# INFORMATION
# FOR THE MEDIA RELATED TO
# THE VISIT OF POPE FRANCIS
# TO LITHUANIA
## ON 22-23 SEPTEMBER 2018

*On the 22nd and 23rd of September 2018 Lithuania receives the visit of Pope Francis, an exceptional spiritual experience for the country where faith plays an important role in the lives of most Lithuanians. The visit of the Holy Father is one of the most significant events during this festive year when Lithuania marks the Centenary of the Restoration of the State. His Holiness is coming to a country which stands proudly connected to its past and future and is in control of its present.*

Today 77% of the Lithuanian population belong to the Roman Catholic Church. This makes Lithuania the only predominantly Catholic country in Northern Europe. During the time of occupation, faith helped families and communities to stay connected. Religion provided people with the strength to endure unbearable hardships and to fight for their freedom.

In 2018 Lithuania also marks the momentous anniversary of the visit of Pope John Paul II. 25 years ago, when His Holiness landed in Lithuania, the soil he kissed was not only the land of his mother, Emilia Kaczorowska, but that of Lithuania that was finally free from almost 50 years of Soviet occupation.

On 25 June 2017, the archbishop and martyr Teofilius Matulionis was beatified at a solemn Mass at the Cathedral Square in Vilnius. He is one of the first martyrs of communism to be raised to the altars.

In 1990 Lithuania declared the reestablishment of its independence. In addition to being a member of the EU, Schengen, Eurozone and NATO, Lithuania is also the newest member of the OECD.

As a young vibrant nation defined by its innovative mindset and can-do attitude, Lithuania is the perfect home for industries that are looking to drive their ideas forward. With its growing position as a hub for likeminded creative professionals working across a number of sectors, and with the right advantage of being a small country where solutions are quick, networks are instant, ands costs more than competitive, Lithuania has the right environment for innovation.

## KEY FACTS

Lithuania is located in Northern Europe, along the south-eastern cost of the Baltic Sea. Together with Latvia and Estonia, it forms an area commonly referred to as the Baltic States. Lithuania borders Latvia in the north, Belarus in the east and south, and Poland and Russian exclave of Kaliningrad in the southwest. Lithuania's population is 2.9 million.

President Dalia Grybauskaitė, serving her second term, is the first female president of Lithuania.

Among the 154 nationalities living in Lithuania, 84 percent are Lithuanians, nearly 6 percent are of Polish and almost 5 percent of Russian origin.

Lithuania participates in the activities of approximately 50 international intergovernmental organisations. Lithuania is a member of the EU, NATO, Schengen Area, and the newest member to the OECD. Lithuania joined the Eurozone in 2015.

In the 15th century the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was the largest country in Europe. It expanded to include the territory of present-day Belarus, parts of Ukraine, Poland and Russia. The Grand Duchy of Lithuania was known for great diversity in languages, religions and cultural heritage.

The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was established by the Union of Lublin in 1569.

The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth adopted the first written constitution in Europe in 1791, just four years after the United States Constitution, the first in the world.

At the end of the 18th century, three partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth took place. With the third partition in 1795 the Commonwealth ceased to exist. Lithuania became part of the Russian Empire. Over one century later, on 16 February 1918, the Act of Independence of Lithuania was signed proclaiming the restoration of the Independent State of Lithuania.

In 2018, Lithuania celebrates the Centennial of the Restoration of the State of Lithuania. Created on 16 February 1918, the modern independent state restored the lost statehood of historic Lithuania (1253-1795).

## ROAD TO INDEPENDENCE

During and after World War II Lithuania underwent three occupations: the Soviet occupations (1940-1941 and 1944-1990) and the Nazi occupation (1941-1944). During the most brutal period of the Soviet and Nazi occupations from 1940 to 1953, Lithuania lost more than 16 percent of its population.

• 20,200 freedom fighters and their supporters killed,

• 120,000 Lithuanians deported to Siberia and the Far North. Approximately 28,000 people perished,

• 140,000 Lithuanians imprisoned in the Gulag labor camps. It is estimated that more than 20 000 died in camps or prisons,

• 200,000 Lithuanian Jews murdered.

