

# ON THE BEGINNINGS OF THE MAY DEVOTION IN LATGALE

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## Summary

At the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, the processes of change in Latgalian spiritual and, respectively, musical culture had reached unprecedented dynamics. They were strongly Catholic in tone and orientation and touching all spheres of life. Their main driving force were the relentless activities of Jesuit missionaries whose concern and task was the implementation of the modern Tridentine Catholicism in this region. The medium of change were the Jesuit books, which were published in the course of the 18th century in increasing numbers. This process was based on the Jesuits' previous educational work among the Latgalian peasantry.

One of the most remarkable Jesuit projects that has left a deep imprint on Latgalian popular culture, and has not completely disappeared even today, even in some locations showing signs of revival, are the May devotions to the Blessed Virgin Mary. These popular services took place every evening in May at the large outdoor crosses, which were decorated for the occasion with bouquets of spring flowers and garlands. The crosses were located either by the roadside, in the village centre or near village borders, in the nearest graveyard or in the church garden, sometimes surrounded by a low railing, with benches inside the railing. The elderly were seated on the benches, while the younger folk stood behind, all dressed up for the occasion. The outdoor crosses in Latgale were the object of veneration on various occasions throughout the year, but the time of the May devotion was the period of special attention and care. During the Soviet era, many crosses were destroyed when the Soviets tried to eradicate May services, and only a few of them remained in remote areas. Today, many crosses have been rebuilt and new ones erected, but the May devotions no longer have their former splendour, and the services are no longer held regularly and all over the region.

Traditionally, a May service includes the Litany of Loreto, the Rosary, prayers, edifying readings, meditation, spiritual exercises and the singing of the popular Marian hymns. The organization and performance are entirely in the hands of the local people themselves. The people simply called the May devotions "singing/prayer at the cross" (*dzīduot/lyugtis pi krusta*), and they were spontaneous gatherings – without the leadership or presence of the clergy; their presence was not even expected. The services were lay-led: officiated by a local expert-singer – usually an older women, a respected leader who was familiar with the structure of the ritual, knew all the melodies, could start the singing at the most appropriate pitch and had a strong voice. A special component of the services was the "drawing of lots" – small slips of paper with suggestions for daily and monthly devotional exercises to discipline religious behaviour and develop the sense of individual religious responsibility of the faithful.

The May services were musical events where singing of the Marian hymns was an important attraction for many. (Songs about Mary's life and suffering, prayer songs to her, etc. form a large and particularly popular part of the rich Latgalian Catholic song repertoire). The melodies of the hymns are orally transmitted and are known by heart, just like folksong melodies. The texts are provided in prayer books and the choice of hymns is decided by the participants following the local tradition.

The Latgalian May devotions are a local version of a broader popular Marian movement that was widespread in the Catholic West from the 18th century onwards. It emerged in Latgale around the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries in the result of the targeted and well-conceived cultural transmission project of Latgalian Jesuit missionaries. (There are reasons to believe that when transplanting this Marian practice into the Latgalian environment, the Jesuits cleverly manipulated the old local non-Christian springtime singing habits so that they switched to "feed" this new Catholic practice.) The source of the Latgalian version of the May devotion was the book by Italian Jesuit Annibale Dionisi (1679–1754) *Il mese di Maria o sia il mese di maggio consacrato a Maria* (*The month of Mary or the month of May consecrated to Mary*) first published in 1725. The Latgalian translation was first published in 1799 and experienced numerous new editions throughout the 19th and some even in the 20th century. The introduction of this tradition of Italian provenance was initiated by the Jesuits of the *Domicilium Puszense*, by P. Tadeusz Kuczyński SJ (1769–1856), supposedly playing a decisive role in this large-scale project of cultural transmission.