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BELARUS: Who shapes up to new religion law?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

In the wake of the restrictive new religion law which came into force last November, despite widespread protests from believers, Forum 18 News Service has discovered that very few educational or monastic communities of the Russian Orthodox and Catholic Churches currently meet the tough new restrictions. Few monastic communities have the required minimum ten members, while no educational institutions have a full teaching staff who know both state languages, Russian and Belarusian. If they want to continue to operate, they must make substantial changes before the re-registration deadline of 16 November 2004.

In the wake of the restrictive new religion law which came into force last November, despite widespread protests from believers within Belarus, Forum 18 News Service has discovered that very few educational or monastic communities of the Russian Orthodox and Catholic Churches - the country's more established religious organisations - currently meet the tough new restrictions. These institutions have until 16 November 2004 to make the substantial changes necessary in order to pass the compulsory re-registration if they wish to continue their activity in accordance with the new law.

Under the new law, only republic-wide religious organisations – or those with ten or more communities in at least four of the country's six regions (including one which has been in operation on Belarusian territory for at least 20 years) – may found monasteries or convents and educational institutions, stipulated by Article 28 as "for the training of clergy, theologians and religious personnel". The new law requires all religious organisations to register with the state in order to function.

At first sight it would appear that only the Belarusian Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church in Belarus would be able to meet these criteria with ease. Indeed, the Belarusian Exarchate was the first religious organisation to re-register under the new law, on 28 February, and the head of the Catholic Church in Belarus, Cardinal Kazimierz Swiatek, was presented with confirmation of his Church's re-registration on 11 April.

In fact, however, a significant number of institutions within both of these Churches fail to meet the law's re-registration criteria for monastic communities and educational institutions. Under Article 19, monasteries, convents and monastic communities must have no fewer than ten participants, while educational institutions must have qualified tutors proficient in both state languages - Belarusian and Russian.

According to its official website (www.church.by), the Belarusian Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church has 25 monasteries and convents in Belarus. On contacting St Afanasi of Brest Monastery in the village of Arkadi near Brest on 23 May, Forum 18 was told that there are only three monks in residence, and on likewise contacting St Barbara Convent in Pinsk, that it has only four nuns.

Two further monastic institutions in Brest diocese appear to be in a similar position, since the Belarusian Exarchate website gives the total number of monks and nuns for the diocese as nine. Vitebsk Orthodox diocese likewise has four monastic institutions with a total of 21 monks and nuns. Even if one includes the number of novices – 15 in Brest, two in Pinsk and 12 in Vitebsk diocese – the figures are still not sufficient for all monasteries and convents in these three dioceses to have the ten participants prescribed by the new law.

The Catholic Church is in a similar position. Speaking from Baranovichi in Brest region on 27 May, a member of the Divine Word (Verbum Dei) monastic order told Forum 18 that while he, another brother and three priests lived as monks in what is clearly a monastic complex, "we can't say officially that we are a monastery" due to the ten participants rule. There are probably five or six such de facto Catholic monastic communities of between 5 and ten members in Belarus, said Brother Cornelius.

For the Catholic Church the situation is further exacerbated by the new law's stipulation that members of monastic communities be either Belarusian citizens or foreign citizens holding residency permits. Most monks and nuns in Belarus are Polish citizens on three-month visas, said Brother Cornelius, while the revival of Catholic monasticism among Belarusians "is moving, but very gradually".

The legal requirement that teaching personnel at religious educational institutions be proficient in both Belarusian and Russian also poses difficulties for both Orthodox and Catholics. The main such institutions within the Belarusian Exarchate of the Russian

Orthodox Church are Minsk Theological Seminary and Minsk Theological Academy, both located at the Dormition Monastery in Zhirovitsy in Grodno region. The institutions' approximately 200 students from Belarus, Russia, Ukraine, Moldova and Lithuania studied in Russian "of course," a seminary spokesman told Forum 18 by telephone on 27 May. Only a couple of the some 20 tutors there spoke Belarusian, he added.

The Catholic Church has two seminaries in Belarus. Speaking in Russian to Forum 18 on 27 May, an attendant at Pinsk Catholic Seminary – where there are 25 students and five tutors - stated that all tuition there takes place in Belarusian. At the larger Catholic seminary in Grodno, he said, classes are in Belarusian and Polish, and most tutors there are ethnic Poles who do not know Belarusian.

Contacted by Forum 18 in Minsk on 28 May, the chairman of the State Committee for Religious Affairs, Stanislav Buko, explained that the re-registration of the Orthodox and Catholic Churches in Belarus in fact included only their central bodies, dioceses and Pinsk Catholic Seminary. No monastic institution has yet submitted re-registration papers, he added, and neither has Minsk Theological Seminary, Minsk Theological Academy nor the Catholic seminary in Grodno.

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