One of the most painful moments in the history of Lithuania is the loss of approximately 95 percent of Lithuanian Jews who became victims of the Nazi regime in Lithuania. The executions of Jews were carried out in line with the policies of the occupying Nazi power, with participation of local collaborators. However, many Lithuanians risked their lives in saving their Jewish neighbours. The Yad Vashem Institute in Jerusalem has awarded the title of Righteous among the Nations to 893 Lithuanians. In terms of the number of Lithuanians credited with saving Jews taken as a proportion to the national population today, Lithuania ranks second only to the Netherlands in the world.

The Soviet regime caused the rise of a resistance movement against the occupiers. In 1944-1953, more than 100,000 people participated in the movement officially known as the Union of Lithuanian Freedom Fighters; 20,200 freedom fighters and their supporters were killed. The fighters, also known as the Forrest Brothers, aimed at restoring the independent and democratic Republic of Lithuania. Resistance was strongest in Lithuania among Baltic countries.

The leader of the Freedom Fighters, Adolfas Ramanauskas-Vanagas (1918-1957) was a symbol of Lithuania's armed anti-Soviet resistance. He envisioned Lithuania as a democratic Republic with a democratically elected parliament, which would guarantee equal rights to all citizens of the country. On 16 February 1949, along with seven other partisan leaders, he co-signed the Declaration of the Union of Lithuanian Freedom Fighters. This document stated the illegitimacy of the Soviet rule. In 1996, Seimas (the Parliament of Lithuania) recognized the Declaration as an official act of the Republic of Lithuania. In

1956 he was betrayed, arrested and severely tortured. One year later, A. Ramanauskas-Vanagas was executed by the KGB. His burial site was discovered in Vilnius only in 2018. A. Ramanauskas-Vanagas' State Funeral will be held on 6 October 2018.

After World War II, Lithuania was fully incorporated into the former Soviet Union. People could not leave the country, they lost the freedom of expression and freedom of religion for almost 50 years.

On August 23, 1989, Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians joined hands on the *Baltic Way* forming a 675 km long human chain in the hope to protest the Soviet occupation. The date was chosen to focus the world's attention on the day in 1939, exactly 50 years prior, when Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Around 2 million demonstrators peacefully linked hands for 15 minutes and it became what is now known as one of the longest human chains in the world.

Between 1987 and 1991 songs became an important weapon in Lithuania's fight for its freedom, now remembered as the Singing Revolution. Thousands of people regularly gathered in public places across Lithuania and sang national songs and Roman Catholic hymns.

After five decades of occupation, on 11 March 1990 Lithuania declared the reestablishment of its independence. The following winter the Soviet military staged a coup, but unarmed Lithuanians showed their strength by singing and praying in front of the tanks and bullets, while heavy military machinery drove straight into the crowds. As a result of Soviet military actions, 13 civilians were killed, and hundreds wounded.

## THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH DURING AND AFTER THE OCCUPATIONS

Lithuania adopted Christianity in 1387. The faith has led Lithuanians through the darkest times in their history and still even in modern times is connecting believers through radio, TV, or even Facebook Live with holy masses.

When the Soviets occupied Lithuania for the first time in 1940-1941 they proclaimed the alleged separation of Church and State, discontinued the concordat and forced the apostolic nuncio to leave. All Church property was confiscated. Chaplains were removed from schools, prisons, hospitals and the armed forces. Religious instruction was banned from all schools. Catholic publications were prohibited, printing houses and bookshops nationalized. A considerable number of priests were arrested and deported.

In 1940-1956 nearly 6,000 priests were killed or died in the Gulags. Nearly 400 Catholic clergy were repressed, imprisoned and tortured. The single seminary in Kaunas was not allowed to admit more than 10 new seminarians per year. In 1947, the last monasteries and convents were closed. In 1939, there were 1,022 churches and chapels in Lithuania, and by 1966 this number had dropped by nearly a half, to 548.

