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BELARUS: Baroque monastery to be luxury hotel - or returned to Catholics?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

The Belarusian state appears to have scaled down plans to turn a baroque Catholic monastery into a luxury hotel and entertainment complex, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Unofficial reports suggest that the cultural monument will now house a mini-hotel and/or museum. As Minsk Catholics marked a third year of daily prayer vigils outside the monastery's St Joseph Church, however, there is still no sign that the government intends to fulfil a 17-year-old promise to return the building to believers. Local Catholics have maintained to Forum 18 that a nationwide petition for the return of the monastery, which gained 50,000 signatures, led to a more modest development project. Protestants active in a separate petition to change the country's harsh Religion Law joined the Catholic campaign. No state officials were available to discuss the issue with Forum 18. Although some 95 per cent of historical Orthodox churches in Belarus have been returned, all but a handful of Jewish synagogues remain state property. Lutherans and Calvinists have also had little success in winning back their historical churches.

Public outrage at government plans to turn a baroque Catholic monastery into a luxury hotel and entertainment complex appears to have significantly scaled down the development, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. But as Catholics in the capital Minsk marked a third year of daily prayer vigils outside the monastery church last month, there is still no sign that the state intends to fulfil a 17-year-old promise to return the building to believers.

"God's house should belong to God," a prominent Catholic campaigner for the monastery's return remarked to Forum 18 from Minsk on 10 April. While local parishioners have heard unofficially that the monastery may now house a museum instead of a hotel, said Ganna Sivchik, "It still means the desecration of a holy place."

Sivchik suggested to Forum 18 that a nationwide petition for the return of St Joseph's Church and adjoining Bernardine Cistercian monastery may have stymied the original hotel plans. Reconstruction work failed to begin as expected in June-July 2007, she pointed out. From March 2007, believers of various confessions collected some 50,000 signatures across Belarus demanding the monastery's return.

The petition was only loosely co-ordinated, unlike a parallel campaign to change the restrictive 2002 Religion Law (see most recently F18News 2 April 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1109). Active in both initiatives, Pavel Nozdrya of the charismatic Jesus Christ Church in Mozyr (Mazyr) in Gomel (Homyel) Region, in south-east Belarus, collected 1,000 signatures soon after it was announced that the monastery would be developed as a luxury hotel and entertainment complex, including bars and a bowling alley, he told Forum 18 on 10 April.

Nozdrya and his Protestant church have been harassed by state officials for their involvement in the Religion Law petition. He himself has been fired from his job as an electrician, after the Education Ministry complained that his employer, Mozyr State Pedagogical University, was employing an "oppositionist" (see F18News 2 April 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1109).

Obtained by a Minsk academic, the plans to include a swimming pool and tennis court within the monastery – bearing the seal of Minsk City Executive Committee – were made public in *Nasha Niva* newspaper on 8 March 2007. Chairman Mikhail Pavlov of the Committee allocated 1,400,000,000 Belarusian Roubles (approximately 3,279,000 Norwegian Kroner, 412,250 Euros or 648,000 US Dollars) of state funds for development of the site as a hotel and retail complex on 25 May 2006, according to the newspaper.

Among the few Minsk buildings to have survived the Second World War, the seventeenth-century St Joseph's Church and Bernardine Cistercian monastery were confiscated by the Russian imperial authorities following a Belarusian nationalist uprising in 1864. Used as an archive from the late nineteenth century, art, literary and scientific archives continue to occupy the church. In early 2007 a military prosecutor and commandant's office vacated the now-empty monastery buildings. Footage of the complex may be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ESfA1L19-M>.

In response to Pavel Nozdrya's first submission of signatures, Minsk Spadchyna (Minsk Heritage) – a state-owned firm overseeing

development of the former monastery – maintained on 7 July 2007 that a government commission had assessed the suitability of its use as a hotel and commercial centre, he told Forum 18. Dissatisfied with this response, Nozdrya sent a further 1,500 signatures to the presidential administration on 1 August. A 14 August 2007 response from Minsk's Architecture Committee stated that a special commission subsequently set up to consider the issue had decided to preserve the historical profile of the monastery complex, said Nozdrya; it would now house a simple mini-hotel and museum.

Ales Bely, a Catholic also active in the campaign against the luxury hotel project, similarly believes that it was scaled down thanks to public opposition. But while there is a blank space in the development plans where the church is situated, he told Forum 18 on 10 April, rumours of its inclusion "have neither been confirmed nor denied." City officials have promised there will not be any form of entertainment centre in the church building, said Bely, "but not in writing."

