

Recent Events in the Lithuanian Catholic Church

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The greatest concentration of Roman Catholics in the USSR is found in the small Baltic republic of Lithuania. Recent events in Lithuania have drawn the attention of the world to this corner of the Soviet Union. Rioting in the streets and the self-immolation of three young men are the surface evidence for a deeper unrest in Lithuania. As 1972 saw the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the USSR,¹ it may be assumed that the central authorities were disturbed at these signs of discontent at present conditions in Soviet Lithuania. Not only that, but the troubles had a strong religious content which could scarcely have gone unnoticed.

Beneath these popular demonstrations there is a deep ferment in the Lithuanian Catholic Church. Over the last few years there has been much more information from different Christian groups about the problems they face in Soviet society. More recently a new trickle of documents began to appear from Lithuania, calling attention to very similar problems experienced by Roman Catholic believers in that area. There have been protests about restrictions on theological education, about the difficulty of preparing children for confirmation and general discrimination against believers. Believers have made transcripts of the trials of Catholic priests and somehow sent them out of the country. The first name to emerge clearly was that of Fr. Antanas Seskevicius, sentenced in September 1970 to one year's imprisonment for teaching religion to children.

Now there has been a new development in this *samizdat* activity of the Lithuanian Catholic Church. The trickle of documents is becoming a stream and now a journal has made its appearance, called the *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church*. The first two issues, both dated 1972, have so far reached the West and have been translated into English.

For those familiar with the wider Soviet human rights movement, the title of the new journal will inevitably recall that of the well-established *Chronicle of Current Events*. Indeed, there is evidence that Lithuanian Catholics are very much aware of events in Moscow and elsewhere. When Fr. Seskevicius was released and was unable to find a parish, he appealed to Academician Sakharov's Human Rights Committee for help.

The first number of the new Lithuanian *Chronicle* concentrates on the trials of Fr. Juozas Zdebskis and Fr. Prosperas Bubnys, sentenced in Octo-

¹ In 1922 the USSR was officially founded as a federal state.

ber 1971, like Fr. Seskevicius, to one year's imprisonment for catechizing children. Issue No.2. begins with a detailed account of the "Memorandum of Lithuanian Catholics". Both numbers also contain a considerable amount of additional information about various repressions of Catholic priests and lay people.

Let us look at the sequence of events as presented in the *Chronicles*. Fr. Zdebskis was arrested in August 1971, charged with gathering children for religious instruction (illegal by Soviet law). His trial was prepared in secret, but on 11 October the news leaked out that it was to be held the next day in Kaunas. Thousands came to the courtroom, but were forcibly prevented from entering.

Fr. Zdebskis admitted that children came to him for catechismal examination. He was asked if they came in groups of up to a hundred; and he answered "joyfully" that this was so. Some children were brought in as witnesses; as each child entered the witness box Fr. Zdebskis stood up and the judge had to order him to sit down again. They all testified to the high moral quality of his teaching.

In his final statement, Fr. Zdebskis declared: "I am being tried for fulfilling my rightful duties . . . If the courts do not judge us priests now, then our nation will judge us! And finally will come the hour for the true judgment by the Supreme Being. May God help us priests to fear this more than your judgment."

Fr. Bubnys at his trial (held on the same day in Raseiniai) made a no less spirited defence. He ended with the words: "If today I must publicly state whether I taught religion or not, then I cannot defend myself or repent of it, since this would signify going against my conscience . . . At this solemn hour allotted to me, dust of the earth, I cannot renounce our beloved Jesus who urged that little children should not be stopped from coming to Him. I want to say: 'Praise be to Jesus Christ!'"

With the memory of these trials fresh in their mind, a group of Lithuanians set about organizing the "Memorandum of Lithuanian Catholics" dated December 1971. It was addressed to Mr. Brezhnev and appealed again for religious liberty in Lithuania. Signatures were canvassed throughout the republic. Only a few were afraid to sign, the *Chronicle* tells us; most added their names willingly. The final total was over 17,000—there would have been many more but for KGB (security police) interference, says an addendum to the Memorandum.

Its organizers had learned from experience that petitions to the Kremlin never reached their destination, but ended only on the desk of J. Rugienis, the Lithuanian representative of the government Council for Religious Affairs. So they added a covering letter dated February 1972 and sent it

to Dr. Kurt Waldheim, General Secretary of the United Nations, requesting him to bring it to the attention of the Soviet Government.

As the Memorandum began to attract publicity in the West, the Soviet authorities reacted by trying to hunt down those responsible. They also exerted pressure in a different direction. On 11 April the same Rugienis summoned the bishops and administrators of the Lithuanian Church to a meeting in the Kaunas Archdiocesan Curia. Here they were presented with a "Pastoral Letter" for signature. It was addressed to all Lithuanian Catholics and appealed for unity within the Church. In only slightly veiled terms it condemned the organized circulation of "irresponsible documents".

This "Pastoral Letter" was then circulated to all priests with instructions that it be read on 30 April in place of the normal Sunday sermon. Very little notice was given so that priests might not have an opportunity to discuss it. On 30 April two state officials were present in each church to observe what happened. Some priests read the whole text as directed. A great many others did not; some read an abbreviated version. The officials accordingly made their reports.

Outraged at this manoeuvre, a number of priests combined to write a reply to this "Pastoral Letter" dated May 1972. They condemned the hierarchy for allowing this state of affairs to prevail. They refuted the accusations contained in the bishops' letter and declared: "We have had enough of these Monsignors who spread the 'truth' about the Lithuanian Catholic Church by means of the atheist radio and press. We have also had enough of the kind of bishops who publish such 'pastoral' letters . . . Help us with your prayers and tell the world that we want at the present time only as much freedom of conscience as is permitted by the Constitution of the Soviet Union. We are full of determination, for God is with us."

These are perhaps the strongest words yet to have reached us from the Lithuanian Catholics. But they have a familiar ring. The voice is strangely like that of some Soviet Baptists and Orthodox Christians. Denominational differences play a small part in the Christian reaction to a militantly atheist environment. We now know more than ever before about the situation of the Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania which, although serious, is perhaps not, at the moment, as acute as that of some other Christian groups in the USSR. It remains to be seen whether the situation will deteriorate as a result of these new initiatives, or whether the Lithuanian Catholics may somehow gain their request for "only as much religious liberty as is reported in the state newspapers or is exported abroad".