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BELARUS: Parish to "lose nothing" when veteran priest expelled?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

A religious affairs official in the south-eastern region of Gomel is dismissive of the rights of the parishioners of Holy Trinity Catholic Church in the town of Rechytsa. He claimed to Forum 18 News Service that they will "lose nothing" when their veteran parish priest, Polish citizen Fr Grzegorz Chudek, is forced to leave Belarus. The priest was ordered to leave by 1 December, but his visa has now been extended by two months. During this period he is "of course" not permitted to work in his parish, the official said. He repeatedly refused to tell Forum 18 how Fr Chudek had broken the law. "No one has told me if or when he might have to leave, let alone why," Cardinal Kazimierz Swiatek told Forum 18. But Fr Chudek appears not to have had his annual visa renewed due to his description of social malaise in Belarus given to a Polish newspaper earlier in 2007. More than 700 local Catholics have appealed to President Aleksandr Lukashenko for the decision to be withdrawn. Foreign religious workers invited by local religious communities are under tight state control and need permission specifying where they will work. An increasing number of Catholic and Protestant religious workers have been barred from Belarus.

A religious affairs official in the south-eastern region of Gomel [Homyel'] has repeatedly refused to tell Forum 18 News Service how a Polish priest soon to be forced out of Belarus after serving in a local parish for the past decade has broken the law. "Better to ask him or Cardinal Swiatek," the regional official, who declined to be named, retorted on 6 December. The Catholic priest, Fr Grzegorz Chudek, appears not to have had his annual visa renewed due to his description of social malaise in Belarus given to a Polish newspaper earlier in 2007.

The religious affairs official told Forum 18 that Fr Chudek originally had to leave Belarus by 1 December, but his visa has now been extended by two months. During this period the Polish priest is "of course" not permitted to work in his parish, he said. He was dismissive of the rights of the parishioners of Holy Trinity Catholic Church in the town of Rechytsa, claiming that they will "lose nothing" when Fr Chudek does leave. "All their religious needs will be met, including over Christmas. The cardinal will send a priest."

"No one has told me if or when he might have to leave, let alone why," Cardinal Kazimierz Swiatek told Forum 18 on 6 December. Only the state authorities can decide whether or not Fr Chudek must return to Poland, the 93-year-old apostolic administrator of Pinsk diocese added. As far as Cardinal Swiatek was aware, Fr Chudek is still in Rechytsa. He did not know whether the Polish priest still has the right to serve at his parish of the Holy Trinity, however.

The telephone of Holy Trinity Church in Rechytsa went unanswered when Forum 18 rang on 6 December.

"Everyone must abide by the law," the anonymous Gomel regional religious affairs official insisted, urging Forum 18 to read the 2002 Religion Law. On learning that Forum 18 was already familiar with the 2002 Religion Law, the official went on to mention the law on foreign citizens, but would not specify which part of either of these laws Fr Chudek had violated.

The official also told Forum 18 that, in addition to situations where there has been a violation of the law, the state intervenes "when foreign citizens say bad things about us abroad". He refused to repeat or clarify this, however. Nor would he say who had taken the decision not to renew Fr Chudek's visa, other than that his department was not responsible. No other Catholic priests in Belarus – of which many are Polish - have similar problems, the official insisted to Forum 18.

"Unlike other priests, Fr Grzegorz Chudek was not in dialogue with the local authorities," independent Belarusian news agency Belapan reported Gomel Region's leading religious affairs official as saying on 20 November. "Moreover, he voiced a very harsh opinion about Rechytsa – the town where he has lived and served for ten years - in the Polish press."

Away when Forum 18 rang on 6 December, Mikhail Zhukevich also claimed that Fr Chudek had given an unobjective picture of Rechytsa to a Polish newspaper by pointing out negative phenomena "unfortunately present in our society". While it would have been acceptable to make such comments to Belarusian journalists, the religious affairs official continued, "they create a negative image of our country abroad. And a priest should work for the spiritual regeneration of the people – that is his main function."

According to a 28 November report in Polish newspaper Gazeta Wyborcza, Fr Chudek made the comments in question to another

Polish newspaper, Dziennik Wschodni, in May 2007. "When I arrived in Belarus for the first time, I saw a desert in the moral and religious sense. It wasn't even the impression of a pagan life, but a completely anti-Christian one," the Polish parish priest is reported to have said. "Sadness, greyness, hopelessness (..) sin, which destroys a person here to the extent that he's not in a state either to work or to live. Escapism via alcohol and sex is very often the accepted social norm here. Men over forty often take teenage female lovers and no one is surprised at this. Drugs, abortions, Aids - this is the general picture of everyday life."

On 16 November Cardinal Swiatek asked Aleksandr Baranov, the chairman of Rechytsa District Executive Council, to appeal to the corresponding authorities to cancel the decision not to extend Fr Chudek's registration, Belapan reported on 18 November. In his written appeal, the cardinal thanked Baranov for restoring Orthodox and Catholic churches in Rechytsa. "Fr Grzegorz Chudek has also made great efforts to restore the Catholic church. He has been sincerely serving the cause of the spiritual regeneration of Belarus for 14 years, for ten years in Rechytsa (..) And just one, ill-judged conversation with Polish journalists has become the reason for his loss of registration. This was his only wrong step during his period of model service."

According to Gazeta Wyborcza, 700 Catholics in Gomel Region have so far signed an appeal to Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko in support of the Rechytsa Catholic parish priest. "We appeal to your good judgment and hope that you will show a kind heart," the letter states. "We are expecting that the decision in the case of Fr Chudek will be withdrawn."

A Council of Ministers decree, dated 23 February 1999, controls the activity of foreign religious workers in Belarus. Should the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs grant a religious community permission to invite a foreign religious worker for up to one year, the decree states, he or she may conduct religious activity only within houses of worship belonging to or premises continuously rented by that community. The transfer of a foreign religious worker from one religious organisation to another - such as between parishes - requires permission from the relevant state official dealing with religious affairs, even for a single service.

Two Polish Catholic priests were forced out of Belarus at the end of 2005. A year later, seven Polish Catholic priests and five nuns were forced out of Belarus at the end of 2006 (see F18News 12 January 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=899). On 19 September 2007 Belarusian Vice-premier Aleksandr Kosinets told a 19 September round table of Belarus' religious leaders that the Catholic Church should end the use of foreign clergy over the next few years (see F18News 1 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1027).

According to the latest official figures, 192 out of 381 Catholic priests in Belarus are foreigners, with a further 105 nuns. Most of these foreign priests and nuns are Polish.

Foreign religious workers invited by local religious communities of various confessions are increasingly being barred from Belarus. Several foreign Protestants have been expelled this year for "harming national security". The most recent case was of Polish citizen Jaroslaw Lukasik, who was forced to leave in early June to punish him for his work with a Pentecostal congregation (see F18News 5 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=969). (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=888.

Full reports of the religious freedom situation in Belarus can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=16>.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806.

A printer-friendly map of Belarus is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=belaru>

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