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BELARUS: State blocks parish priest nomination

By Olga Glace, Forum 18

Senior state religious affairs official Leonid Gulyako rejects Catholic Bishop's request for Russian priest Fr Klemens Werth to serve in Vitebsk parish, the latest foreign priest refused state permission. Bobruisk officials warn Baptists if further foreigners participate in worship their church will be liquidated.

The Belarusian government's senior religious affairs official has refused to allow Catholic priest Klemens Werth, a Russian citizen, to take up the ministry of parish priest in Vitebsk to which the Bishop had assigned him. Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Leonid Gulyako refused Bishop Oleg Butkevich's request for the compulsory state permission before any foreign citizen is allowed to exercise freedom of religion or belief publicly.

The Plenipotentiary has repeatedly denied Catholic applications for permission for foreign priests to serve in Belarus. In May a parish priest was forced to leave the country after 25 years' service. In July Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz of Minsk-Mogilev [Mahilyow] managed to overturn the Plenipotentiary's repeated refusal to extend state permission for three of his parish priests only after the Archbishop published a letter to be read in all parishes in his Archdiocese (see below).

And in Bobruisk in Mohilev Region, the Regional Executive Committee warned a Baptist pastor that if his church again hosts foreigners who do not have state permission to conduct public religious activity a suit will be sent to court to strip the community of the right to exist (see below).

The state retains tight controls over all exercise of the right to freedom of religion or belief. Meetings for religious purposes are allowed only if a community has managed to gain the compulsory state registration. Only registered religious communities are allowed to invite foreign citizens for any public religious activity. If the state grants such permission it is only valid for the one religious community which has obtained it (see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1997).

State decides if foreigners' religious work "necessary"

Under a January 2008 Council of Ministers Decree, amended in July 2010, stating the procedure for inviting foreigners for religious purposes, a religious organisation should send an application for such permission to the Plenipotentiary's Office a month in advance. The senior religious affairs official has sole discretion in deciding whether religious work by a foreign citizen is "necessary". He may refuse a foreign religious worker's permission for such work without giving any reason.

The Decree requires foreign citizens to obtain permission if the purpose of the visit is "performing priest's duties, teaching in religious institutions, establishing relations and contacts, participation in charity activities connected with religious needs, studying in religious institutions and providing other religious activities for the inviting religious organisation".

Human rights lawyer Dina Shavtsova warned that wording of the Decree "establishing relations and contacts" can relate to any activities. "A foreigner comes to the worship, prays with the others, talks to them and if in addition to that gives greetings from follow-believers abroad on stage – this is the element of a violation," she complained to Forum 18 on 24 November.

No permission to be parish priest

After Bishop Butkevich of Vitebsk invited Fr Werth to serve in his diocese in northern Belarus a year ago, the priest moved to Vitebsk. Fr Werth was born in Kazakhstan but is a Russian citizen. He was ordained priest in the Russian city of Novosibirsk in 2002 by his own brother, Bishop Iosif Werth. Both brothers are Jesuits.

Bishop Butkevich appointed Fr Werth to the recently-created parish of St Vladislav in one of the outer districts of the city, local Catholics told Forum 18 in early December. The parish has no church and currently holds services in rented premises while a church is being built.

Bishop Butkevich then sought the approval of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Gulyako for the appointment. However, Gulyako denied permission for Fr Werth to conduct public religious activities in a 23 November letter to Bishop Butkevich (of which Forum 18 has seen the text).

"The bishop wished to appoint Fr Werth as parish priest in this church," local Catholics told Forum 18. "But the Plenipotentiary didn't approve this appointment without explaining the reason."

Asked why the state did not allow Fr Werth to serve, the spokesperson for the Catholic Bishops' Conference, Fr Yuri Sanko, responded: "That's a question to the Plenipotentiary". He told Forum 18 on 6 December that he is not aware of any other visa or permission denials to Catholic clergy or sisters. He confirmed that in 2017 the Minsk-Mogilev Archdiocese is not planning to invite any new priests from abroad.

No explanation for permission denials

Asked by Forum 18 on 6 December why Bishop Butkevich's request for Fr Werth to be allowed to minister in Vitebsk had been rejected, the Head of the Religious Affairs Department of the Plenipotentiary's Office in Minsk, Andrei Aryayev, refused to give any explanation. He referred to the Decree, saying that the Plenipotentiary is not obliged to give reasons to refusals.

Aryayev claimed that the number of such rejections is not very high and mainly due to mistakes in applications. However, he then admitted that correctly filled applications are sometimes denied. He was unable to tell Forum 18 which religious communities get more refusals. "We don't have such statistics," he claimed.

Fr Werth will stay in Belarus and will continue working in the diocese administration, but without conducting religious ministry, Catholics told Forum 18. They added that they hope if the Diocese decides to make a renewed approach for permission to Plenipotentiary Gulyako it might be successful.

Warned after foreigners attend church

Elsewhere, in the town of Bobruisk in Mogilev Region south-east of Minsk, the Regional Executive Committee issued an official warning to the leader of the Baptist Church of God's Grace, Pastor Sergei Gormash, for having American fellow-believers during religious meetings on 9 and 10 September without permission from the authorities.

In the 21 October letter (seen by Forum 18), the Deputy Head of Mogilev Regional Executive Committee Valery Malashko insisted this was a violation of the procedure for inviting foreigners for religious purposes and Article 29 of the 2002 Religious Law. He threatened to initiate a liquidation suit and pass the case to court if the Church commits such "violations" again.