After exhausting other methods of negotiation with the state authorities, some Belarusian religious believers have adopted tactics more usually associated with secular political activism - such as petitioning - in pursuit of their right to exercise freedom of thought, conscience and belief (see F18News 29 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=880).

Two officials at Minsk's Architecture Committee whom a secretary said would be prepared to comment – Viktor Nikitin and Aleksandr Andronchik – were unavailable when Forum 18 rang on 10 April. On 11 April another secretary maintained that the Committee was not responsible for the issue and directed Forum 18 to Minsk's Cultural Department.

Natalya Radchenko of the Cultural Department told Forum 18 that St Joseph's Church is republican rather than city property, but that she has not heard of any plans to move out the archives. While the remaining monastic buildings come under the auspices of the city authorities, she confirmed on 11 April, Forum 18 would have to approach Minsk Spadchyna for details of current development plans.

The relevant engineer at Minsk Spadchyna was unavailable for comment on 11 and 14 April.

A resolution passed by the Minsk city authorities back in 1991 promises the return of St Joseph's Church to local Catholics, Ganna Savchik told Forum 18 - but only after the archives are re-housed. She is sceptical about their continued presence in the church. "It's hard to believe that our authorities are so poor they can't move the archives. There is a huge budget to build hotel and retail complexes, sports centres, the new National Library."

The hotel development plans spurred local Catholics into stepping up their demands. In addition to petitioning, they have been holding daily prayer vigils outside the former Minsk monastery since 19 March – St Joseph's Day – in 2005, Ales Bely told Forum 18. While a typical daily prayer meeting attracts a handful of mostly elderly female parishioners, he said, those on major feast days, such as St Joseph's, are attended by several hundred people. The meetings are a lay initiative, stressed Bely.

Both the secretary and press secretary to the Catholic Bishops' Conference in Belarus, Bishop Antoni Dziemianko and Fr Aliaksandr Amialchenia, were unavailable for comment on 11 April. A priest at Minsk's Catholic Church of Saints Simon and Helena (known locally due to its brickwork as the Red Church), Fr Vladislav Zavalnyuk told Forum 18 on 9 April that church leaders – including Bishop Dziemianko - are in favour of the monastery's return, both as a unique survival in Belarus and "because it's better to carry out repairs on old churches than to build something new." Fr Zavalnyuk said he knew nothing of current development plans at the site, however. "All I know is that they don't give the church back."

The proposed development – even if it preserves the historical character of the monastery complex – bucks a more recent trend. Minsk's most prominent surviving historical Catholic churches – Saints Simon and Helena (the Red Church), Holy Trinity and the Cathedral of the Virgin Mary – have now been restored to believers after use as a cinema, sports hall and philharmonic during the Soviet period.

There is "a catastrophic lack" of Catholic churches in Minsk nevertheless, Ales Bely told Forum 18. The Belarusian capital's five churches serve at least 30 parishes, he said.

Fr Yuri Kasabutsky, curia chancellor for Minsk-Mogilev diocese, maintained to Forum 18 on 11 April that no one in the Church knows what proportion of historical Catholic churches in Belarus have been returned to believers: "Someone would have to sit down and count."

Gennadi Sheikin, a historian at the Belarusian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), estimated to Forum 18 on 11 April that 95 per cent of historical Orthodox churches in Belarus have been returned.

According to 2005 state figures, 484 of the Belarusian Orthodox Church's 1,092 and 194 of the Catholic Church's 410 churches are cultural monuments.

Out of 92 historical synagogues in Belarus, however, only a handful have been returned to Jewish communities since 1991. The 2002 Religion Law stipulates that religious organisations do not have priority in claims for worship buildings currently used for

culture or sport – usually the case with former synagogues (see F18News 29 January 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=239).

Lutherans and Calvinists have also had little success in winning back their historical churches (see F18News 8 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=157). Protestant communities also continue to face great difficulties in rebuilding premises for worship (see F18News 30 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=966).

Similarly, Protestant communities face problems in renting buildings to meet for worship. A consistent pattern has emerged over a number of years, in which those who control premises for rent regularly back out of contracts with Protestants soon after the authorities are informed (see F18News 29 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=965) (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=888.

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Belarus can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=16>.

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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