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## **The Orthodox Monastery and Women's Religious School in Illukst (Courland Governorate, late 19<sup>th</sup> century to early 20<sup>th</sup> century)**

**Key words:** Uniates, Convent of Illukst, Diocesan School of Illukst, Abbess Agnia (Shtal), Abbess Eugenia (Postovskaya)

### **Summary**

The present article is devoted to the history of the transformation of the former Illukst (modern Ilūkste) Uniate Basilian male monastery into a female Orthodox Monastery. The paper reviews the stages of creation and missionary activity of the Illukst Nativity of the Mother of God Convent and the Diocesan Religious School of the Riga Diocese of the Courland (modern Kurzeme) Governorate. The educational Abbesses of Agnia (Shtal) and Eugenia (Postovskaya) are also analyzed. The dynamic development of the Riga Diocese and Orthodoxy occurred at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Church bishops paid great attention to the tasks of education and upbringing of children of the clergy and laity. A striking example of this course was the activities of the Illukst nunnery. The Shelter created by the sisters in a short time was transformed into the Women's Religious School for girls of secondary educational institutions in the Baltic territory. This study is devoted to the stages of the formation of the Orthodox Monastery and the Women's Religious School during the specified period in Illukst.

**Ilūkstes pareizticīgais klosteris un Kurzemes guberņas eparhijas sieviešu garīgā skola 19. gadsimta beigās un 20. gadsimta sākumā**

**Atslēgas vārdi:** uniāti, Ilūkstes sieviešu klosteris, Ilūkstes sieviešu garīgā skola, igumene Agnija (Štāle), igumene Jevgēņija (Postovska)

### **Kopsavilkums**

19. gadsimta beigās – 20. gadsimta sākumā notika dinamiska pareizticības attīstība Rīgas eparhijā un Kurzemes guberņā. Valdošie bīskapi lielu uzmanību veltīja pareizticīgās misijas uzdevumiem, kalpotāju un draudzes bērnu garīgajai izglītošanai. Šis pētījums veltīts bijušā Grieķu-uniātu baziliāņu vīriešu klostera pārtapšanai par sieviešu klosteri. Eparhijas garīgās skolas, Ilūkstes Dievmātes Piedzimšanas sieviešu

klostera tapšanas etapi un misijas darbs ir cieši saistīti ar igumenes (klostera priekšnieces) Agnijas (Štāle, 1833–1905) un igumenes Jevgēņijas (Postovska, 1864–1948) kalpošanu. Klostera priekšnieces bija izglītotas mūķenes, rūpējās ne tikai par uzticētā klostera labiekārtošanu, bet arī par sieviešu skolas izaugsmi.

Skola deva iespēju iegūt izglītību pareizticīgo kalpotāju meitenēm un bāreņiem. Daudzas sāka pasniegt Ilūkstes sieviešu skolā, arī Rīgas eparhijas pareizticīgo draudžu skolās. Izglītības misijas projekts veicināja jaunās paaudzes pareizticīgo sieviešu audzināšanu, kurām bija cēls uzdevums provinciālās sabiedrības ētiskā līmeņa celšanā Baltijas reģionā.

### **Introduction**

The dynamic development of the Riga Diocese and Orthodoxy in the Courland Governorate occurred at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. The ruling bishops paid great attention to the tasks of the Orthodox mission and the religious education of the children of the clergy and laity. A striking example of this course was the activity of the Illukst convent in the so-called “Uniate land”. This study is devoted to the history of the transformation of the former Greek-Uniate Basilian monastery into an Orthodox monastery, and later into a women’s convent. This article examines the stages of creation and missionary activities of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary Convent and Religious School of Illukst in the Baltic region. The purpose of the article is an attempt to collect data and their further analysis to study the educational ministry of the Abbesses – Agnia (Shtal, 1833–1905) and Eugenia (Postovskaya, 1864–1948). The study used archival materials from the funds of the Latvian National Archives and publications of church media. The materials had been introduced into scientific circulation.

### **From Union to Orthodoxy**

The events of February 12, 1839 laid the basis for the liquidation of the Union (1596), i.e. Greek-Catholic rite in the Belarusian-Lithuanian provinces of the Russian Empire. Thus, the reunification of the parishes of the Greek-Catholic Church with the Synodal One (Orthodox Russian Church), which were geographically located in the eastern part of the Courland Governorate on the former territory of the Polish Inflants, began (LNA LVVA, 232. f., 2. apr., 66. l., 9. lp; Putniņa 2018, 366). It should be said that the appearance of Greek Uniates in the Duchy of Courland dates back to the beginning of the 18th century after the active preaching of monks of the rank of St. Basil the Great or Basilian one. Thus, in the Courland Governorate there were 6 parishes and 2 monasteries. According to statistics, the total number of Greek Uniates ranged from 5 to 7 thousand people (Plenne 2018, 74). The Greek-Uniates mainly belonged to local peasants – Belarusians, whose economic and living conditions were unenviable, because they were completely dependent on landowners (Otchet 2016, 164-165). As for the Orthodox, their number was small. The keymaster of the Riga Cathedral of the Nativity of Christ, Archpriest Vladimir Pliss (1861–1927), wrote that

the churches of Illukst were so “poor that they created a difficult situation for the Orthodox person” (Visokopreosveshenneishii 1897, 192-193).

Historical events regarding the Greek-Uniate issue affected two monastic parishes in Jakobstadt (modern Jekabpils) and Illukst, as well as several small parishes in Illukst or Selburg (Selpils) district. Among them: Solonaisk (Saliena) parish in honor of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross in the estate of Yegor Fonesdorf (so in the document); Skrudaliena Holy Protection parish on the lands of Colonel Ivan Knobov; Kopulov (Kaplava) Holy Protection parish in the estate of Colonel's wife Dorothea Komarovskaya; Alt-Greenvald St. Nicholas parish (distance to Illukst was 7.42 km), assigned to the monastery of Illukst, as well as Elners (Elerne) one. Later they were included into the Selburg deanery of the Riga Vicariate. These processes were painful, as many Greek-Uniate believers tried to join the Roman Catholic Church. That became a great concern for the Orthodox Courland dean of the Saliena Cross Exaltation Church, priest Feofil Malyantovich (?-?). To resolve these issues, the rector of the Alekseevskaya Church, priest Nikolai Fasanov (1808–1890), was sent from Riga to help him (Gavrilin 1999, 55-56).

### **The support for Orthodox parishes in Courland**

Secular and ecclesiastical authorities saw religious education through parish schools as an important means in the Orthodox mission. The rector of the Illukst monastery, Hegumen Porfiry (Syadkovsky, ?-?) wrote to the Bishop of Polotsk and Vitebsk, Vassily (Luzhinsky, 1791–1879) about the need to create parish schools in Illukst in order to bring local believers, not only Greek-Uniates, but also Old Believers, closer to Orthodoxy (LNA LVVA 2728. f., 2. apr., 267. l., 24. lp.). These schools could teach the doctrine and worship of the Russian Orthodox Church (Strods 2011, 93). But it was possible to realize the plan only in the second half of the 19th century. In 1868, schools with 62 children studying were already operating in five once Greek-Uniate communities (Piļka 2022, 89; Plenne 2018, 74).

After the events associated with the Polish (January) uprising of 1863–1864, the state of spiritual affairs in Illukst district came under the special and close control of the authorities. The attitude of Russian society had also changed due to what was happening in the Western Territory. It began to donate significantly to the beautification of Orthodox churches and provide assistance to the poorest clergy. Wealthy people took an active part in the establishment of schools and monasteries (Romanchuk 2015, 209). In the former “Uniate side,” processes began to strengthen Orthodoxy by the forces of secular and ecclesiastical authorities. They proceeded extremely slowly and gave weak results, and only by 1880 the situation began to gradually change. True, the former Greek-Uniate Basilian monastery, transformed into an Orthodox monastery, never became a center of education. And as a result, the authorities decided to create a convent for educational purposes on this site. Abbess Agnia (Shtal) took control of the monastery. Under the convent, the Diocesan Religious School for Women was opened, and the monastery became a stronghold of Orthodoxy (Oranovskii 1890, 219).

