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RUSSIA: Orthodox can get Catholic and Lutheran churches – but Catholics and Lutherans can't

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Seeking the return of the century-old Holy Family Catholic Church in Russia's Baltic exclave of Kaliningrad in vain over nearly two decades has been the local parish of the same name, which still worships in a temporary structure. However, the church – as well as former Lutheran churches and several castles – was suddenly handed to the Russian Orthodox, who have never owned them, under two local Laws. Catholic parish priest Fr Aleksandr Krevsky told Forum 18 News Service "there were hopes" earlier for the church's return, but now: "All lies in the hands of the Lord." Handing such property to the Orthodox is "fully justified", Inna Moreva of the Kaliningrad Government insisted to Forum 18. Asked why it was right that property confiscated during the Soviet period from Catholic and Lutherans was handed to another religious community, she responded: "You're not Russian, you won't understand." One Kaliningrad official told Forum 18 anonymously that the decision was unfair. "It was a surprise for us officials as well."

A Catholic church in Kaliningrad, the capital of Russia's Baltic exclave of Kaliningrad, which the local parish has been trying to get back in vain since the early 1990s, was among a number of religious properties suddenly handed to the Russian Orthodox Church in October. Other properties handed over, which likewise never belonged to the Orthodox, include former Lutheran churches and castles originally built by the Teutonic knights. Handing such property to the Orthodox is "fully justified", Inna Moreva, spokesperson for the Kaliningrad Government told Forum 18 News Service on 14 December.

Asked why it was right that property confiscated during the Soviet period from Catholic and Lutherans was handed to another religious community, she responded: "You're not Russian, you won't understand."

Similarly defending the transfers is Tatyana Sharova, deputy head of the Kaliningrad Government's Property Agency. "This property belonged to Kaliningrad Government. The transfer was decided by Kaliningrad Duma (parliament). All was done in accordance with the law," she insisted to Forum 18 on 14 December.

Sharova denied that any of the property had been confiscated by the Soviet authorities from the Lutherans or Catholics, but refused to say how it had otherwise ended up in state hands.

She said her agency had never received any requests from the Lutheran or Catholic communities for the churches' return. Asked whether it had seen a 19 May 2010 letter from Catholic Archbishop Paolo Pezzi to then Kaliningrad Governor Georgy Boos requesting the return of the Holy Family Catholic Church, she responded: "The letter didn't reach our agency."

Roman Lunkin, head of the Moscow-based Institute of Religion and Law, which is affiliated with the Slavic Centre for Law and Justice, believes the decision was wrong. "It is a legal act – the authorities had the power to do this," he told Forum 18 on 14 December. "But from the point of view of the rights of believers and the equality of religious communities before the law, this is a violation."

Lunkin specifically points to Article 28 of Russia's 1993 Constitution, which guarantees freedom of religion, and Article 14, which affirms that Russia is a secular state and that "Religious associations are separate from the state and equal before the law".

The Kaliningrad Region makes up much of what was Germany's East Prussia until the region was captured by the Soviet Union during the Second World War and annexed. Almost the entire ethnic German population was driven out and the area was resettled with people who moved from other parts of the Soviet Union.

The Russian Orthodox Church argues that any transfers of confiscated religious property should be on the basis not of who built the places of worship, but the composition of the population today.

Controversial laws

The controversial decision came in two Laws, adopted by the Kaliningrad Duma on 28 October. One Law handed the former

Lutheran church in Arnau (Rodniki) to the Kaliningrad Orthodox Diocese, and the other Law handed over 14 further properties, including Kaliningrad's Holy Family Catholic Church and the former parish house next door, Queen Luise Memorial Church and a Lutheran chapel in Kaliningrad, as well as various castles. The Laws were signed by Kaliningrad's governor, Nikolai Tsukanov.

On 23 November, the acting head of the State Property Agency Irina Sidorenkova and Orthodox Bishop Serafim (Melkonyan) of Baltiisk signed the transfer documents at the regional Duma. The Russian Orthodox then signed agreements with the institutions now housed in each of them that they could continue to use these now Orthodox-owned properties. Holy Family Church currently houses the regional orchestra, while Queen Luise Memorial Church the puppet theatre.

The properties given to the Orthodox diocese on 28 October were the fifth batch of such properties in Kaliningrad given to it by various Kaliningrad and Federal government agencies in 2010, the website Kaliningrad-kultura.net notes. The website opposes these transfers, which include not only former Lutheran and Catholic property, but Reformed churches also.