For a very long time the *Chronicle of the Catholic Church of Lithuania* was the only voice from behind the Iron Curtain. It was published in Lithuania from 1972 to 1989 by Catholic

priests and nuns. The texts were focusing on the repressions against Catholics and human right violations in the Soviet Union. Most of the copies were made in secret with type writers or self-made machines by people who risked their lives. The publishers were routinely interrogated, arrested, and imprisoned by the KGB. Photocopies were secretly placed in gifts, sometimes without the traveller knowing that, and in this way the paper reached the West. It would be later read out publicly on the Voice of America or Vatican Radio.

Many churches in Lithuania were used as warehouses during Soviet occupation. The sight of heavy agricultural machinery in churches was a common sight of Soviet reality. In Vilnius alone, 38 churches were appropriated by the government to serve as warehouses, theatres or museums. The Cathedral of Vilnius was turned into the Art Gallery, while the church of St. Casimir, the patron saint of Lithuania, became the Museum of Atheism.

**The Hill of Crosses** is a monument of 100,000 crosses near Šiauliai in the North of Lithuania. The first crosses appeared at the end of 19th century and it has grown to become a truly unique place today. It started as a form of rebellion against the Tsar and then later against the Soviet regime. Soviets crushed and destroyed the crosses many times. However, the more fervently the Hill was destroyed, the more powerfully it would be rebuilt. People were stubbornly bringing crosses at night, despite the dangers, prohibitions and persecutions from the authorities. The Hill of Crosses became a symbol of the unshakable faith of the people, their sufferings and their hopes. Pope John Paul II, who visited it on 7 September 1993 offered Mass on the Hill, praying for the martyrs of faith in Lithuania and the entire Christian Europe. The Pope then called Lithuania the country of crosses and spoke of the Hill of Crosses as a very special place in the world.

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The Hill represented the pain and suffering experienced by Lithuania during that century.

**Lithuanian Cross-crafting** is a phenomenon in which craft, art and faith meet. The tradition of erecting crosses goes back to the arrival of Christianity in Lithuania at the end of the 14th century and also includes elements of pre-Christian culture. The concept of cross-crafting accommodates the history of a traditional wooden monument from its beginning to the end: the idea, location and craftsman selection, creative process, erection and consecration of the monument, vis-

iting it, burning down of the old cross and replacement. Wooden or metal crosses and pillar shrines acquire life through people's beliefs, ceremonies and customs. Lithuania is unique in its vitality of the Cross-crafting tradition even today, after surviving the harsh times of prohibition, demolition and occupation. Lithuanian cross-crafting and its symbolism was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008.

Due to the Soviet oppression, Lithuanian Catholics were not allowed to celebrate Christmas publicly until 1988.

## POPE JOHN PAUL II

The election of Pope John Paul II was a sign of hope for the people in the former Communist countries. Right after the election, the Pope went to pray to the Chapel of our Lady of the Gate of Dawn, which is on the ground floor of St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. Later he greeted the crowd in Lithuanian during his first inauguration speech.

Up to this day, Lithuanians are proud that in the very beginning of his pontificate John Paul II spontaneously pronounced his famous phrase: "Half of my heart is in Lithuania". Pope John Paul II used every occasion to greet Lithuanian Catholics in their own language.

From the beginning of his pontificate The Holy Father was very sensitive to the sufferings of the "Silent Church" under Communist oppression. In 1984, commemorating the 500th anniversary of death of St. Casimir, patron of Lithuania, the Holy Father celebrated the solemn Mass in the presence of the cardinals of the Roman Curia and Vatican diplomatic corps.

In 1987, when commemorating the 600th anniversary of the Baptism of Lithuania, Pope John Paul II wrote a letter to American, European and Australian bishops, calling for their solidarity with the persecuted Church in Lithuania. This call was favorably covered by the media and there were commemorative celebrations in many countries.

In September 1993, Pope John Paul II became the first Roman pontiff to visit Lithuania. His pontificate is linked to Lithuania's religious and national revival and the re-establishment of the Lithuanian Republic in 1990.

