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BELARUS: 12 Catholic priests and nuns face expulsion

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

"No reasons whatsoever" have been given for Belarus' decision to refuse annual visa renewal for 12 Polish Catholic priests and nuns, the Dean of Grodno's Catholic Cathedral has told Forum 18 News Service. The 7 priests and 5 nuns have been working in different parishes of Grodno Diocese for about ten years, but have been ordered to leave Belarus by 2007. "This is the first time so many have been refused permission to renew their visas," he told Forum 18, adding that nothing of the kind has happened in the other three Catholic dioceses in Belarus. Grodno region's main religious affairs official did not answer Forum 18's questions. But Aleksandr Kalinov of the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs in Minsk maintained that "sufficient argumentation, foundation" is necessary in order for a foreign priest to come to Belarus. Of the 350 or so Catholic priests in Belarus, more than half are foreign citizens. Two did not have their annual visas renewed at the end of 2005, and were thus forced to return to their native Poland.

"No reasons whatsoever" have been given for the state's decision to refuse annual visa renewal for 12 Polish Catholic priests and nuns in the north-western region of Grodno [Hrodna], the Dean of Grodno's Catholic Cathedral has told Forum 18 News Service. Speaking on 3 October, Fr Yan Kuchynski said that the 7 priests and 5 nuns have been working in different parishes of Grodno diocese – whose territory corresponds with Grodno region and borders Poland - for approximately ten years, but have been ordered to leave Belarus by 2007. "This is the first time so many have been refused permission to renew their visas," he told Forum 18, adding that nothing of the kind has happened in the three other Catholic dioceses in Belarus.

Reached on what appeared to be a clear telephone line on 2 October, Grodno region's main religious affairs official initially confirmed his name and patronymic but then claimed not to be able to hear Forum 18's questions. Igor Popov's telephone went unanswered when Forum 18 rang back immediately and on 3 October.

Aleksandr Kalinov of the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs in Minsk maintained to Radio Free Europe that Grodno's Catholic bishop, Aleksandr Kaszkiewicz, could turn to his own "rather successful" seminary for priests, and insisted that "sufficient argumentation, foundation" is necessary in order for a foreign priest to come to Belarus: "Are they being invited because there are not enough priests?"

Bishop Aleksander Kaszkiewicz, on 26 September, appealed to the faithful of the Diocese to say the rosary and parish prayers throughout October for "law-abiding priests and nuns who have not received permission from the Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs in Minsk to continue their religious activity from 1 January 2007," according to Grodno Catholic Cathedral's website <http://www.katedra.grodnensis.by>. Catholics in Grodno region have begun to gather signatures for a petition in support of the Polish priests and nuns, according to the Radio Free Europe Belarusian service. Bishop Kaszkiewicz is also Chairman of the Conference of the Catholic Bishops in Belarus.

Religious affairs officials refused to comment specifically on the 12 expulsions to the Belarusian service of Radio Free Europe on 2 October. Pointing out that 66 foreign Catholic religious workers remained in Grodno region, an unnamed local religious affairs official remarked that "dioceses are continually being recommended to attract priests from among those Belarusian citizens who are seminary graduates, particularly as the law requires foreign workers to be competent in both state languages [Russian and Belarusian]."

All of the Polish priests and nuns slated to leave the country understand the Belarusian language and are comfortable speaking it, Fr Yan Kuchynski told Radio Free Europe's Belarusian service. He also pointed out that a number of the priests work alone in their parishes: "If we don't have enough priests, where are we supposed to get them from? The best option is these priests from Poland, as it is easier for them to understand the faithful than for priests from Italy. That's why we invite Poles."

A Council of Ministers decree, dated 23 February 1999, controls the activity of foreign religious workers in Belarus. Should the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs grant a religious community permission to invite a foreign religious worker for up to one year, the decree states, he or she may conduct religious activity only within houses of worship belonging to or premises continually rented by that community. The transfer of a foreign religious worker from one religious organisation to another - such as between parishes - requires permission from the relevant state official dealing with religious affairs, even for a single service.

Asked whether the recent prosecution in Minsk of a foreign Catholic priest who celebrated Mass without state permission was exceptional (see F18News 2 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=849), a local Catholic priest who wished to remain unnamed told Forum 18 on 26 September that similar prosecutions "often happen" in Grodno region. He qualified this to "several incidents", however, and added that he did not have any statistics. Contacted on 2 October, the priest said that he was unaware of the 12 priests and nuns denied permission to continue their work in Grodno region.

While territorially smaller than each of the other three Catholic dioceses in Belarus, Grodno diocese has approximately twice as many parishes, putting it on a par with the Belarusian Orthodox Church in that region. According to 2005 state figures, there were 170 Catholic parishes in Grodno region supported by 168 clergy, of whom 72 were foreign citizens.

Of the 350 or so Catholic priests in Belarus, more than half are foreign citizens. Two did not have their annual visas renewed at the end of 2005, and were thus forced to return to their native Poland (see F18News 22 December 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=710, 6 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=713 and 13 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=715). (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=478.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806.

A printer-friendly map of Belarus is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=belaru>

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY