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RUSSIA: Religious work visa respite?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Catholics in southern Russia have told Forum 18 News Service it is getting easier for foreign Catholic priests to gain visas, citing the return to Russia of one of the eight Catholic clergy (including a bishop) barred since 1998. After being denied a visa in October 2004, Fr Janusz Blaut returned to his parish in Vladikavkaz last autumn, thanks to an invitation not from the parish but from the diocese in Saratov. Fr Dariusz Jagodzinski told Forum 18 in Sochi that Catholic priests in Krasnodar region – previously issued only three-month visas at a time – are now given one-year visas as elsewhere in southern Russia. Russia's Catholic Church, which was allowed no seminary in Soviet times, depends heavily on foreign clergy. Protestants, Muslims, Buddhists and a Jew are also among the 55 known religious workers barred since 1998, though a handful have been allowed to return. A Pentecostal pastor in Rostov-on-Don told Forum 18 that far fewer foreign Protestant missionaries are now working locally than in the 1990s and they have to keep a low profile.

An apparent improvement in the visa fortunes of foreign Catholic clergy has recently been confirmed to Forum 18 News Service by parish representatives in southern Russia. "We feel the situation is getting better," Fr Dariusz Jagodzinski of the local Catholic parish of SS Thaddeus and Simon told Forum 18 in the Black Sea coastal town of Sochi on 11 April. In particular, he cited the recent return of a priest previously barred from Russia. A Protestant pastor in the southern city of Rostov-on-Don, however, pointed out that there are now far fewer foreign missionaries working in the region than in the 1990s, and brought to light two previously unreported cases of visa denials.

If a reason is given by the authorities for barring a foreign religious worker, it is normally "in the interests of state security" under Article 27, Part 1 of the federal law on entry to and exit from Russia (see F18News 7 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=644).

Refused a visa in October 2004 after working in North Ossetia for ten years, Polish Catholic priest Fr Janusz Blaut managed to return to that north Caucasus republic's capital Vladikavkaz "quietly" in autumn 2005, Fr Dariusz told Forum 18. Crucial to Fr Janusz's return, he believes, was an official invitation from the Saratov-based southern Catholic diocese of St Clement rather than his parish of the Ascension, since this allowed him to deal with different state officials.

Fr Dariusz also told Forum 18 that, like Fr Janusz, he and other foreign Catholic clergy in Krasnodar region now hold one-year visas. While this has been the case for clergy elsewhere in southern Russia, those in Krasnodar region were issued only three-month visas from approximately mid-2002 to mid-2004, forcing them to make time-consuming and expensive visits to their home countries to renew their papers (see F18News 23 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=461).

Fr Janusz Blaut is the only one of eight foreign Catholic clergy (including a bishop) barred from Russia since 1998 who has managed to return. Five had their visas revoked or applications denied in high profile cases soon after the Catholic Church in Russia upgraded its apostolic administrations to dioceses - to the chagrin of the Russian Orthodox Church - in early 2002. One, Slovak citizen Fr Stanislav Krajnak, reportedly received a visa in 2004 but was summoned back to the Russian embassy within hours for it to be cancelled.

Foreign clergy are particularly important for the Catholic Church in Russia. There are only a relatively small number of ordained Russian nationals, primarily because only two Catholic parishes and no seminaries were allowed to function in Soviet times. The first local citizens to be trained as Catholic priests since the end of the Soviet regime graduated in 1999.

Another of the five priests denied entry to Russia in 2002, Polish citizen Fr Edward Mackiewicz essentially exchanged his Rostov-on-Don parish of the Last Supper with that of Latin-rite Fr Mikhail Nuckowski in western Ukraine, the latter told Forum 18 on 9 April. While it remains unclear why Fr Edward was expelled, Fr Mikhail pointed out that the multinational nature of Rostov-on-Don's 300-strong Catholic parish had ensured that the impact of his expulsion resonated in many countries. He also suggested to Forum 18 that the "quiet pressure" for Fr Janusz Blaut's return had proved effective: "You can either make a mountain out of a molehill or you can do things quietly, which achieves more than loudly claiming your rights." As a Ukrainian citizen, Fr Mikhail is able to remain in Russia without a visa for up to three months.

Until recently, Forum 18 knew of 53 foreign religious workers - including Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Buddhists and a Jew - barred from Russia since 1998 (see F18News 7 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=644). With few exceptions, only some of the most recent cases have managed to return. Thus, German Lutheran bishop Siegfried Springer had his visa revoked in April 2005, South African Protestant church overseer Hugo Van Niekerk was denied a visa in July 2005 and Moscow chief rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt had his visa annulled in September 2005. All three have since managed to return, however (see F18News 7 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=644 and 19 December 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=706).

The news of Fr Janusz Blaut's return thus adds to the impression that the religious work visa situation for foreign citizens is improving. Speaking to Forum 18 in Rostov-on-Don on 10 April, however, Pastor Viktor Shvedov of Christ the Saviour Pentecostal Church pointed out that there are now far fewer foreign missionaries in the region than in the 1990s, and that they are obliged to keep a much lower profile. He also reported that Larry and Elsie Dannhauer, two Canadian evangelicals with pre-1917 family ties to Rostov-on-Don, worked for some years in the region but were denied visas approximately three years ago, thus bringing the total number of expulsion cases known to Forum 18 to 55.

On 9 April Captain Vladimir Tatiosov of the Rostov-on-Don branch of the Salvation Army said that his Canadian colleague Geoff Ryan has been unable to return to Russia since being denied a visa without explanation in September 2000. In neighbouring Kalmykia, where Ryan also worked, the Salvation Army was described in the local state press back in 2002 as "western spies" and "one of the most powerful totalitarian sects in the world" (see F18News 14 April 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=31). (END)

For a personal commentary by an Old Believer about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=509

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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