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BELARUS: When is a Monastery not a Monastery?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

The Greek Catholic Church has no registered central body in Belarus under the 2002 religion law, so officially its two monasteries "do not exist", Forum 18 News Service has been told. Under the same law, the church's 15 registered parishes are not considered to have any legal relationship with each other. Also, because the church's centre is not in Belarus but in the Vatican, the law prevents central registration and the current head of the church being its head, because he is not a Belarusian citizen. Even if the Greek Catholics had a registered central body, its monasteries still could not legally exist because they do not have the legal minimum number of fully professed monks. The local state official commented to Forum 18 that only fully professed monks could legally count because "Novices might leave at any moment, or their mummies could come and take them home".

According to the 2002 Belarusian law on religion, only a republic-wide religious organisation registered in Minsk has the right to found monasteries and convents. The Greek Catholic Church has no such central body in Belarus. Therefore its monastery of the Holy Martyrs Boris and Gleb in Polotsk "does not exist", the town's Greek Catholic parish council chairman, Mikola Sharakh, told Forum 18 News Service on 24 September. The local official in charge of religious affairs, Nikolai Stepanenko, likewise told Forum 18 that there were no Catholic monastic establishments in Vitebsk region, other than one Roman Catholic convent registered in the town of Braslav.

Approximately six years ago, according to Sharakh, local police drew up a protocol against Fr Venedikt Aleksichuk, who is now abbot of the Dormition Monastery in the western Ukrainian village of Univ. It accused him of founding the Polotsk monastery illegally, maintained Sharakh. They said, "Either you register or you don't exist". But registration is impossible since the legal centre of the Church is not in Belarus but in the Vatican City State. Whilst recognising the Roman papacy, the 400 year old Greek Catholic Church worships according to the Eastern Orthodox rite. Although some of its clergy outwardly resemble their western Catholic counterparts, those of the Studite order to which both the Univ and Polotsk communities belong are barely distinguishable from monks of the Orthodox Church.

Speaking to Forum 18, local Greek Catholic parish priest Fr Igor Kondrasev (Igar Kandrazjeu) explained that the head of the Greek Catholic Church in Belarus, Apostolic Visitor Sergei Gajek, is based in the Vatican. Although the eight Greek Catholic parish priests in Belarus, including a Ukrainian, a Pole, a Russian and a Georgian, all respect the spiritual authority of the Roman Catholic bishops in the republic, he said, they are not subordinate to them in ecclesiastical terms. So in the eyes of the Belarusian state, the country's 15 registered Greek Catholic parishes all function independently.

Even if the Greek Catholic Church did have a central body in Belarus, it would still be unable to register a monastery unless it had ten participants. Fr Vasili Zakharus told Forum 18 that currently only he and three other monks are attached to the town's Greek Catholic parish of St Paraskeva, however. Also, the 2002 law would appear to disqualify the current head Sergei Gajek as the church's head, because he has Vatican not Belarusian citizenship.

Meeting the number of participants part of the new Belarusian religion law is not only a problem for the Greek Catholics. Most Roman Catholic monasteries and convents in the republic don't have legal status either, since they have fewer than ten participants, auxiliary bishop of Grodno's Roman Catholic diocese Aleksandr Dziemianko told Forum 18. The diocese has two registered convents in Grodno city and Novogrudok, he said, but not a single monastery is registered. As a consequence, Bishop Aleksandr explained, the property belonging to monastic orders is usually held by parishes or private citizens. But of course it would be better if it belonged to monasteries, in accordance with normal monastic practice.

In Brest region, Vasili Marchenko, the official in charge of religious affairs maintained to Forum 18 News on 16 September that the only monastic establishments there were an Orthodox monastery and convent in Brest city and a Roman Catholic convent in Baranovichi. This is because no one wants any more than that, Marchenko maintained. Forum 18 knows of at least two other Roman Catholic monastic communities in the region, however, while the official website of the Belarusian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) puts the total number of monasteries and convents there at four.

The same website puts the total number of monastics in these establishments at 12, with a further 17 novices. Forum 18 noted that the recently founded Orthodox convent of the Nativity of the Most Holy Mother of God in the grounds of Brest Fortress, which

Marchenko mentioned, has ten inhabitants, of whom eight are novices at various stages. While it would thus appear to comply with the 2002 law on religion, Marchenko maintained that only those who had taken full vows could be properly considered to be participants in a monastic community. "Novices might leave at any moment", he quipped, "or their mummies could come and take them home".

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY