14 years of age and patients in maternity wards at the permission of the manager of a hospital<sup>14</sup>.

### Funerals

Ministry of Health of the Republic of Lithuania prepared recommendations for handling of bodies of deceased persons and arrangement of funerals<sup>15</sup> based on the recommendations from European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC)<sup>16</sup>.

Recommendations were renewed during the extreme period<sup>17</sup>. The same recommendations prepared earlier by the Ministry of Health were applied. In November 2020, nationwide lockdown was provided when some businesses had to halt or reduce their operations, tighter infection control measures were enforced, and work and education were arranged with a minimum of contacts. During lockdown specific rules regarding funerals were released. Funerals could be attended by maximum 10 people, except family members (spouses or persons with whom a registered partnership agreement has been concluded, children (adopted children), including minor children of the people, of their spouses or of persons with whom a registered partnership agreement has been concluded, also parents (adoptive parents) and guardians) and people providing funeral services<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> The Government of the Republic of Lithuania (5 November 2020). Nationwide lockdown as of Saturday <<https://sam.lrv.lt/en/news/nationwide-lockdown-as-of-saturday>>.

<sup>15</sup> Dėl mirusiųjų nuo COVID-19 ligos (koronaviruso infekcijos) palaikų tvarkymo ir šarvojimo [Regarding treatment and armouring of the remains of deceased persons from Covid-19 (coronavirus infection)] (1 April 2020) <[https://sam.lrv.lt/uploads/sam/documents/files/0401\\_rekomendacijos%20del%20mirusiųjų%20nuo%20COVID-19%20palaikų%20tvarkymo.pdf](https://sam.lrv.lt/uploads/sam/documents/files/0401_rekomendacijos%20del%20mirusiųjų%20nuo%20COVID-19%20palaikų%20tvarkymo.pdf)>.

<sup>16</sup> Considerations related to the safe handling of bodies of deceased persons with suspected or confirmed Covid-19. Stockholm: ECDC (2020) <<https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/COVID-19-safe-handling-of-bodies-or-persons-dying-from-COVID19.pdf>>.

<sup>17</sup> Atnaujinta, kaip tvarkyti palaikus ir organizuoti laidotuves ekstremalios situacijos laikotarpiu [Updated how to handle remains and organise funerals during the emergency period] (18 January 2022) <<https://covid.lt/atnaujinta-kaip-tvarkyti-palaikus-ir-organizuoti-laidotuves-ekstremalios-situacijos-laikotarpiu/>>.

<sup>18</sup> The Government of the Republic of Lithuania (5 November 2020). Nationwide lockdown as of Saturday <<https://sam.lrv.lt/en/news/nationwide-lockdown-as-of-saturday>>.

### 3. Sociological aspect:

- How was collective religious life affected during the pandemic? - church attendance, pilgrimages, major religious holidays etc. Importance and modalities of digital use (videoconferencing etc.).

Restrictions on public religious gatherings due to the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 resulted in the suspension of religious services, including during Ramadan, Easter, and Passover. Lithuania's approach was described as "high" (compared to "very high", "moderate", or "low") because public religious gatherings were suspended but places of worship were open for private prayer<sup>19</sup>.

Due to the quarantine restrictions, many places of worship and churches were closed, community gatherings were cancelled. Religious communities were advised to refrain from performing religious services or conduct activities in a way that would help avoid large gatherings. Various communities faced restrictions and recommendations. This highlighted the ability of religion to adapt to changed conditions. Religious communities had to adapt to the governmental recommendations and decrees. Some of them, such as the Catholic Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Evangelical Reformed Church, Council of the Lithuanian Muslim religious community – Muftiate<sup>20</sup> have issued their regulations and reminders to believers considering the government's decision on quarantine. After the suspension of life services, religious communities invited believers to participate in services, recollections, and other community meetings virtually. Other religious communities, such as ISKCON, invited believers to watch meditations and lectures online instead of meeting in the temple.

