

23 September 2020

BELARUS: Another Catholic priest banned from serving

By Olga Glace, Forum 18

Belarus' senior state religious affairs official gave the Catholic bishop of Vitebsk one day's notice that he was annulling permission for Polish priest Jerzy Wilk to serve in his parish, giving no reason. Fr Wilk has served in Belarus since 2003. The State Border Committee told Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz he was denied re-entry because his Belarusian passport was invalid. The Interior Ministry then said it was checking if he gained citizenship lawfully.

Without any explanation, Belarus' senior state religious affairs official Leonid Gulyako abruptly cancelled the permission for Polish Catholic priest Fr Jerzy Wilk to continue serving his parish in the north-eastern Vitebsk Region. Gulyako gave his bishop one day's notice of the cancellation, which came into effect on 3 September, half way through the one-year period for which Fr Wilk had earlier been given permission.

Fr Wilk – who has been working in Belarus since 2003 - said he has no idea why the state permission for him to work as a priest was cancelled. He added that about 500 parishioners had written to Plenipotentiary Gulyako asking him to withdraw his decision. "They are all very good and kind people," he told Forum 18 (see below).

The Head of Religious and Ethnic affairs Department of the Plenipotentiary's Office Andrey Aryaev refused to explain to Forum 18 why Fr Wilk's right to work as a priest was suddenly revoked (see below).

Pyotr Gnutenko, Head of Vitebsk Region Ideology Department, denied that the regional Executive Committee initiated the move to strip Fr Wilk of permission to undertake religious work. "This is the first time I have heard this name [Fr Wilk]," he claimed to Forum 18 (see below).

Meanwhile, the State Border Committee has told the head of the Catholic Church in Belarus, Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, that he was denied re-entry to his home country on 31 August because his Belarusian passport was invalid. He was forced to remain in Poland (see below).

The head of the Interior Ministry's Citizenship and Migration Department then said that officials are "at present simply checking up on whether he is a citizen of the Republic of Belarus and the documents he presented when going through the procedure of naturalisation" (see below).

The 74-year-old Archbishop Kondrusiewicz, a native of Belarus who only has Belarusian citizenship, renounced Russian citizenship in 2008, the year after his return to Belarus after serving in Moscow for 16 years, Catholic spokesperson Fr Yuri Sanko told Forum 18. In 2008 Archbishop Kondrusiewicz was then given residence in Belarus, and finally gained citizenship in 2016, Fr Sanko added (see below).

The Citizenship and Migration Department refused to answer Forum 18's questions about Archbishop Kondrusiewicz's case (see below).

On 23 August, and without prior announcement, the state-controlled Radio Belarus unexpectedly stopped broadcasting Catholic Mass on Sundays. "We were not given the reasons, we were only told that there will be no radio Mass in September," Fr Yuri Sanko of the Catholic Bishops' Conference told Forum 18 (see below).

Official suddenly cancels priest's work permission

On 2 September the office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, Leonid Gulyako, wrote to the Catholic Bishop of Vitebsk Oleg Butkevich cancelling without any explanation the permission to work and say Mass of Fr Jerzy Wilk. Gulyako gave the bishop only one day's notice of the cancellation, which came into effect on 3 September, according to the letter seen by Forum 18.

Fr Wilk, who is 48, is parish priest of St Michael the Archangel Church in the village of Voropaevo, about 200 kms (125 miles) west

of the north-eastern city of Vitebsk.

A Polish citizen, Fr Wilk had the necessary permission to work as a priest from the Plenipotentiary, valid until 14 February 2021. "He has a visa in the passport and has the right to stay in the country but cannot work or say Mass," Fr Viktor Misevich, Chancellor of Vitebsk Diocese, told Forum 18 on 22 September.