## LAND OF A MARTYR, BLESSED AND SAINT

**Blessed and martyr Teofilius Matulionis** was beatified in the Vilnius Cathedral square in 2017. He spent all his life fighting communist repression while spreading the Christian message and helping others. Bishop Matulionis suffered persecution, spending 16 years in prisons, forced labour camps and exile, yet remained faithful. While residing in St. Petersburg he witnessed the horrors of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 but continued to live in the city then renamed Leningrad. In 1923 he was arrested and sentenced to three years of imprisonment for refusing to cooperate with the communist authorities. Later, in 1929, Teofilius Matulionis was secretly consecrated as bishop and for that he was sentenced to 10 years in a concentration camp in the Solovetsky Islands, Russia. Nothing could hold him back from missionary work in Russia – neither the Bolsheviks' threats of brutal treatment, nor the offer of a safe and much more peaceful life in America. It is suspected that Matulionis was murdered. He died at the age of 90, after a search in his appartment and an injection of unidentified drugs on KGB's orders.

**Blessed Jurgis (George) Matulaitis**, MIC (1871-1927) was beatified by Pope St. John Paul II on 29 June1987, on the occasion of the 600th anniversary of the baptism of Lithuania. The casket with his remains was transferred from the sarcophagus to the

altar of a new side chapel of St. Michael the Archangel pro-cathedral in Marijampolė. Bl. Jurgis Matulaitis was the Archbishop of Vilnius from 1918 to 1925. From 1925, he served as the Apostolic Visitor to Lithuania. Perhaps because of his close friendship with Archbishop Achile Ratti, who later became Pope Pius XI and wrote the encyclical about social justice, Jurgis Matulaitis did much to engage the Catholic Church in social teaching and social work. He also was one of the founders of the Catholic youth movement *Ateitininkai* (Future) which remains one of the biggest Catholic youth organisations today. He also founded the Sisters of Immaculate Conception. Bl. Jurgis Matulaitis worked in secret to revive the Marian Fathers after the Russian authorities suppressed all religious orders and he even relinquished his teaching position to better dedicate himself to that secret revival. Bl. Jurgis Matulaitis was a noted teacher and spiritual director, who set up other branches of the order in places such as Switzerland and the United States, far from Russian authorities.

**Saint Casimir (Kazimieras) (1458-1484)** was the third of thirteen children born to King of Poland and the Grand Duke of Lithuania Casimir IV and his wife Elizabeth of Austria. As a child he was educated by the best teachers of that time. According to surviving historical accounts, the Prince was an extremely gifted student. St. Casimir is described as a person of refined taste, educated mind, great eloquence and nobility. The Prince was his father's constant travel companion and provided assistance in all his work. He was expected to succeed his father to the throne. The young prince had a distaste for the luxury of courtly life, and instead chose the way of asceticism and devotion. Casimir showed his love for God through these exercises of devotion, and also through his material charity to the poor. Pope St. John Paul II said, "he was a shining example of poverty and of

sacrificial love for the poor and needy." Prince Casimir died from tuberculosis. His parents laid him to rest in a chapel, which they had built for their family in Vilnius Cathedral. St. Casimir was declared patron of Lithuania and Poland. He is also a patron of youth and sets an example for young people because of his prudence, justice, sensitivity and chastity.

The city of Naples and the Knights of Malta, who had fought against Muslim Turks in the Mediterranean area, also consider St. Casimir as their patron. The devotion to St. Casimir is very well known in Florence, southern Italy and especially in Sicily. In Venezuela there is a small town named in the Saint's honour, as well as St. Casimir Church and Monastery.

## VILNIUS IN THE HISTORY OF DEVOTION TO DIVINE MERCY

**Saint Faustina (Helena Kowalska, 1905-1938)** was born, grew up and died in Poland, but during her short life she had a special connection with Vilnius.

St. Faustina lived in Vilnius in 1929 and from 1933 to 1936 at the convent house of Our Lady of Mercy. St. Faustina was famous for the apostolate of Divine Mercy, who experienced an important period of her mystic inner life journey while living in a monastery in Vilnius. During her visions she was directed to create an image of the revelation of Jesus' love and mercy and to share it with the rest of the world. In Vilnius she met her spiritual director and

confessor, blessed Father Michael Sopocko. With the help of Sopocko, St. Faustina found a painter to fulfil the request Jesus had made to her in one of the visions, i. e. to "paint an image according to the pattern you see, with the signature: Jesus, I trust in You". In 1934, the painter Eugeniusz Kazimirowski created the original Image of Divine Mercy painting under St. Faustina's direction. Due to the Soviet occupation the painting was hidden many times and was even taken to Belarus but then returned to Lithuania untouched. It is now at the Shrine of Divine Mercy in Vilnius. In 2000 Pope St. John Paul II canonized Sister Faustina.

