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BELARUS: Why were Catholic priests expelled?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Fr Robert Krzywicki, one of two Catholic priests expelled from Belarus at the end of 2005, has told Forum 18 News Service that he thinks his expulsion was decided by the central Religious Affairs Committee in the capital Minsk. When Forum 18 questioned Vladimir Lameko, vice-chairman of the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, he stated that he did not know of the expulsion. Fr Robert has not been given a reason for the decision. He was parish priest of the Descent of the Holy Spirit parish in Borisov. The local District Executive Committee referred Forum 18's enquiries to the Ideology Department of the town's Municipal Executive Committee, who were unavailable for comment. Asked by Forum 18 whether his expulsion was connected with political activity, Fr Robert said that he had criticised state ideology. "In my sermons I spoke about Christ and the authorities saw it as being political." Fr Jozef Petushko of Borisov's second Catholic parish told Forum 18 that Fr Robert "wasn't guilty of anything." The Catholic Church faces tight restrictions on foreign priests invited to work in Belarus.

The vice-chairman of the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs has told Forum 18 News Service that he is unaware of the recent expulsion of Polish Catholic priest Fr Robert Krzywicki (see F18News 22 December 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=710 and 6 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=713). Speaking from Belarus' capital Minsk on 12 January, Vladimir Lameko sounded surprised, asked for details and expressed doubt that the action could be politically motivated. He pointed out that since the Committee's new chairman, former Culture Minister Leonid Gulyako, was appointed only on 29 December 2005 and his own brief focuses upon nationalities issues, Forum 18 would do better turning to the Committee's legal expert, Aleksandr Kalinov.

Contacted the same day, however, Aleksandr Kalinov requested that any enquiry be sent by fax, which Forum 18 duly sent.

Prior to leaving Belarus on 27 December, Fr Robert Krzywicki told Forum 18 that, although he learnt of the decision to expel him from the deputy head of the Religious Affairs Committee for Minsk region, he believes it to have been taken by the central Religious Affairs Committee in the capital. There was no answer at the office of the Minsk regional Religious Affairs Committee when Forum 18 rang on 12 January 2006.

Until his departure, Fr Robert Krzywicki headed the Descent of the Holy Spirit Roman Catholic parish in Borisov [Barysaw], a small town approximately 60 km (37 miles) north-east of Minsk. Asked why Fr Robert had had to leave Borisov, Forum 18 was advised by a spokesman at Borisov District Executive Committee to contact the main specialist on religious organisations within the Ideology Department of Borisov Municipal Executive Committee, Aleksandr Myadeltsov, but he was unavailable for comment on 13 January.

Another Catholic priest was expelled along with Fr Robert, who Forum 18 has learnt also worked in the Minsk-Mogilev [Minsk-Mahilyow] Diocese, in a village parish near Minsk, and had served in Belarus for the past decade. Neither he nor the diocese is contesting the decision. The Minsk-Mogilev Diocese declined to comment to Forum 18 on 22 December 2005 about the expulsions, while the Apostolic Nunciature in Minsk said it had no information.

Speaking to Forum 18 on a poor line from Poland on 11 January 2006, Fr Robert Krzywicki said that he did not know if there had been any state reaction to the local petition for his return to Borisov and surmised that his parishioners were still collecting signatures. Asked whether his expulsion was connected with political activity, Fr Robert said that he had criticised state ideology. "In my sermons I spoke about Christ and the authorities saw it as being political." He also noted that there were political activists among his parishioners.

For 15 years the priest at the Church of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary, Borisov's second Catholic parish, Fr Jozef Petushko told Forum 18 on 11 January that Fr Robert "wasn't guilty of anything." Also a Polish citizen, Fr Jozef said that, as a guest in Belarus, he had not taken part in organising the petition in Fr Robert's defence, signed it or "ever said anything political." Nevertheless, he continued, local officials had since criticised him because his parishioners were among the signatories: "How could I allow it? As if I were responsible."

Fr Jozef also told Forum 18 that the replacement priest for Fr Robert, Fr Zbigniew Grygorcewicz, who is likewise from Poland,

arrived in Borisov on 28 December and is now operating "with full rights – except that he has no involvement in either politics or elections."

Of the 250 or so Catholic priests in Belarus, more than half are foreign citizens. The Catholic Church faces tight restrictions on priests it invites, being subject to an annual quota and unable to transfer priests from one parish to another without their religious visa being cancelled and reissued.

According to Fr Jozef Petushko, Fr Robert was assigned to a group of village parishes at the start of his five-year spell in Belarus and was transferred with great difficulty to Borisov, where the Descent of the Holy Spirit parish is currently building a new church. "We are still building everything up," he told Forum 18, "the only Catholic church in Borisov – the church where I now serve – was closed between 1935 and 1990." Suggesting that some progress is being made, however, Fr Jozef estimated that there are now over 100 Belarusian Catholic priests. According to the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, 428 Roman Catholic parishes have been re-registered under the 2002 religion law (see F18News 17 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=454).

In November 2002 a Catholic layman and opposition activist from Borisov, Igor Zakrevsky, was detained for picketing in Minsk against the adoption of the 2002 religion law, which breaks Belarus' international human rights commitments. Zakrevsky has since left the country. (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=478

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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