Fr Misevich thinks it will not be possible to do without a resident priest in St Michael the Archangel parish, as it is large and priests in neighbouring parishes are already carrying a large workload in their own parishes. "This is going to make the life of ordinary people more complicated," Fr Misevich told Forum 18. He also said that, despite their existing heavy workload, a priest from a neighbouring parish is celebrating Mass on Sundays until a new priest is appointed.

Fr Wilk said that about 500 parishioners had written to Plenipotentiary Gulyako asking him to withdraw his decision. "They are all very good and kind people," he told Forum 18 on 15 September. "They did a lot for the church, including repairs on the church building and its grounds. I am sad to now be without them."

Fr Wilk has been working in Belarus since 2003 and has an excellent command of the Belarusian language. Fr Misevich of Vitebsk Diocese told Forum 18 that Fr Wilk "has never violated the law, is sociable and dynamic in his parish activities. He even plays football for Vitebsk Diocese."

Why was priest's permission cancelled?

Fr Wilk said he has no idea why the state permission for him to work as a priest was cancelled. He insisted that his sermons did not touch on political issues. "All I talked about was good and evil, of the need to love, about everything I believe myself," he told Forum 18.

Plenipotentiary Gulyako normally gives no reason for his decisions about granting, refusing or cancelling state permission for foreign citizens to conduct religious work in the country (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2461). Such decisions are entirely within Gulyako's power and are difficult for the communities which have invited them to challenge.

In recent years Plenipotentiary Gulyako has repeatedly accused foreign Catholic priests of violating the law, including allegedly by speeding, involvement in political activity, and poor command of the Belarusian language (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2387). He has rejected applications from Catholic and Orthodox bishops for priests from abroad to come to work in the country or to continue working in the country.

The Head of Religious and Ethnic affairs Department of the Plenipotentiary's Office Andrey Aryaev refused to explain why Fr Wilk's right to work as a priest was suddenly revoked. "We do not give any comments on this issue," Aryaev told Forum 18 from Minsk on 16 September, before putting the phone down.

If the Plenipotentiary decides to give permission for a foreign religious worker to work, the regional Executive Committee's [local authority] Ideology, Culture and Youth Department is responsible for issuing a certificate specifying in which single religious community the individual can work, and the exact dates for which permission is given (http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2461) (usually three months, six months or one year).

On 16 September Forum 18 asked the Ideology Department of Vitebsk Region Executive Committee whether the sudden order to stop Fr Wilk working as a priest was initiated by the Executive Committee. Pyotr Gnutenko, Head of the Ideology Department denied this. "This is the first time I have heard this name [Fr Wilk]," he claimed. "Sorry, but I have no information."

New priest from same Congregation?

Bishop Butkevich would like to keep St Michael the Archangel parish in Voropaevo in the care of the religious congregation Fr Wilk belongs to, the Congregation of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Fr Misevich of Vitebsk Diocese told Forum 18. However, as there are no Belarusian priests of the Congregation yet, the Bishop will have to appoint another foreign priest like Fr Wilk.

"The authorities took a priest away from us within one day, but it will take at least a month for us to get their approval for a new foreign priest," Fr Misevich commented.

The Belarusian authorities have frequently rejected requests by Catholic diocesan bishops for foreign clergy (mostly from Poland) to be able to continue serving in local churches.

In November 2018, Plenipotentiary Gulyako refused Bishop Butkevich's request to extend permission for Polish Catholic priest Fr Pawel Knurek to continue working in the Cathedral parish of the Merciful Jesus in Vitebsk. The priest had to leave Belarus after 15 years' service. Gulyako refused Bishop Butkevich's continuing appeals in January 2019, as well as a petition by parishioners (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2461).

Catholic Archbishop to be made stateless?

On 31 August border guards denied Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, head of Belarus' Catholic Church, re-entry to his own country. No officials explained to Archbishop Kondrusiewicz – a Belarusian citizen – why he is barred (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2597). "The right of a citizen to enter the Republic of Belarus cannot be restricted," says the Law on Exit and Entry for Belarusian Citizens.