### **Abbess Agnia (Shtal)**

The future abbess came from a heterodox family, where the spiritual foundations did not have a dominant position. Her father, Johann Shtal, a Catholic from the city of Cologne, served as a pharmacist, and her mother was a Lutheran. The family lived in the Novooskol district of the Kursk province, where Adelaide was born on November 29, 1833. There was no Lutheran pastor in the city, and the baby was born weak, so the mother called an Orthodox priest to baptize the girl (Rizhskie 1906, 834). Adelaide Shtal strove for an ascetic life from her early youth. Her wish came true on March 1, 1866, she was appointed a mentor at the Pskov Old Ascension Monastery. Earlier, in 1850, A. Shtal acquired the title of home teacher. In the same monastery she became a novice in 1868, and three years later she was tonsured a monk. And in 1877 she was appointed assistant to the head of the Pskov Joahn-Ilyinsk community of sisters of mercy, which she began to manage. On January 27, 1881, she was appointed to the position of abbess of the Illukst Monastery of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary. Nun Agnia became the head of the newly opened girls' school sheltering 20 students.

During the reign of Bishop Filaret II of Riga and Mitau (Filaretova, 1824–1882), the question arose of starting a Religious School for girls of clergy in the Riga Diocese. It is no coincidence that the choice fell on Illukst, where in the converted convent they were going to establish a shelter-school for orphans of the clergy (Saharov 1939, 54). Thus, in 1881, at the monastery, a Diocesan 3-grade the Religious School for girls of various classes (with a preparatory class) and a shelter for girls were created (LNA LVVA, 4754. f., 1. apr., 332. l., 50. lp.; Rizhskii 2007, 7).

At Maslenitsa, nun Agnia (Shtal) left Pskov for Illukst with her sisters: nun Olimpiada, nun Feofania, nuns Macaria and Eugenia. The abbess visited Riga, where she discussed issues of arranging the convent with Bishop Filaret II (Filaretov). Earlier, the Diocesan publication reported that the bishop and the Diocesan architect had a visit to the Courland Governorate, where the issue of opening a school in Illukst or Jacobstadt was being decided. But after the trip taken, the bishop made a choice in favor of Illukst. To manage the affairs of founding the Diocesan Women's Religious School, a committee was established in Riga.

The first impressions of the monastery left a bleak picture, since the monastery was in extreme desolation. The monastery complex included a small temple without a bell tower and two nondescript buildings standing next to it. The buildings were destroyed to such an extent that in one of the buildings (on the first floor) horses were led through, since there were no floors, no windows or doors. Work began to restore the buildings and the surrounding area, as it was unsightly due to its desolation. In a short period of time, it was possible to carry out a major overhaul, which cost about 5 000 rubles. As the report stated: "As the time for the start of classes approached, the work took on a particularly feverish character: they worked even at night by candlelight... The work was highlighted by the energy of nun Agnia and her closest assistant nun Olympiada". The rector of the Alt-Greenwald St. Nicholas Church,

Archpriest Konstantin Yakovitsky (1822–1905) took an active part in the organization of the convent (Rizhskie 1907, 163).

### **The work of the Monastery of Illukst in the creation of a Religious School**

It is important to note that only towards the end of Abbess Agnia being in the office the monastery acquired a stable position and matched the category of a regular 3rd class, but it was not rich. The monastery received an annual allowance from the treasury in the amount of 2 168 rubles 20 kopecks. The monastery had only one stone church. About the monastic property it was reported that the amount of land was 133 tithes (according to the Old Russian state system), the conversion according to the modern Metric system is 1.453 km<sup>3</sup> or 145.3 hectares. The amount of property was unknown, but there were hayfields, land with forests and with swamps. The last ones were rented out, but, as noted in the document, “everything was processed with our own means”. The number of nuns of the monastery was not numerous: 1 abbess, 10 nuns and 34 novices.

Regarding the Religious School, its activities gradually became stronger. The Religious School accepted girls aged from 9 to 11 from families of clergy, as well as laity, not only Orthodox, but also from other denominations (Old Believers and Lutherans). The maintenance of the pupils was carried out both for payment and at public expense for orphans. In terms of payment, the Religious School was divided into several categories: students with full board, with half board, and visiting students. The payment was made in six months and not refunded.

Abbess Agnia diligently fulfilled the duties assigned to her. She actively took part in the educational process of the school, teaching not only French as an official subject, but also other ones. The abbess paid great attention to instilling in her students Orthodox piety, consciousness of duty, love of work, accuracy, politeness and delicacy in dealing with others. As one of her colleagues wrote: “Her pupils have dispersed to all corners of the Baltic region, and probably will not forget her lessons and instructions, trying in their lives and activities to justify the work of their mentor” (Rizhskie 1906, 836).

The abbess received great support personally from the Chief Prosecutor of the Holy Synod, Konstantin Petrovich Pobedonostsev (1827–1907). After her appointment, she traveled to St. Petersburg, where she had the opportunity to introduce herself to the influential dignitary. In a letter dated by 1881, Abbess Agnia thanked the chief prosecutor for financial support in the amount of 3 000 rubles from Medyntsevsky fund. The fund became known for the history of its owner. In 1870, a Moscow merchant's wife, hereditary and honorary citizen of Moscow, Praskovya Ilyinichna Medyntseva (born Lazareva, 1822–?) was placed under guardianship at the request of her husband and son “due to drunken behavior and wasteful life”. It can be assumed that in the future the money from the capital in the amount of over 300 000 rubles were donated to social and church projects. Except the Illukst Monastery, an amount of 3 000 rubles was also sent for the establishment of the Holy Trinity Paraskeva Toplovsky convent in the Tauride Governorate. The famous lawyer Anatolij Fedorovich Koni also

mentioned in his memoirs the sensational case of the merchant's wife P. I. Medyntseva (Koni 1956, 864-872).

As to the Illukst Monastery, in addition to financial assistance, the high authorities from St. Petersburg provided Abbess Agnia with all kinds of support. For example, the conflict against the "harmful activities" of Priest Khariton Gerbachevsky (1822–1896) from Jacobstadt against the abbess was solved in favor of the Illukst monastery. The abbess's work was also noticed and appreciated in St. Petersburg; in the same year, the Empress donated portraits in a gilded frame to the women's school. Abbess Agnia thanked the assistant of K. P. Pobedonostsev for the portrait of the Empress for the Religious School and for sending 200 rubles from the merchant Ignatiev for "the needs with a request for prayer and church remembrance for his family" (LNA LVVA, 4754. f., 1. apr., 181. l., 52. lp.).

During the period of control of the Riga Diocese by Archbishop Arseny (Bryantsev, 1839–1914), the monastery and the Religious School were more actively supported. In 1887, a bishop's scholarship was established for poor students of the Religious School. And starting from 1889, the Illukst Religious School began to graduate 60 teachers of primary city schools (Piļka 2022, 90). The ruling bishops did a lot for the Illukst monastery. Priest Vladimir Pliss wrote that the monastery church was poor in appearance and looked more like a house of prayer. There was no dome over the temple, and the rickety wooden bell tower gave the impression of squalor and extreme poverty, especially against the backdrop of the nearby stone Jesuit Catholic Cathedral (Kaminska 2006, 171, 174). Thanks to government support, the welfare of the Riga Diocese also grew. At the request of Archbishop Arseny (Bryantsev), the Holy Synod from St. Petersburg also allocated funds from the treasury for the needs of the Illukst Monastery (Visokopreosveshenneishii 1897, 194).

By 1903, the Religious School of Illukst received full rights as an educational institution from the Holy Synod. While inspecting parish schools, Bishop Agafangel of Riga (Preobrazhensky, 1854–1928) traditionally visited the Illukst Religious School. In the presence of teachers, the Bishop examined the students in all subjects, as reported in the Riga Diocesan newspaper ("Rizhskie Eparhialnye Vedomosti") (Obozrenie 1904, 356-357). The Bishop carefully examined the economic part and was interested in the maintenance of the school buildings and library. More than half a century had passed since the liquidation of the Union, and 271 Orthodox Christians already lived in the town of Illukst. Nevertheless, as Priest Vladimir Pliss wrote, the acquisition of "places for church buildings caused a lot of trouble and sometimes grief" for the ruling bishop (Visokopreosveshenneishii 1897, 180-181).