The Gate of Dawn Chapel in Vilnius is included in the European Marian Network, which links twenty of the most significant shrines honoring Mary in Europe. In the 1600s, a painting of Our Lady was placed in the niche above one of the famous city gates. Many miracles are attributed to the image, which was canonically crowned Mother of Mercy by Pope Pius XI in 1927. In 1935, on the Sunday following Easter the original image of Divine Mercy was placed in a window of the Gates of Dawn stairway gallery for public veneration for the first time. This event is considered to be the origin of the Divine Mercy Sunday.

*https://cityofmercy.lt/en_GB/vilnius/*

## CONNECTED TO THE WORLD THROUGH INNOVATION

Lithuania takes pride in being among the most educated countries globally. According to the World Economic Forum, Lithuania ranks #1 in Europe by the percentage of population with tertiary education (2016).

Vilnius University and the Institute of Physics have been carrying out cutting-edge laser research since the 1970s, just a decade after the first functioning laser was demonstrated. Today half of all picosecond lasers sold worldwide are produced by Lithuanian companies, while Lithuanian-made femtosecond parametric light amplifiers, used in generating the ultrashort laser pulses, account for as much as 80 percent of the world market.

In 2018 the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters awarded Biochemist Virginijus Šikšnys with the prestigious Kavli Prize prise for his "seminal advances" in developing the revolutionary genome editor CRISPR-Cas9.

DuPont Pioneer, the world's leading developer and supplier of advanced plant genetics, has acquired usage rights from Vilnius University for a unique guided Cas-9 genome editing technology.

The American Thermo Fisher Scientific's World Excellence Center for Molecular Biology is located in Lithuania.

Support for R&D and the tech sectors is a national priority. Between 2006 and 2013 Lithuania spent EUR 411 million to develop its R&D infrastructure and science valleys. Another EUR 679 million will be put into further enhancement of R&D capacity over the 2014-2020 period. The investment of approximately 1 billion euros in R&D accounts for more than 2% of Lithuania's GDP in 2017.

IMD World Digital Competitiveness Ranking 2018 places Lithuania at #1 spot for Digital / Technological skills globally.

According to the data collected by telecommunications company Ooma, Lithuania has the fastest public Wi-Fi in the world. The average download speed in Lithuania is 15.4 Mbps, compared to 6.89 Mbps in the U.S.

According to OpenSignal, 88.40% of the Lithuanian territory is covered with 4G LTE, which puts Lithuania at #3 in the European Union.

The World Bank's Ease of Doing Business index ranks Lithuania at #16 for business-friendly environment globally.

Nasdaq, Continental, Western Union, Barclays, Uber, Wix are among the global companies operating in Lithuania.

Lithuania's most successful start-ups include the cybersecurity company CUJO AI, the world's first echo sounder technology start-up Deeper, the transport app Trafi, and the money transfer company TransferGo.

There are now over 120 fintech companies based in Lithuania.

*https://investlithuania.com/*

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## HERITAGE, NATURE AND LIFESTYLE

Lithuania is a green country and connection with nature is important for Lithuanians.

There are about 6,000 lakes in Lithuania and about 1,200 of them are supported only by ground water. Lakes and rivers play an important role in the lifestyles of Lithuanians, who spend a lot of their time by the water in summer and even in the cold Lithuanian winter.

Lithuanian tap water is among the cleanest in Europe and is perfectly drinkable. This is because 100% of it is taken from abundant underground sources sheltered from human interference.

Forests cover approximately 33 percent of Lithuania's landmass.