To prevent the spread of the virus, religious institutions and groups had to respond quickly to government demands, so newly adapted forms of interactive religious services and rituals were inevitable. Religious groups and institutions used a number of technological innovations to fill the void created by the coronavirus outbreak. Life gatherings were replaced by means of telecommunications, radio, various online platforms. In this way, believers could feel a presence in the community even though they were participating virtually. Such a method helped to carry out usual communal religious practices together with others, although it did not replace physical presence in the community. By meeting in online space, believers could

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<sup>19</sup> Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, "OSCE Human Dimension Commitments and State Responses to the Covid-19 Pandemic", Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, p. 117 <[https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/c/457567\\_0.pdf](https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/c/457567_0.pdf)>; Alexis Artaud de La Ferrière (4 May 2020) "Coronavirus: how new restrictions on religious liberty vary across Europe," The Conversation <<https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-how-new-restrictions-on-religious-liberty-vary-across-europe-135879>> In: Religious Freedom in the World. Lithuania. Report 2021. Aid to the Church in Need. ACN International <<https://acninternational.org/religiousfreedomreport/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Lithuania.pdf>>.

<sup>20</sup> Council of the Lithuanian Muslim religious community – Muftiate (6 May 2020) Reglamentas dėl kasdienių, savaitinių ir šventinių kongregacinių apeigų COVID-19 karantino laikotarpiu [Regulation on daily, weekly and festive congregational rites during the covid-19 quarantine period] <<http://islamavisiems.lt/reglamentas-del-kasdieniui-savaitiniu-ir-sventiniu-kongregaciniu-apeigu-covid-19-karantino-laikotarpiu/>>.

confirm their professed values and religious goals. Live-streamed religious rituals connected people in time, but in different locations, thus turning their homes into a “temporary sacred space” (Bryson, Andres, Davies 2020) by trying to replicate what normally happened in the church. Home also turned into “intersacred space” (Bryson, Andres, Davies 2020) – a space where believers who are in different places but gather for a common goal come together. One of such examples could be the initiative in the shrine of Šiluva, in Lithuania, which started as a counter initiative for the maps, whose spots mark the places where the Covid-19 pandemic has struck. The initiative titled the “Map of Light”, where every spot marks a place where people prayed to end the pandemic. The Map of Light initiative started as an invitation to multiply prayers, and later became a charity initiative<sup>21</sup>.

**Lockdown and Jewish community in Lithuania** (information presented by Aušra Pažėraitė, Vilnius University)

During the two long periods of lockdown in Lithuania, the two working synagogues (in Kaunas and Vilnius) were closed), and prayers and gatherings for festivals were sometimes held only in private spheres with close friends and family members. The interruption of lockdown after the first period gave the possibility to celebrate the most significant festivals of the Fall in person. All this period was the most profitable time for a group of those who hold an opposition to the official rabbi of Vilnius synagogue from Chabad Lubavitch Chassidim, and even before the lockdown they did not pray with that community. This group (which was also joined by people from Klaipėda, Šiauliai and recently also from Riga), profited the time every week having Zoom meetings with their unofficial rabbi Kalev Krelin for Torah studies and other questions.

Although it may seem that the use of digital technologies by religious communities is a new thing that only came into play during the Covid-19 pandemic, this would not be true. Digital religion back in 2012 was described by Campbell, stating that it is “the technological and cultural space that is evoked when we talk about how online and offline religious spheres have become blended or integrated” (Campbell 2012, 4-5). It should be noted that like other 21<sup>st</sup> century factors of life, the boundary between the “offline sphere” and the “online sphere” is increasingly disappearing (O’Brien 2020). However, it is agreed that the development of digital

