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RUSSIA: Degree of calm in Catholic storm

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

While the Catholic Church's fortunes in Russia may have risen from their low point last September, when two Catholic priests were denied entry to the country in as many days, they have not yet turned decisively for the better during the first three months of 2003. Saratov-based Bishop Clemens Pickel, who is German, was granted a residency permit in January, but Bishop Jerzy Mazur of Irkutsk, who is Polish, is still being barred entry to Russia. St Petersburg-based Fr Bronislaw Czaplicki was refused an extension to his residency permit and was told to leave Russia by 12 March, though he retains the right to return to Russia on an ordinary visa. Asked by Forum 18 News Service what he thought about the fact that no Catholic clergy had been expelled for some time, chancellor of the Moscow-based diocese Fr Igor Kovalevsky remarked: "I don't think anything about it. It doesn't mean that there won't be any tomorrow."

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The year began rosily. In what Cardinal Walter Kasper, the president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, called "a positive sign," on 15 January Saratov-based German Catholic bishop Clemens Pickel was granted the residency permit he had long been denied. In every other respect Bishop Pickel's situation is analogous to that of Irkutsk-based Polish Catholic bishop Jerzy Mazur, who was refused entry to Russia last April. The pair were appointed to lead the two apostolic administrations created when those of European Russia and Siberia were subdivided in 1999. Attempts to obtain legal status for these new structures have so far proved entirely unsuccessful, with the foreign bishops' lack of residency permits being cited as grounds by the Russian authorities.

Bishop Pickel's receipt of a residency permit thus contrasts starkly with Bishop Mazur's situation, and is all the more significant since the local Orthodox archbishop, Aleksandr of Saratov and Volsk, signed a strongly-worded open declaration last February opposing the setting-up of Catholic dioceses in Russia as "spiritual expansion at the expense of the Orthodox populace... reminding us of the heretical roots of the western confession".

There was a further positive development at the end of January. During a Moscow reception attended by the recently-appointed papal nuncio to Russia, Archbishop Antonio Mennini, President Vladimir Putin announced that he would "act for the development of a political dialogue" with the Holy See, which shared Russia's position "on many questions".

In an interview with Vremya Novostei daily newspaper on 17 March, however, it became apparent that little had changed substantially in the Kremlin's policy towards the Vatican. Diplomatic representative to the Holy See Vitali Litvin reiterated that a visit to Russia by Pope John Paul II depended, as before, on improvements in the Catholic Church's relations with the Russian Orthodox. While Patriarch Aleksii II did receive Mennini on 20 February and reportedly expressed hope that it might "mend ties," he also pointed out that relations between the two Churches still left "a lot to be desired".

Yet an Associated Press report on a 19 March meeting in Geneva between Cardinal Kasper and Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad suggested that the church representatives were still far from healing the rift sparked by the setting-up of the four Catholic dioceses in Russia last year. "They agreed to hold further consultations aimed at resolving the problems which exist between the two Churches," declared the statement subsequently circulated by both the Vatican and the Moscow Patriarchate.

During the interim period, an incident reminiscent of last year's expulsions occurred. Fr Bronislaw Czaplicki, director of the St Petersburg-based programme researching the Russian Catholic New Martyrs, was refused an extension to his residency permit, which he had previously held for approximately ten years, and was told to leave Russia by 12 March. This he did, a Catholic source in St Petersburg told Forum 18 News Service on 28 March. According to this source, Fr Czaplicki was not given any reason whatsoever for the refusal, but retains the right to return to Russia on an ordinary visa.

On 26 February, ITAR-TASS Russian news agency reported Litvin as maintaining that Fr Czaplicki had simply been asked to bring his documentation into line with new regulations for foreign residents. On 28 March, however, one of Fr Czaplicki's Moscow-based

academic colleagues told Forum 18 that the refusal had taken place because his parish in the town of Pushkin near St Petersburg had only lately submitted a re-registration application. It had therefore been impossible for the authorities to formulate the necessary documents to prolong his residency permit, she said.

While Litvin maintained in his interview with Vremya Novostei that Russia was prepared to accept replacements for those priests refused entry last year "at any moment," he also claimed that they had "violated Russian law". "Certain members of the Catholic Church deviated from the religious sphere and engaged in activity incompatible with the status of a priest," he remarked. "It is not in order for a religious personage to engage in purely commercial activity."

Most of the priests denied entry have not received any formal explanation. In Bishop Mazur's case, a Foreign Ministry spokesman stated that he had been refused entry to Russia "strictly in accordance with Article 27 of the 1996 Russian Federation law on the procedure of entry and leaving the country". According to Russian Catholic newspaper Svet Yevangeliya (Light of the Gospel), the Foreign Ministry further specified that it was in response to Part 1 of this article – or for reasons of state security. If, however, as Litvin suggests, the Russian authorities believe Mazur was breaking the law by engaging in commercial activity, it is unclear why he was not simply prosecuted within Russia rather than denied entry to the country "for reasons of state security".

The chancellor of the Moscow-based Catholic diocese, Fr Igor Kovalevsky, confirmed to Forum 18 on 28 March that none of those priests denied entry to Russia last year had so far been able to return. He added that, while Bishop Mazur's diocese had attempted to issue an invitation for him, it had not been accepted by the authorities as far as he knew. In response to Forum 18's enquiry on 28 March, one of the expelled priests, Fr Stefano Caprio, said that he was currently engaged in academic work in Italy, including assisting in the beatification procedure for the Russian Catholic New Martyrs, but naturally wished to return to Russia and would soon attempt to obtain a visa.

Papal nuncio Mennini received a frosty rebuff from local officials when he visited the town of Tula on 2 March, and had to say Mass on the steps of the town's nineteenth century Catholic church, which the authorities are still refusing to return to the Catholic parish.

In Fr Kovalevsky's view, there were some signs of improvement in relations with the Russian Orthodox Church, such as participation by their representatives in prayers for unity at Moscow's Catholic Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in January. In some Russian provinces relations with the authorities were also improving, he maintained, while on the federal level they "were always not so bad". Asked by Forum 18 what he thought about the fact that no Catholic clergy had been expelled for some time, however, Fr Kovalevsky remarked: "I don't think anything about it. It doesn't mean that there won't be any tomorrow."

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