Lithuanians love to sing. Songs helped the nation to gain the independence almost 30 years ago, and up to this day Lithuanians from all around the globe gather to the Song and Dance Festival that takes place every four years. At some events of this festival, as many as 15,000 people sing together. In 2008 the Song and Dance Festival has been inscribed in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Beginning with 2009, on the occasion of the Statehood Day celebrated on the 6th of July, Lithuanians around the globe sing the national anthem at the same time.

Lithuanians speak one of the world's oldest languages. It is related to Sanskrit (a classical language of India) Latin and Ancient Greek. It is the oldest surviving Indo-European language, which has preserved the most phonetical and morphological aspects of the proto-language which many other European languages come from. Yet 98% of Lithuanians also speak a foreign language and one third of Lithuanians live overseas, mainly in the US, Norway, UK, Ireland and Spain, providing strong connections to the rest of the world.

Basketball is a significant part of the Lithuanian culture: it is as big as football in Brazil, rugby in New Zealand or ice-hockey in Canada. As a result, basketball fans around the world call Lithuania the genuine "basketball nation". During the Soviet occupation, basketball was often viewed as a means of resistance, where the matches between Žalgiris Kaunas and CSKA Moscow often had a special significance for the nation. Since Lithuania regained its independence in 1990, basketball has remained extremely popular. The Lithuanian national basketball team participated in every single Olympic Games. Only three other nations, including the US, can be proud of the same result. During 28 years of independence, the national basketball team collected 9 medals in the Olympics, World Championships and European Championships. All these achievements are accredited by the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) which today ranks Lithuania #6 in the world.

## VILNIUS

Vilnius is a multicultural city with a population of 547,542 people that has a long history but a very modern lifestyle today.

Today Vilnius is proud to be called the happiest capital in the EU. According to a Eurostat survey in 2015, 98 percent of the residents stated that they were satisfied with living in their city: the highest number in the EU.

Vilnius is recognised by UNESCO as one of the most beautiful cities of the Old Continent with the splendid Baroque old town in Europe. The Old Town surrounded by excellent landscape blends in harmony the heritage of the past and present achievements, science and culture.

From the thirteenth until the eighteenth century Vilnius was the political centre of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, had a huge impact on the cultural and architectural development in Europe. Although it was often attacked and ruined, it maintained impressive buildings of Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque and classicism as well as its medieval layout and the natural environment.

Vilnius is situated between lakes, two rivers and multiple green areas that make it a unique city within a forest. Surrounded as it is by so many trees, the city enjoys a perfect environment with abundant fresh clean air and a relaxing atmosphere. In 2009, Vilnius was celebrated as the European Capital of Culture. The city has almost 40 churches of all architectural styles and their bells are so accurate and regular that everyone knows the time without checking their watches.

Surrounded by churches and the Presidential palace, Vilnius University is one of the oldest universities in the Northern Europe. It was founded by the Jesuits in the 16th century and has since then attracted students from Lithuania and all over Europe who contribute to making the city a vibrant centre of learning.

Legend says that Grand Duke Gediminas built Vilnius after a dream that he had following a successful hunt. In his dream, an iron wolf was howling on the top of the mound where the Duke later decided to found Vilnius, and the renown of the city then spread throughout Europe. Through centuries Vilnius became home to many nations where people could feel free to practice their faith and traditions. It is called the Jerusalem of Lithuania or, as Napoleon Bonaparte described it in 1812, the Jerusalem of the North. Before World War II, Vilnius was one of the largest Jewish centres in Europe where Jews made up a third of the population.

The city lived through different epochs under the rule of the Russian Empire, Poland and the Soviet Powers. Almost a year after Lithuania declared Independence in 1990, on a cold 13th of January 1991 the Soviets attempted a coup in Vilnius in order to seize control over the parliament and key media. Unarmed people from all around the country gathered and linked arms in front of the Parliament, the TV Tower and national television headquarters and once more defended their freedom.

*More information on Vilnius: http://vilnius-tourism.lt/en/*

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## KAUNAS

Kaunas is the second largest city in Lithuania with a population of less than 300,000. It keeps the authentic spirit of the country's national character alive and is open to contemporary ideas as it is surrounded by the great innovative spirit of the many start-ups and companies that are situated here. The city lies at the confluence of the Nemunas and the Neris, the two largest Lithuanian rivers.

