
27 August 2003

RUSSIA: Do Sunday school children need written parental permission?

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

Fr Sergi Golovanov, who teaches religion to five children in his Eastern-rite Catholic parish in the Siberian city of Omsk with permission from their parents, could be fined up to 66 US dollars for failing to supply such parental permission in writing. The local justice department demanded he present such written permission by 15 August, but Fr Sergi refused, arguing that the country's religion law nowhere declares that parental permission must be in writing. However, local religious affairs official Vasili Tkach insisted to Forum 18 News Service that the authorities were acting in accordance with the law.

An Eastern-rite Catholic priest in the Siberian city of Omsk may be fined for teaching religion to the children in his parish without the written permission of their parents. Fr Sergi Golovanov told Forum 18 News Service that he has refused to comply with the demand from the local justice department for him to supply written parental permission, pointing out that the country's law on religion does not specify that such permission must be given in writing. However, the official dealing with religious organisations in Omsk region Vasili Tkach insisted to Forum 18 on 26 August that the state authorities were acting in accordance with the law.

At the end of July Fr Sergi received a letter from the Omsk department of justice accusing his parish of the Protection of the Most Holy Mother of God of violating Article 3, Part 5 of Russia's 1997 law on religion, which prohibits "attraction of minors" to a religious association, as well as religious instruction to children "without the agreement of their parents or guardians".

In view of this, continues the letter, which has been viewed by Forum 18, the parish must provide the justice department with written parental permission for the children to attend Sunday school by 15 August. Failure to do so could result in Fr Sergi being charged with "disobeying the lawful demand of a governmental inspectorate representative," which attracts a fine of between 10 and 20 times the minimum wage, currently between 1000 and 2000 roubles (253 to 506 Norwegian kroner, 30 to 60 Euros, or 33 to 66 US dollars).

Fr Sergi emphasised that, while he had previously received the verbal agreement of the parents of the five children who receive religious instruction at the parish, written permission is nowhere specified in the law. Neither does the official commentary to the 1997 religion law make any mention of written parental permission, notes Forum 18.

Believing the local department of justice therefore to have no legal basis in making such a demand, Fr Sergi has not complied with it and has received no further warning, he told Forum 18 from Omsk on 26 August. A visit by justice department officials to the parish prior to the demand was part of a general check-up on religious organisations in the region, in his view, the aim of which was to "try to find some kind of legal violation".

While he was unaware of the particulars of the letter to Fr Sergi, Tkach maintained that written parental permission had probably been requested in order to prove that the parish had not violated the legal provision in question.

The Omsk department of justice is obliged to conduct ongoing check-ups of social and religious organisations, Tkach explained, and is currently asking all professional educational establishments to obtain a licence for their activity. While acknowledging that a Sunday school may well not require such registration, Tkach maintained that a request for written parental permission may be issued in that context.

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