By the beginning of the 20th century, the welfare of the Monastery and the Religious School of Illukst had noticeably strengthened. The school had 102 students, which made it possible to open a 7th (additional, but optional) pedagogical class (Gavrilin 2014, 327-328). Until 1905, the School and Monastery were managed by Abbess Agnia (Shtal). Under her leadership, the Monastery and the Religious School developed and expanded. Two stone buildings were erected for the Diocesan Religious School, and several wooden houses for teachers were built. But on October 27, 1905, the monastery bell announced the sudden death of the abbess. In November, nun

Eugenia (Postovskaya), the treasurer of the Riga Holy Trinity Monastery of Sergius was appointed to replace the deceased abbess of the Monastery of Illukst (Gavrilin 2014, 42).

### **Abbess Eugenia (Postovskaya)**

The future abbess Eugenia Postovskaya was born in Moscow in 1864 on March 10 in the family of Zakhar Konstantinovich and Maria Alexandrovna Postovsky (LNA LVVA, 7469. f., 1. apr., 1096. l., 160. lp.). Zakhar Konstantinovich came from Smolensk nobles. Eugenia studied in St. Petersburg at the Smolny Institute in the Nikolaevskaya noble part of the Institute and received the title of home teacher. However, she was forced to leave her last year for health reasons. After returning to Riga, Eugenia began to help the Mansurov sisters – Catherine (Schiema Abbess Sergiya, 1861–1926) and Natalya (Nun Joanna, 1868–1934), the future founders of the Riga Holy Trinity Sergius Convent. Eugenia was engaged in educational activities. She taught at a public Russian-language Sunday School for poor women, and also selflessly provided the apartment of her father general for pedagogical meetings. The girl not only supervised the “pedagogical process at school”, but also delved into the work of the candle workshop of the Riga community, and also performed the troublesome work of the monastery economist and treasurer (Demina 1999, 196).

By the age of thirty, Eugenia had already confirmed her decision to become a nun. She went to the Holy Trinity Sergius Lavra to her confessor, Archimandrite Pavel (Glebov, 1827–1904). In 1894, on June 26, with the blessing of the Bishop, the governor of the Lavra, Father Pavel clothed her in the Rasophorus, and in the summer of the same year, with the blessing of her confessor, she entered the Riga community and began to fulfill the obedience of treasurer. In 1905, nun Eugenia was appointed to the position of abbess of the Illukst Nativity of the Virgin Mary Monastery and head of the Diocesan Women's Religious School (LNA LVVA, 7469. f., 1. apr., 1100. l., 172. lp.).

Abbess Eugenia continued the work of her predecessor. The monastery was repeatedly mentioned in the Riga Diocesan newspaper in connection with issues of education. After the Riga Diocesan Council in 1905, the clergy tried to improve the teaching process in Orthodox schools, actively attracting female teachers who graduated from the Religious School of Illukst. It is important to note the religious state of society in the Baltic provinces after the Law on Tolerance of Faith in 1905, which was difficult and had certain problems. There were the following lines from the reports of the clergy:

- pastors from Estonians and Latvians inspired parishioners that their faith was national; and deviation from Lutheranism to Orthodoxy was a betrayal of one's nationality;
- Catholic priests showed great hostility, especially in the parishes of the Selburg deanery, where the Catholic majority predominated; this began to manifest itself noticeably in Polish Catholic propaganda after the adoption of the Law;
- the Old Believer communities belonged to Fedoseevtsy non-priestless group, but relations developed peacefully and believers were not involved in proselytism;

– the communities of the Herrnhuter brothers among the Estonians remained in a strong position, the Evangelical society pursued the goals of Germanization.

Thus, the tasks of Orthodox education in the Riga Diocese remained relevant and were under the close attention of the ruling Bishops. After the December Diocesan Congress of the Clergy in 1908, an article was published that examined the most important steps to strengthen parishioners in the faith through church singing. The Congress decided to petition the Diocesan leadership with a proposal to take a more serious approach to the problem of church singing, including the Diocesan Religious School of Illukst, where teachers were trained for parish and auxiliary schools (Meri 1908, 847).