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<sup>21</sup> “Bishop Algirdas Jurevicius, the apostolic administrator of the archdiocese of Kaunas (where the shrine is located), stressed that “this project aims to help the people of the world to participate as much as possible in the prayer of intercession for those who are affected by the coronavirus pandemic and to provide the opportunity to support them with a donation.” The goal of the initiative is “to spread the message of hope that together we can counterbalance the statistics of infections and deaths with the statistics of prayer, support, unity, and light,” said Bishop Jurevicius. “Starting Apr. 8, “he added, “the project is expanded by inviting people from all over the world to join in the prayer and contribute with a donation to help those who are suffering the consequences of the pandemic”. A. Gagliarducci (19 April 2020) A Vatican Observer. Lithuania, the “map of light” against coronavirus from the shrine of Siluva, Catholic News Agency (CNA) <<https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/column/54153/lithuania-the-map-of-light-against-coronavirus-from-the-shrine-of-siluva>>.

religion has been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, popular church and pilgrimage centre – Sanctuary of Divine Mercy in Vilnius has been broadcasting and continues to broadcast religious activities online 24 hours per day<sup>22</sup>.

Thus, global Covid-19 pandemic has influenced the change of some established habits and rules and encouraged believers to look for ways to maintain and practise their faith. The development of digital religion during the Covid-19 pandemic has been active both at the level of the individual (choosing to comment on religious topics in social space) and at the level of a larger social group (a public broadcaster provides a direct virtual access to ritual rites). Such virtual access to religions and religious communities is viewed positively and is continued to be developed when the restrictions regarding social interaction are stopped.

- How has the pandemic influenced people's religiosity? - secularisation or secularisation; changes in religious behaviour regarding funerals, commemorations, marriage, baptism, etc. Some religious practices (ritual gestures, dietary practices, etc.) had to be modified because of the pandemic. Have the changes brought about by the pandemic situation lasted or have they been temporary?

During a pandemic, religious leaders reached out people to encourage them to engage in certain activities or to refrain from certain behaviours. The pandemic could also be viewed as an opportunity to promote volunteering, search for meaning and trust in God. For example, bishops of Lithuanian Roman Catholic Church mentioned in their Christmas congratulatory letter to believers that during a global pandemic the world "takes an exam of mutual aid". Addressing the believers, the Roman Catholic bishops invited them to try to overcome difficulties, to care and listen to each other, and to turn to the Church, which is open to the needs of the believers and offers its help<sup>23</sup>. Thus, religion during pandemics and crises can act as a meaning maker of the period. Religious communities and their leaders could encourage seeing not only the challenges of the situation, but also the benefits, see its significance in a wider context and try to help those most affected by the crisis.

A person's interaction with difficulties and uncertainty prompts individuals to turn to their inner personal beliefs. In such a case, the priority is often not given to communal activities, but to a personal relationship with religion, God, and it is speculated that this may be repeated in the case of Covid-19 pandemic. Because of this, it is worth noting that today, when Lithuania (together with most countries) is experiencing the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic (as well as the war in Ukraine, which has been initiated by Russia) in economic and social life of the

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<sup>22</sup> Direct online broadcasting from Sanctuary of Divine Mercy <<https://galestingumas.lt/tiesiogine-transliacija/>>.

<sup>23</sup> Lietuvos vyskupų konferencija [Lithuanian Episcopal Conference] (7 December 2020). Lietuvos vyskupų ganytojiškas laiškas „Kalėdų belaukiant“ [Letter from Lithuanian bishops to believers "While waiting for Christmas"] <<https://lvk.lcn.lt/naujienos/434>>.

country, it is difficult to assess the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the size of religious communities in the long term.

- How can the relation between religious groups and the state during Covid-19 pandemic be described? - collaboration, confrontation, neutrality? Did religious groups facilitate or hinder the adherence to public health measures to prevent the spread of the virus?