President Aleksandr Lukashenko said on 1 September that the archbishop is on the shared Belarus/Russia entry ban list.

Archbishop Kondrusiewicz wrote to the State Border Committee seeking an explanation for the denial of entry. Committee Chair Major-General Anatoly Lappo responded to him in early September, the Church website noted on 14 September.

"We inform you that you were not allowed through the state border in connection with a decision taken by the internal affairs agencies on the recognition of the passport of a Belarusian citizen No. [...] belonging to you as invalid," Major-General Lappo wrote. He added that Archbishop Kondrusiewicz had the right to ask the Interior Ministry about the decision to declare his passport invalid.

Archbishop Kondrusiewicz then wrote to the Interior Ministry.

On 15 September, the head of the Interior Ministry's Citizenship and Migration Department, Aleksei Begun, told the local tut.by news website that the cancellation of Archbishop Kondrusiewicz's passport does not mean his citizenship has been annulled. However, he added that it had been annulled because officials are checking whether Archbishop Kondrusiewicz is eligible for citizenship or not.

"The Interior Ministry is at present simply checking up on whether he is a citizen of the Republic of Belarus and the documents he presented when going through the procedure of naturalisation," Begun stated.

Begun claimed that Archbishop Kondrusiewicz was one of more than a thousand people whose citizenship is checked each year. He said in his case the checks began before his visit to Poland in August, and that "this was just a coincidence". He added that the Ministry had received Archbishop Kondrusiewicz's letter and would respond to him.

The Interior Ministry on 22 September refused to answer Forum 18's questions as they claimed they cannot answer without consulting their Citizenship and Migration Department. They "will not tell you anything" without a written inquiry, the official who refused to give her name claimed.

The Citizenship and Migration Department refused to answer any of Forum 18's questions on 23 September.

The Presidential Administration did not answer their telephones on 22 September.

The 74-year-old Archbishop Kondrusiewicz, a native of Belarus who only has Belarusian citizenship, renounced Russian citizenship in 2008, the year after his return to Belarus after serving in Moscow for 16 years, Fr Yuri Sanko told Forum 18. In 2008 Archbishop Kondrusiewicz was given residence in Belarus, and finally gained citizenship in 2016, Fr Sanko added.

Catholic and ecumenical support for Archbishop

Archbishop Kondrusiewicz has had support from other Christian Churches, clergy and laypeople within Belarus. The Pentecostal Union "expressed outrage" at the denial of re-entry in a 1 September statement on the Union's website signed by Bishop Leonid Voronenko said (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2597).

Fr Sergei Lepin, spokesperson for the Orthodox Church, said on his Facebook page on 1 September that it would not be making an official comment on the denial of re-entry to Archbishop Kondrusiewicz. However, Fr Lepin added his personal support for the Archbishop and wished "the Catholic community of Belarus the successful resolution of the misunderstanding that has arisen", which he described as "strange and dangerous". "I hope for the speedy reunion of the Catholic flock with its hierarch."

In the western city of Grodno, Orthodox priest Fr Georgy Roy attended a prayer service for Archbishop Kondrusiewicz's return at the Catholic parish church. He agreed with the Catholics that the denial of re-entry to the Archbishop is unjust.

"This should not have happened," Fr Roy told Euroradio.fm on 15 September. "As a sign of solidarity, we came to the church to say that we support the Catholic community, that we share its concern over this situation, and that we hope that such an unjust decision will soon be cancelled."

On 16 September, the District Court in the western town of Lida fined Aleksandr Shor after officials found him praying outside the town's Catholic church of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. Judge Maksim Filatov fined him 270 Belarusian Roubles (980 Norwegian Kroner, 90 Euros, or 105 US Dollars), Anzhelika Borys, head of the Union of Poles in Belarus, who was present in court, noted on her Facebook page the same day.