The letter does not reveal how the Regional Executive Committee's Ideology Department learnt of the foreigners' attendance at the Church.

The Chief Editor of the Baptist journal Krynitsa Zhitstsya, Vasily Trubchik, commented on his blog that "many people in the world don't understand such restrictions". He complains that religious visas are hard to obtain.

"Sometimes foreign guests can drop in unexpectedly, and if they find themselves at the worship in your church you can't give them the floor without permission from the authorities – this is the freedom of belief and rights," Trubchik declared on his blog.

Trubchik reflects that the laws are supposed to make life easier, while officially registered communities are denied the right to decide whom to invite. The officials have the last word in this case. "If a foreign pastor comes at a church's invitation and violates the law, there's no problem to order him out of the country," Trubchik complains. He hopes that the authorities would not go so far as to close the Church of God's Grace.

"We know perfectly well what they were doing"

The Deputy Head of the Ideology Department of Mogilev Regional Executive Committee, Yelena Bobrova, who drafted the letter on behalf of Malashko, insisted to Forum 18 on 7 December that the warning had been drawn up "in line with the law and normative documents". She refused to answer questions about where the Ideology Department had received information about the foreigners' presence at the Baptist Church from or who might have been harmed by their participation in the service.

Asked on 29 November why foreigners are not allowed to participate in religious meetings without permission from the authorities, the Head of the Regional Religious Affairs Department Sergei Savenko told Forum 18 that the law allows foreigners to attend religious meetings and to greet fellow believers, but preaching from the front is prohibited.

"We know perfectly well what they were doing there [at the Baptist Church]," Savenko told Forum 18. He maintained that getting permission for religious activities is not hard and there are more than enough applications. "For three years while I've held this office

there were practically no denials," he claimed. "It's just that everything should be done according to the law."

The law "doesn't allow" inviting missionaries

Andrei Kovalev, spokesperson for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (commonly known as the Mormons), which is known for its strong missionary movement, told Forum 18 on 25 November that their community does not have foreign missionaries and does not invite them "because the law doesn't allow it". He said that his Church has foreign volunteers working at some projects, but stressed that these projects are not related to religion.

A representative of Minsk Jewish community Beis Isroel, who did not give his name, told Forum 18 on 28 November that they used to invite foreigners for religious purposes but now it is not necessary. "We have no problems with the authorities," he assured Forum 18.

The Mufti of the Belarus Muslim Association Abu-Bekir Shabanovich acknowledged that obtaining the Plenipotentiary's permission to invite foreigners takes about twenty days. But he insisted to Forum 18 that his community had received no denials. "We carefully follow the law and have no difficulties with that," he maintained.

Long-running problem

The problem of foreigners carrying out religious activities is not new in Belarus. The Catholic Church lacks local priests and has to invite them from abroad, mostly from neighbouring Poland. According to statistics given by the Plenipotentiary's Office in 2015, foreign priests made up 113 out of 430 Catholic priests in the country.

The Catholic Church has to seek extensions of permission for foreign priests already working in Belarus from the Plenipotentiary once or twice a year.

On 13 July 2016, Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz issued a letter to be read at all churches of the Minsk-Mogilev Diocese the following Sunday announcing that Plenipotentiary Gulyako had refused his request to extend permission for three Polish priests to serve in his Diocese. The three were Fr Roman Schulz, who serves in Mogilev, Fr Lech Bochenek in Ivanets and Fr Jerzy Kotowski in Kolodishchi.

The state authorities have repeatedly refused to extend Fr Schulz's permission to conduct religious work, only to back down under pressure from local Catholics (see F18News 30 June 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2194).

Archbishop Kondrusiewicz noted that the three priests had "conducted a long-term and fruitful service to the faithful of Belarus – they built and restored Catholic churches, catechised, and were engaged in charity and the Christian upbringing of children and youth".

Archbishop Kondrusiewicz recounted that he had met Plenipotentiary Gulyako on 11 July and the Plenipotentiary had repeated his rejection of the application without giving any reason and refused to reconsider his refusal.

However, on 14 July, the day after Archbishop Kondrusiewicz issued his letter, he issued a further letter announcing that the Plenipotentiary had that day changed his mind and allowed the priests to continue serving for another year.

In December 2015, two Polish Catholic priests invited by the Church to work in Minsk-Mogilev Archdiocese were denied entry to Belarus. The spokesperson for the Catholic Bishops' Conference Fr Sanko admitted then: "It's becoming ever more difficult for priests from abroad to come to Belarus" (see F18News 14 March 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2157).

Polish priest Fr Andrzej Stopyra was not given permission to continue religious activities and was forced to leave Belarus in May 2016 after 25 years of serving. And Catholic priest Fr James Manjackal from India - invited to conduct spiritual exercises over several days in July - was denied state permission for his religious visit to the country (see F18News 30 June 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2194).

The leader of Minsk's Baptist seminary told Forum 18 in January 2015 that invitations for foreign lecturers to join the staff often fail. And a court officially warned two foreign Jehovah's Witnesses in August 2014 that they had no right to talk to people on the streets about their faith because they were not Belarusian citizens (see F18News 20 February 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2040). (END)

For a personal commentary by Antoni Bokun, Pastor of a Pentecostal Church in Minsk, on Belarusian citizens' struggle to reclaim their history as a land of religious freedom, see F18News 22 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1131.

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1997.

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Belarus can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=16>.

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 Belarus is available at <http://nationalgeographic.org/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Belarus>.

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