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BELARUS: Two Catholic parish priests banned from religious activity

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org)

Two Polish Catholic parish priests in Belarus are the latest foreign citizens to be denied permission to carry out religious activity, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Both Capuchin priest Fr Jan Bonkowski, who was parish priest of Mizhevitsi village for twenty years, and Jesuit priest Fr Edward Smaga had to halt all religious activity at the end of 2009. A third priest was also threatened with denial of permission, but told Forum 18 that "everything is OK now". Fr Aleksandr Amialchenia, who speaks for the Belarusian Catholic Bishops' Conference, said no reasons were given for the refusals. He stressed that the two priests have not been barred from Belarus. Igor Popov, of the Grodno Religious Affairs Department, refused to answer any questions, asking "What priests?" before putting the phone down. Forum 18 estimates that more than two-thirds of the 33 foreign citizens barred from conducting religious work have been Catholic. Priests and nuns engaged in tackling social issues, such as alcoholism, in a very public manner appear to be particular targets.

Two Polish Catholic priests in the western Grodno [Hrodna] Region have been refused state permission to continue religious work in Belarus, local Catholics have complained to Forum 18 News Service. Capuchin priest Fr Jan Bonkowski, who has served as priest of the Annunciation parish in the village of Mizhevitsi for twenty years, and Jesuit priest Fr Edward Smaga, who served in the Holy Trinity parish in the village of Indura, had to halt all religious activity at the end of 2009. A third Grodno Diocese priest originally from Poland, Fr Aleksander Drogas, who serves at St John the Baptist parish in Volpa, was also threatened with denial of permission to conduct religious work. However, he told Forum 18 on 4 January that "everything is OK now".

Fr Aleksandr Amialchenia, who speaks for the Belarusian Catholic Bishops' Conference, said no reasons were given for the refusals. "All we know is that their permission to conduct religious work was not extended," he told Forum 18 from Minsk on 5 January. He said that in the wake of the denials, the Bishop of Grodno, Aleksandr Kashkevich, had urged the authorities several times to grant the necessary permission. "It appears that the initiators of the decision not to extend the permissions were in Grodno, not in Minsk."

Fr Amialchenia stressed to Forum 18 that the two priests, who are both thought to be in Poland, have not been barred from Belarus. Should they return however, they will not legally be able to perform religious rites. After Polish priest Fr Antoni Koczko celebrated a single mass without state permission in a Minsk church in September 2006, a man and woman in plain clothes present in the congregation approached him in the sacristy and informed him that he had violated Belarusian law covering religious activity (see F18News 3 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=849).

Igor Popov, head of the Religious Affairs Department at Grodno Regional Executive Committee, refused to answer any of Forum 18's questions on 5 January as to why the authorities have refused to extend the priests' permission to conduct religious work in Belarus. "What priests? Invitations are done by the Diocese. Ask them if they invited them." He then put the phone down.

Previous denials of permission to conduct religious activity

Forum 18 estimates that more than two-thirds of the now 33 foreign citizens barred from conducting religious work in Belarus since 2004 have been Catholic, while most of the rest have been Protestant. Priests and nuns engaged in tackling social issues, such as alcoholism, in a very public manner appear to be particular targets.

Four Polish Catholic priests as well as three nuns had their permission to continue religious work in Minsk-Mohilov Archdiocese and Grodno Diocese revoked in December 2008. The authorities ignored repeated appeals from the Catholic community to overturn the denials (see F18News 7 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1237). Two Danish citizens, Erling Laursen and Rolf Bergen, were given deportation orders in February 2009 for taking part in worship services in Gomel's [Homyel] charismatic Living Faith Church (see F18News 15 July 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1326).

"This is not the first time such things have happened in our Diocese"

Catholics from the Indura parish told Forum 18 that Fr Smaga (who is 63) had left for Poland in November 2009 for health reasons

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and only subsequently did they hear from Bishop Kashkevich that the authorities had denied Fr Smaga permission to return to religious work in Belarus. "Only one priest – a local citizen – is left to look after the parish," one local Catholic lamented to Forum 18 on 4 January. "We very much need a second priest. This is not the first time such things have happened in our Diocese."

The Indura Catholic said it remained unclear where the Diocese will be able to find another priest to serve in the parish. "It is clear there is no chance from Poland."

Fr Bonkowski told the Grodno correspondent for the Polish daily paper Gazeta Wyborcza that the authorities did not like the fact that he celebrated Mass in Polish, a language spoken or understood by many Catholics in Belarus – especially in regions like Grodno which border Poland and have an ethnically mixed population.

Official defence of denials

Defending the refusal to grant permission for the priests to continue to conduct religious work was Marina Tsvilik of the government's Office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs in the capital Minsk. "Documents for some of these comrades were not submitted correctly," she told Forum 18 from Minsk on 4 January. "In the case of Bonkowski, we agreed with the Diocese that as his documents were incomplete, they would resend them. But they didn't. In the case of Smaga, he is ill and unable to serve."

Asked whether it is not the responsibility of the religious community to decide who is healthy enough to serve, and not the state, Tsvilik declined to respond.

Asked whether, if Fr Bonkowski's documents are resubmitted, he will get permission to conduct religious work in Belarus once again, Tsvilik replied: "It is possible there would be a positive decision – if the documents are correctly formulated."

Tsvilik claimed to Forum 18 that which languages the priests held services in was irrelevant to the decision not to extend their permission to conduct religious work. But she insisted that religious services have to be conducted in "our languages", which she identified as Russian and Belarusian. "At least once a month they have to serve or at least preach in Russian or Belarusian."

Asked whether the Catholic Church was being singled out for special linguistic restrictions or whether such requirements also exist for the Russian Orthodox (who serve in Church Slavonic), Muslims (who use Arabic), Jews (who use Hebrew) or the Armenian Apostolic (who use Grabar or Classical Armenian), Tsvilik claimed that the same requirement holds for all faiths.

She refused to discuss any other questions and put the phone down.

Tsvilik has previously used the language used in worship as an excuse to defend state violations of freedom of religion or belief (see F18News 23 December 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1235).

Church rejects state claim that documents incomplete

Fr Amialchenia of the Catholic Bishops' Conference rejected suggestions that the application for Fr Bonkowski was incomplete. "This is a well-developed procedure which we have had to go through for many years," he told Forum 18. As for Fr Smaga, Fr Amialchenia insisted it is the role of the diocesan bishop to decide on the health of a priest, not the state.

He said that dioceses need to renew permission for foreign priests and nuns to conduct religious work once a year, except in Grodno Region (and Diocese), where this has to be done every six months. He said he did not know why the system is different in Grodno.

Fr Amialchenia said that the state authorities did not give language as a reason for their denials, but insisted that it must be the role of the Church to decide what languages services should be conducted in. "We serve in the language that believers speak and understand."

Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz told Forum 18 on 4 January that all the forty or so foreign Catholic priests and ten or so religious sisters of his Archdiocese of Minsk-Mohilov had this year received extensions of their permission to conduct religious work. But he pointed out that whenever such permissions are denied, as has happened in Grodno Diocese, it is ordinary believers who suffer.

State officials are also continuing their moves against the New Life Full Gospel Church in Minsk. On 4 January the church received a summons from the Minsk City Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Committee, claiming that the church had polluted the ground around its building with traces of oil, causing large amounts of damage (see F18News 6 January 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1393). (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.

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For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1311.

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://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=belaru.

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