### **The educational process, teachers, students and way of life of the Religious School**

At that time, the Illukst Religious School was an educational institution with an established order. The Religious School was headed by Abbess Eugeniya. The chairman of the council was the Archpriest of the Riga Cathedral of the Nativity of Christ, Vladimir Pliss. The Priest had an academic theological education and performed his obedience at the Religious School free of charge. He only charged for travel expenses from Riga to Illukst (Otchet 1904, 380). The Priest Vasily Markov (1877–1966) served as inspector; he also had a theological education (he completed a course at the St. Petersburg Theological Academy). The teaching corporation included both priests and teachers. Riga City dean Archpriest Nikolai Tikhomirov (1863–1932) became a member of the council from the clergy. There were ten teachers at the Religious School, the team was headed by the Senior teacher – A. V. Mirolyubova. The staff also included two teachers: M. P. Sponarovskaya and M. I. Leman. The entire economic part was led by the housekeeper – the treasurer of the monastery of Illukst, Nun Olympiada, who performed her duties free of charge since 1903. Medical assistance was provided by Doctor, State Councilor A. V. Jonas, he had been in office since the end of the 19th century with an annual salary of 100 rubles, and he was helped by the infirmary matron, sister of mercy O. A. Pavlovskaya (Adres 1913, 116). In addition to the above-mentioned persons, 15 nuns of the monastery of Illukst served for hire, with an annual salary of 80 rubles, they worked as employees at the hospital, in the bedrooms, in the dining room, with the teachers, in the kitchen, in the classrooms, in the laundry and so on, some of them were also in charge of linen and clothing (Otchet 1904, 387).

The Religious School program was standard. The pupils studied arithmetic, general civil history, ancient history, geography, theory of literature, history of Russian literature, pedagogy. The languages studied were Russian, German, French, and Church Slavonic. At this time, a missionary priest, Archpriest Georgy Zalazinsky (1875–1930), served as rector of the monastery. He was appointed inspector of classes at the Religious School with the right to teach the Law of God, and later Russian literature and didactics (LNA LVVA, 4754. f., 2. apr., 219. l., 12.-13. lp.). Lessons on the Law of God were mandatory, and much attention was paid to handicrafts – three hours daily. The girls received a good education and after graduation had the right to



work as home teachers, and could also work in the teaching field in schools. In 1909, under Abbess Eugenia, the school was transformed from a 6-grade school into a 7-grade school with all the rights of a gymnasium, and graduates received pedagogical education (Saharov 1939, 54).

From statistical data for 1913 it is known that at the Diocesan Women's Religious School there were 163 students and 149 boarders (on a boarding basis), 500 lunches were prepared for them. The children's hospital had 14 beds (LNA LVVA, 4754. f., 2., apr., 230. l., 173. lp). The monastery expanded, and a year later, according to a special project, a two-story building and a house church in honor of Protection of the Holy Mother of God were built. But it was not possible to consecrate the temple, since the First World War began.

The life of the students of the Religious School was so rich in the educational process that at the end of the school year, Abbess Eugenia organized an incentive for the students – pilgrimages to shrines. It is known that before the First World War there was a big trip to Mitava (modern Jelgava), from where the students went in procession to the Transfiguration Hermitage (Palomnichestvo 1914, 365-366).

### **Conclusions**

Summarizing all of the above, it should be stated that by 1914 the Missionary Council was actively working in the Riga Diocese, as well as one of its branches in the Selburg deanery. A large role in it was given to the Monastery of Illukst and the Diocesan Women's Religious School, which had been an educational center for more than a quarter of a century in the former "Uniate side." The abbesses – Abbess Agnia (Shtal) and Abbess Eugenia (Postovskaya) were educated nuns of their time. The abbesses-educators cared not only about the improvement of the entrusted monastery, but also about its spiritual growth. The life of the clergy in the province was not rich and did not differ much from that of the peasants. Along with the villagers, they tilled the land and harvested crops. Therefore, the Religious School of Illukst provided an opportunity to receive education for orphans and girls from the Orthodox clergy, as well as those from other classes and denominations (Old Believers or Lutherans). From 1899 to 1915, 16 annual enrollments of students were carried out; during this period, more than 560 students completed the full course. Many of them began teaching at the Religious School of Illukst, as well as in the parish Orthodox Religious Schools of the Riga Diocese. It is impossible to talk about the complete openness and universality of the educational institution, since the Religious School remained semi-closed. The missionary and educational project, in which the Illukst Monastery and the Diocesan Religious School participated, contributed to the education of a new generation of Orthodox women who were supposed to ennoble provincial society. Graduates of the Illukst Religious School not only weakened "prejudices and vices" with their education, but also became active assistants to the church clergy of the Riga Diocese.

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