Forum 18 was unable to reach Governor Tsukanov and Sidorenkova of the State Property Agency on 14 December. An assistant to Tatyana Kuzaeva, the Kaliningrad Government representative to the Duma, told Forum 18 her boss could not speak without the authorisation of Governor Tsukanov.

The decision on the Catholic and Lutheran property proved controversial. One aide to a senior Kaliningrad Government official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told Forum 18 on 14 December that they considered the decision unfair. "It was a surprise for us officials as well."

As well as unhappiness among Lutherans and Catholics, these decisions also aroused protests from local secularists, who argued that the Russian Orthodox had no right to these properties and that they should remain in state hands for continuing use by the cultural organisations they house. They complained that the Laws had been drawn up in secret without consulting those involved and society more widely. Several demonstrations against the decision have been held in Kaliningrad.

Years of rejected demands

Condemning the new Law handing the Holy Family Church to the Orthodox was Archbishop Pezzi. In a 4 November statement, posted on the diocesan website, he complained of the secrecy surrounding the Law's adoption and the "irresponsibility" of the "mistaken decision" that "can only lead to regret". He said the decision not to return the church to the Catholic parish "causes me to raise my voice in defence of the legal interests and dignity of my Kaliningrad flock".

The Catholic Holy Family parish has been asking for the church's return ever since the early 1990s, parish priest and dean of Kaliningrad Fr Aleksandr Krevsky told Forum 18 on 14 December. He said the parish has occasionally been able to use the church in the past two decades, pointing particularly to a special Mass in the Jubilee Year of 2000. "The church was more than full," he recalled.

Asked why the church's return is important, Fr Krevsky noted that "we consider the Holy Family Church as a historic church, built by Catholics a century ago". He said the parish meets in a temporary chapel which is not suitable for long-term use.

Fr Krevsky said that earlier "there were hopes" for the church's return. However, he conceded that the October Law "wasn't a surprise for us". Asked whether any hopes now remain, he responded: "All lies in the hands of the Lord."

Archbishop Pezzi of Moscow, in whose diocese Kaliningrad falls, has written several times to the Kaliningrad authorities requesting the return of the Holy Family Church. In his May letter to Governor Boos, seen by Forum 18, the Archbishop described the return of the church as being of "special interest" as the parish of the same name is meeting only in a temporary chapel.

As with other Catholic requests, this one too was rejected, by Kaliningrad's Culture Minister.

Jochen Loeber, dean of the Lutheran Church in Kaliningrad, told Forum 18 on 14 December that his Church is preparing an open letter and will give its views on the Laws shortly.

Federal Law should help return confiscated property

Meanwhile, both houses of the Federal Parliament in Moscow approved a Federal Law on the return of confiscated religious property held by the state or local authorities in November. President Dmitry Medvedev signed the Law on 30 November, the presidential website noted.

Welcoming the Law is Lunkin of the Institute of Religion and Law. "This Law gives a more clear-cut procedure for regaining confiscated property," he told Forum 18. "It will be positive." He welcomed what he believes will be a far more open procedure. "All documents in each case must be published." He said this might prevent "secret transfers" of property to other religious communities, as has happened in Kaliningrad.

Lunkin noted a mixed picture over restitution since the early 1990s. He said the Russian Orthodox Church received the most property back, though by no means all, with other communities – like Baptists, Catholics, Lutherans and Jews – receiving lesser amounts. He also said the level of return varies greatly from region to region.

The issue of the return of historical property which began in the 1990s has been one of the most troublesome issues for religious communities (see F18News 2 March 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1263).

However, Lunkin warned that the new Law will not help in cases where property of one religious community has already been handed to another, such as the former Catholic church in Blagoveshchensk, which was given to the Orthodox Church.

Many religious communities also broadly welcomed the Law, though many are waiting to see how it will be enacted in practice. They hope it will allow long-stalled attempts to regain confiscated places of worship and other significant property.

In his May letter to Kaliningrad's Governor, Archbishop Pezzi noted that regaining churches the Catholics built and used in Russia before 1917 remains "highly complex". He said there are still over 100 church properties across Russia that have not been returned. (END)

For more background, see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1196.

Analysis of the background to Russian policy on "religious extremism" is available in two articles: - 'How the battle with "religious extremism" began' (F18News 27 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1287 - and - 'The battle with "religious extremism" - a return to past methods?' (F18News 28 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1288).

A personal commentary by Irina Budkina, Editor of the <http://www.samstar.ru> Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, is at F18News 26 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570.

A personal commentary by Alexander Verkhovsky, Director of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis <http://www.sova-center.ru>, about the systemic problems of Russian anti-extremism legislation, is at F18News 19 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1468.

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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

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