

Editorial

Roman Catholics in Lithuania have criticized the Constitution of the USSR because it discriminates against religious believers. Last year *RCL* (Vol. 6, No. 1) published two documents which revealed how Orthodox believers and Baptists felt about the draft of the new USSR Constitution. Now we have some documents from the Roman Catholic Church in the Soviet Union (see pp. 89–96) which show that Catholics, too, do not consider the Constitution (both the USSR and LSSR versions) to be acceptable to religious believers. (The historical background and present position of the Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania are discussed by Marite Sapiets in her article, “Religion and Nationalism in Lithuania”, pp. 76–85.)

These documents appeared in the *samizdat* journal, the *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church* (No. 33, 31 May 1978). One of the documents is signed by the officially-approved leaders of the Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania, (it is the first time they have expressed their views in this *samizdat* journal) and demands that Arts. 36, 50 and 52 of the USSR Constitution be changed. Art. 36 does not protect believers against discrimination on religious grounds. Art. 52 gives atheists the right to spread their convictions but does not allow religious believers to teach and be taught religion: “Every conscious member of a religious community, who practises his religion, is at the same time interested in religious learning, in other words, in obtaining at least elementary religious knowledge. But where will he obtain that knowledge if none of the citizens is allowed to give out religious information or to teach religion?” (p. 90). The authors of this document also object to Art. 50 which guarantees Soviet citizens freedom of speech, press and assembly. In their revised version of this article they omit the opening phrase, “In conformity with the interests of the workers”, for this phrase limits the exercise of these freedoms, since the Communist Party, as the “vanguard of the people”, decides what conforms to the workers’ interests and, being committed to atheism, does not consider that religious belief is desirable.

Seventy-six Roman Catholic priests (see p. 91) in April 1978 wrote to the Presidium of the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet in an attempt to

change some sections of the draft Lithuanian SSR Constitution. They claim that religious believers have not had the same rights in the past as other Soviet citizens and have been treated as second class citizens. They have been banned from leading positions in state and educational institutions; they have been vilified in the press; and have not had the same opportunities "in the spheres of culture and art" as other citizens. Therefore they ask that believers be equal before the law "irrespective of religious and philosophical differences". Art. 50 in the Lithuanian SSR Constitution (corresponding to Art. 52 in the USSR Constitution) guarantees believers "freedom of conscience", but a similar article in the previous Constitution did not prevent religious discrimination taking place in practice, the priests claim. Lithuanian Catholics have not been allowed any religious literature apart from a few small editions of prayer-books: "We do not have one single Catholic newspaper, journal, almanac or religious book . . . On the other hand the atheists publish literature in tens of thousands of copies, and have radio and television programmes provided at government expense . . ." They claim that many churches have been closed, that the only Roman Catholic seminary in Lithuania, at Kaunas, (the others were closed in 1946) is restricted, that the number of those allowed to train for the priesthood is limited and controlled by the secular authorities rather than by the bishops. As a result the number of priests has decreased. Catholics in Lithuania feel isolated: they have no contact with the Roman Catholic Church in other countries and cannot "exchange religious information and spiritual values".

The demand for changes in the Constitution and for greater religious freedom comes not only from church leaders and parish priests in Lithuania but also from many hundreds of ordinary believers. We publish two documents from the laity, one signed by 780 parishioners in the Telšiai Diocese and the other signed by 975 people from the Kybartai parish (see p. 95).

Since November 1978 Roman Catholics in the USSR have had a small organization which is committed to obtaining equal rights for believers. The Catholic Committee for the Defence of Believers' Rights has been founded by five Lithuanian Catholic priests who in a letter to Pope John Paul II (see p. 88) write, "realizing our responsibility before God and the Church . . . we priests of Lithuania have decided to speak up and to defend the sacred rights of the Church and the believers." All those who take such a stand are people of exceptional courage, but it remains to be seen whether this Committee will achieve its aims. Despite the criticisms of Soviet Christians the Constitution was not revised to meet their demands.