"The Judge asks what were you doing at the church in Lida? Answer - I prayed. Who did you pray for? For the return of his Excellency Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz," Borys quoted the exchange in court.

National radio suddenly halts Sunday Mass broadcasts

On 23 August, and without prior announcement, the state-controlled Radio Belarus unexpectedly stopped broadcasting Catholic Mass on Sundays. "We were not given the reasons, we were only told that there will be no radio Mass in September," Fr Yuri Sanko of the Catholic Bishops' Conference told Forum 18 on 16 September.

A 40-minute Mass had routinely been broadcast nationwide every Sunday morning from the Cathedral of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the capital Minsk, followed by a brief news summary from Vatican Radio.

A priest of the Cathedral, Fr Antony Klimantovich, told the Catholic Church website on 9 September that all the technical equipment for broadcasting from the Cathedral is functioning, and "the signal is strong but there's no broadcast".

The programme schedule on the official state Radio 1 website still contains a weblink to the regular "Catholic sermon" but the link no longer works.

Since the 1990s the broadcast Sunday Mass has been widely listened to by many Catholics, especially those who are elderly, sick, or living in rural areas far from a Catholic church. For many, the nationwide state radio broadcast is their only chance every Sunday to join with their fellow Catholics meeting for worship.

Fr Misevich, Chancellor of Vitebsk Diocese, pointed out that Sunday Mass on the radio is especially important during the coronavirus pandemic, when many people are not allowed to leave homes to attend Mass. The state stopping Sunday Mass broadcasts "is a strong blow against sick and old people in all dioceses in Belarus," he told Forum 18.

A Catholic from Minsk Region explained that her bed-ridden grandmother living in a village used to listen to the live Mass broadcast on the radio every Sunday. "Now there are no broadcasts any longer it makes her suffer, because it is the only opportunity for her to be together with the Church," the Catholic told Ex-Press.by on 4 September.

The state broadcaster Belteleradio refused to answer Forum 18's questions or say when broadcasts of Sunday Mass will be resumed. "It is difficult to answer these questions," an official who refused to give her name told Forum 18 on 22 September. "I need to collect the information."

No individual or belief community is able to have a religious FM broadcasting band radio station, despite several attempts (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2157). One such example is the Catholic Church's attempts to get permission for Radio Mariya. (Belarus' Radio Mariya is unrelated to Radio Maryja in neighbouring Poland.) No official is prepared to take responsibility for dealing with such applications.

Radio Mariya is part of an international Italian network, and the regime's refusal to give it a broadcasting licence means it can only be heard in Belarus via the internet.

"Prayers on our radio are always in demand," Radio Mariya volunteer Evgenia Naidovich told Forum 18 on 16 September. "Many of our listeners are almost deaf, others are blind, and cannot use smartphones. Many do not have a computer or a telephone, or cannot afford the internet."

Naidovich added that people with internet access also want to listen to Radio Mariya on a radio. She insisted that the state should allow listeners to listen to Radio Mariya in the way they find most comfortable.

Minsk's Red Church "now open during its regular hours"

Minsk's historical Catholic Church of Saints Simon and Helena (known locally due to its brickwork as the Red Church) – which is located on the city's central Independence Square where demonstrations have been taking place since the disputed presidential elections in August – has faced repeated problems from the state.

The state has given the parish large financial demands for building work it did not agree to and which it cannot afford. It is unclear why this parish is facing these demands, as no other religious community has faced them. City officials refused to explain to Forum 18 the large sums demanded (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2591).

On 26 August, OMON riot police violently pushed into the Church people demonstrating against the falsification of the presidential election results.

In the days afterwards, unknown officials changed the locks on the Church and the electricity was often cut off. The protests near the Church have now ended. "The Church is now open during its regular hours and Mass is celebrated five times a day," a parishioner who wished to remain unnamed told Forum 18 on 22 September. (END)

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Belarus
(<http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=16>).

For more background, see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2612).

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351).

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