In case of Covid-19 pandemic, the spread of the disease is limited either by existing immunity or by social distancing, reduce of social contacts. Such restriction of contacts determined the introduction of the quarantine, a radical change in human contact, moving from live contact to virtual one. In the case of the pandemic, distancing, in contrast to the concept of social distancing, which is based on a possibility of restricting basic human rights, acted as a positive system, fostered communality of society and, in terms of influence, acted as a general law or social norm (Lew, Seung-moo 2020). Religious organisations are often based on communal values and mobilisation of community members, so control of the Covid-19 pandemic has become a challenge for them. Therefore, religious organisations had to choose: religions, on the one hand, could be at risk of the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, by continuing to organise religious ceremonies, promoting contact activities, or involve members of society in the fight against the pandemic by focusing on limiting social contact networks, by gathering help, and remote volunteering, informing about vaccination, etc.

The relation between religious groups and the state during Covid-19 pandemic in Lithuania can be described as a collaboration. The majority of religious groups facilitated the adherence to public health measures to prevent the spread of the virus.

During the first wave of the coronavirus, the government of Lithuania recommended to religious communities not to organise religious rites<sup>24</sup>. Religious organisations agreed with recommendations. For example, the Episcopal Conference of Lithuania immediately informed the Catholics that public masses will be halted as long as the quarantine announced by the Government is in effect. Bishops urged not to go to church, but to watch Mass offered by a priest on television, the Internet, to listen to radio broadcasts. It was emphasised that churches continued to “remain open for private prayer” and for the most necessary personal services of believers – funerals, baptisms or other sacraments were continued to be provided, but only with the participation of the closest family members<sup>25</sup>.

During the first wave of Covid-19, both the Republic of Lithuania and religious organisations acted in co-operation, which was successful. For example, OECD considered Lithuania to successfully manage the pandemic outbreak. Such insights were shared on how Lithuania had

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<sup>24</sup> Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybė [The Government of the Republic of Lithuania] (14 March 2020). Dėl karantino Lietuvos Respublikos teritorijoje paskelbimo [Decision on the declaration of lockdown in the territory of Lithuania], Mano Vyriausybė [My Government] <<https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/73c0b060663111eabee4a336e7e6fdab>>.

<sup>25</sup> J. Budreikienė and N. Navakas (14 March 2020). Lietuvos vyskupai atšaukia viešas pamaldas [Lithuanian bishops cancel public services], Verslo Žinios <<https://www.vz.lt/2020/03/14/patvirtintas-naujas-koronaviruso-atvejis>>.

managed to control the first wave of the pandemic: Lithuania's prompt response to the threat of the pandemic, the rapid reorganisation of the national and regional health care institutions, a successful testing strategy, even with limited human resources, and responsible public behaviour under the quarantine conditions<sup>26</sup>.

During the second national lockdown, it was recommended for the religious communities to organise the religious rites and recollections remotely (online)<sup>27</sup>. However, some religious organisations made their own decisions. For example, the Episcopal Conference decided to continue organising public masses in the churches, but with serious restrictions in the number of participants<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> The Government of the Republic of Lithuania (4 June 2020). The OECD praises Lithuania for the proper management of the coronavirus pandemic. *Koronastop* <<https://koronastop.lrv.lt/en/news/the-oecd-praises-lithuania-for-the-proper-management-of-the-coronavirus-pandemic>>.

<sup>27</sup> The Government of the Republic of Lithuania (5 November 2020). Nationwide lockdown as of Saturday <<https://sam.lrv.lt/en/news/nationwide-lockdown-as-of-saturday>>.

<sup>28</sup> Lietuvos vyskupai: pamaldos karantino metu nenutrūks, bet bus ribojamas tikinčiųjų skaičius [The Episcopal Conference: Lithuanian bishops: services will not be interrupted during quarantine, but the number of believers will be limited], *Bernardinai* (4 November 2020) <<https://www.bernardinai.lt/lietuvos-vyskupai-pamaldos-karantino-metu-nenutruks-bet-bus-ribojamas-tikinciuju-skaicius/>>.

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