In 1919, after Vilnius was forcibly annexed by Poland, Kaunas became the temporary capital of Lithuania and experienced rapid development in all areas. Today the vast array of interwar modernist architectural heritage is one of the most significant features of Kaunas. Awarded the European Heritage Label and included in the UNESCO's World Heritage Tentative List, Kaunas is also a member of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network and a UNESCO City of Design.

The city is getting international attention for its myriad examples of street art as well as its Jurgis Mačiūnas Square, inspired by the FLUXUS movement. Jurgis Mačiūnas, the father of FLUXUS, was born in Kaunas in 1931 and was the main coordinator of the movement in New York. In 2022, Kaunas will proudly become the European Capital of Culture with the theme "From Temporary to Contemporary".

Kaunas is a not just home to traditional and contemporary festivals, jazz, classical music and architecture, but it is also a city of basketball. The Kaunas team Žalgiris is the most successful basketball team in the country and placed 3rd in the 2018 Euroleague. Its home field is Žalgirio arena, the most significant and newest multifunctional arena in the Baltics.

Catholic heritage and history play a significant role in today's life in Kaunas. The numerous Gothic and Baroque churches create the landscape of the city and the monumental modernist Basilica of Christ's Resurrection is considered to be one of the symbols of both Kaunas and Lithuania.

The ensemble of the Pažaislis Camaldolese Monastery and the Church of Visitation form the largest monastery complex in Lithuania and the most magnificent example of Italian Baroque architecture in the country. It is situated on a peninsula in the Kaunas Reservoir and is now a cultural monument. The monastery was designed by Pietro Puttini, Carlo Puttini and Giovanni Battista Frediani. Original architectural solutions were used for the first time in Europe in the form of a hexagonal church plan, and a concave facade. The interior stucco work is ascribed to Joan Merli and the frescos to Michelangelo Palloni. Today the monastery is home to the annual international Pažaislis Music Festival.

In Kaunas one can find many bronze scallop shells – the iconic symbols of those on the Camino de Santiago, leading the way to the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, Spain. Thousands of pilgrims take the Camino de Santiago also known as Saint James Way every year.

The combination of a rich history and an active modern life attracts young people from all over the country. It is truly a young city with over 35,000 students attending seven universities here, the largest number of students compared to any other city in Lithuania. The Kaunas University of

Technology enjoys international recognition for its advanced knowledge and future technology development and application and is the biggest centre for innovative projects in the country.

The city is also home to small yet visible Jewish, Muslim, Armenian, Russian, Polish and German traditional communities as well as emerging diasporas of Dutch, Spanish, Italian and British expats that choose to live in Kaunas to study or for the business opportunities it affords.

Though Kaunas is a vibrant modern city, it contains many reminders of the greatest tragedies of World War II. Most of Lithuanian Jews were killed here and put into mass graves in the Kaunas Ninth Fort. During World War II, the vice consul for the Japanese Empire in Lithuania, the eminent Chiune Sugihara, risked his life issuing travel visas that saved as many as 6,000 Jewish refugees from the approaching Nazis. He would spend 20 hours a day handwriting visas. According to witnesses, he was still writing visas while in transit from his hotel and after boarding the train at Kaunas Railway Station, throwing visas into the crowd of desperate refugees out of the train's window even as the train pulled away. This was one of the biggest operations to save Jewish refugees in Europe.

The city is also famous for Steponas Darius and Stasys Girėnas, Lithuanian pilots who attempted a non-stop flight from New York City to Kaunas. On 15 July 1933, they flew across the Atlantic Ocean with the plane Lituanica, covering a distance of 6,411 km without landing in 37 hours and 11 minutes. Although Darius and Girėnas did not have navigational equipment and flew under unfavourable weather conditions, this was one of the most accurate flights in aviation history. Unfortunately, at the end of the trip their plane crashed in the present territory of Poland due to unknown circumstances. 50,000 people gathered to pay their respects at their funeral in Kaunas.

*More information on Kaunas: http://www.visit.kaunas.lt/en/*

*More information on Papal visit: www.popieziausvizitas.lt*

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