

# Moldavian Roman Catholics

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German and Polish Roman Catholics in the Moldavian republic of the USSR are being severely harassed by the authorities. Information on the situation of these Catholics is given in recent Soviet *samizdat* sources. Their situation has not changed for the better since they appealed to Pope Paul VI in 1977 (see *RCL* Vol. 6, No. 2, 1978, pp. 115-17). The 15,000 Catholics in Moldavia still have only one legally registered church – a cemetery chapel in Kishinev – and one officially recognized priest, Vladislav Zavalnyuk.

This priest, a young man in his late 20s, who graduated from the Riga Theological Seminary in 1974, is permanently in conflict with the Soviet authorities as a result of his zeal in carrying out his duties. In response to appeals from Catholics all over Moldavia, he travelled round the towns and villages where there were Catholic groups, holding services and hearing confessions. The authorities reacted by confiscating his car and driving licence. In 1975, there was an attempt to conscript him into the army; he had earlier been exempted because of his poor health. He suffered from meningitis as a student and still gets severe headaches. However, the medical section of the Kishinev Military Commissariat now decided that Fr Zavalnyuk was healthy enough for a labour battalion. He was ordered to present himself at the military assembly point, "with a kit-bag of essentials", on 15 May. The *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church*, in a report on Moldavian Catholics published in the last issue (No. 32), describes what happened :

On 15 May, a farewell service was held. The whole parish, about a thousand people, escorted their only priest as he left for the army, with tears in their eyes. The priest joined the ranks dressed in his cassock, while the believers prayed on the other side of the fence. One woman approached the major in charge, appealing to him, "I have two sons. Take them, but leave us our priest."

Everybody's attention was attracted to the young priest in his cassock. The army officers became embarrassed. A major went up to the priest's

mother and said, "Tell your son to take off his cassock, so that people will stop staring at him." "But he's a priest," the mother replied. "You're only taking him because he's a priest, so he's come to you dressed as a priest. I would not allow him to take off his cassock."

After long deliberation, the priest was released, to the great joy of his parishioners. He was almost carried to the church by the believers. The Catholics had their shepherd restored to them, but persecution did not cease.

The authorities then began a campaign to make the priest's working life impossible by requiring five permits from different officials before he could give the Last Rites to sick and dying Catholics. While the priest was trying to collect the permits, being sent from one official to the other, the person needing his ministrations would often die without confession. As some of these permits had to be obtained from local authorities on the way to the sick person, the priest was strictly speaking committing a sin by conversing on secular matters with officials because he was carrying the Sacrament and should be engaged wholly in prayer and meditation. The Council for Religious Affairs (CRA) also forbade Fr Zavalnyuk to give Communion to anyone but the dying person, in cases where permits were given.

However, when people began to write complaints to the CRA in Moscow, the Moldavian authorities accused Fr Zavalnyuk of inventing the whole story about the permits, so that he would not have to visit his parishioners so much. The priest was even threatened with prosecution for slander. Such permits to visit the sick and dying are in fact illegal, as one of the officials of the Kishinev CRA made clear to Olga Frank, a Catholic from Krikov who had gone there to complain about them. He read her a document "which is not shown to believers", stating that a sick person has a right to be visited at any time by a priest. No "permits" to do so are required in law.

In February 1978, according to the *Chronicle of Current Events*, No. 48, the Kishinev church committee were summoned by Vikonsky, the Moldavian representative of the CRA, who demanded that they write to the Catholic bishop in Riga, asking him to remove Fr Zavalnyuk from the parish. When they refused, he again threatened to make a criminal case against the priest.

The attempts of Roman Catholics throughout the Moldavian SSR to hold regular religious services have been consistently obstructed by the authorities. After the destruction of a church constructed by the believers in Rashkovo in November 1977 (see *RCL* Vol. 6, No. 2, 1978, p. 116), the authorities warned Catholics not to celebrate Christmas together. However, this warning was disregarded by the believers who put up a Christmas tree on the former site of their church and celebrated Christmas in

the normal way. The next day, the tree was thrown down and the ornaments smashed. The authorities now refuse to register the prayer meetings which take place in the house of Valentina Oleinik, a resident of Rashkovo, and are threatening to put her in a mental home. When believers from Rashkovo travelled to Moscow in January 1978, to complain to the CRA, they were finally seen by Mr Kuroedov, head of the CRA, only to be called "hooligans" and threatened with fines if they continued to hold services on the site of their destroyed church. The church committee members then tried to present a complaint to the Central Committee of the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union) but were sent back to Kuroedov. Roman Catholic families in Rashkovo have now been threatened with exile from Moldavia.

In the town of Beltsy, where Catholics have repeatedly applied to have their "house-church" registered, the authorities have so far refused to grant them registration. However, they demanded that the church committee supply a list of all would-be members of the Catholic church (there are about 1,500 Catholics in Beltsy). The church committee refused.

There are many German Catholics living in the village of Novo-Andryashevka, Sloboda district: they have no church and it is 120 kilometres to the registered church in Kishinev. The sick find it impossible to travel such a distance and people often die without the Last Rites. The believers here have often asked that the priest be allowed to visit them. At first, Vikonsky allowed the priest to visit the village once a month, but then withdrew permission on the grounds that there was no suitable accommodation available for religious services. The Catholics tried to make an agreement with the local Orthodox church, but the Metropolitan of Odessa would not allow the Orthodox church to be used by Catholics, even for one service every month.

When Fr Zavalnyuk is able to visit outlying towns and villages, the local Catholics are often subjected to petty harassment by the police. For example, in the village of Ivanovka, where many Polish Catholics live, the priest was hearing confessions when the police arrived, dispersed those who were waiting their turn to confess and forbade Fr Zavalnyuk to enter the district again. Taxi drivers have often been deprived of their licences for driving the priest around.

It is ironic that one of the measures taken by the Soviet authorities to make religious life more difficult for Catholics in Moldavia is a ban on the use of Russian in services. This means that united services of Polish and German Catholics are banned: the priest must conduct one service in Polish for Polish Catholics and another in German for the Germans. In every other field, the Russian language is said to unite the different nationalities of the USSR, but in the religious sphere, the Soviet authorities hope to divide the two national communities of Catholics and prevent a united stand by them.