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BELARUS: "The views of the parishioners are nothing to us"

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

The Catholic Church in Belarus has appealed for the state to rescind its ban on four priests and three nuns working in the country, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. One of the priests, Fr Zbigniew Grygorcewicz, was told that he was being expelled for arranging a banned Christian music festival. Like his colleagues, Fr Grygorcewicz was active in serving the people of his parish, arranging for a sports pitch for local children to be built, providing humanitarian aid in the area, promoting ecumenical activity among the town's Christian churches, and lecturing in the Belarusian State University. One of the many parishioners and students who have protested against the bans, Lena Okolovicz, told Forum 18 that it is "absurd" that foreigners need special permission from the state before they can conduct religious work in the country. "I think believers should take the decision over which priest should serve where, not the state." But Mikhail Rybakov of the government's Office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs told Forum 18 that "the views of the parishioners are nothing to us."

As the Catholic Archdiocese of Minsk-Mohilov [Mahilyow] insists it will work to bring back the foreign priest and three nuns banned from continuing their religious work in the country from the end of December 2008, officials have dismissed Catholic concerns over the bans to Forum 18 News Service. "If the Diocese wants them to return then they should apply," Mikhail Rybakov, the spokesperson for the government's Office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, told Forum 18 from the capital Minsk on 6 January. "Nothing prevents [Archbishop Tadeusz] Kondrusiewicz coming here to resolve this issue." Rybakov refused to acknowledge that the Archbishop had already applied for the four to be allowed to remain. Asked whether the Office would give the necessary permission for the four if Archbishop Kondrusiewicz applies yet again, Rybakov declared: "I can't say."

"The views of the parishioners are nothing to us"

Rybakov scorned protests by parishioners of ousted priest Fr Zbigniew Grygorcewicz. "The views of the parishioners are nothing to us – he was invited by the Archdiocese, not by the parishioners." He said that if it needs to, there is nothing to stop the Catholic Church inviting another foreign priest to take Fr Grygorcewicz's place. "Why can't the Church accept another priest? I see nothing wrong in that."

Asked repeatedly why Fr Grygorcewicz cannot remain, given that he is the choice of the parish and the Archdiocese, Rybakov avoided answering. "Everything was done in accordance with the law," he kept insisting.

Rybakov refused to explain to Forum 18 why it was the role of the state to choose which religious leaders are acceptable or unacceptable. But he stressed that if those banned return to Belarus and conduct religious activity without state permission they will be punished under the Criminal Code.

Appeals, threat that official attitudes to nuns "would become even harsher"

Fr Aleksandr Amialchenia of the Minsk-Mohilov Archdiocese rejected Rybakov's comments as "at the very least irresponsible". He insisted that Archbishop Kondrusiewicz had "more than once" appealed to the Office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs in recent weeks for the priest and three nuns to have their permission extended. "He did this both before the Plenipotentiary's official reply and afterwards," Fr Amialchenia told Forum 18 from Minsk on 7 January.

He said that Fr Grygorcewicz's documents will again be lodged as soon as the January 2009 holiday for Orthodox Christmas is over. As for the three nuns, he said the Plenipotentiary had verbally "insisted" that the Archdiocese not raise their cases. "Otherwise the attitude to the presence of foreign nuns in Belarus would become even harsher," he reported.

The three Polish nuns who were also refused an extension to their permission to conduct religious work after the end of December 2008 were all working in parishes in the Minsk-Mohilov Archdiocese. Sister Malgorzata Zarek was working in Nesvezh, Sister Antonina Bigaj in Svir and Sister Katarzyna Cheldt in Novy Sverchen. Fr Amialchenia told Forum 18 that all three nuns had left Belarus by 1 January.

Fr Amialchenia said that Archbishop Kondrusiewicz is doing all he can to have the priest and nuns returned to their work and to

prevent further such "incidents". "The reason officials gave – in writing - was the small number of faithful in the parishes where they were serving," Fr Amialchenia told Forum 18, an assertion the Church rejects.

As well as the priest and three nuns in the Minsk-Mohilov Archdiocese, three Polish Catholic priests in the Grodno [Hrodna] Diocese in western Belarus also had their permission to continue religious work in the country revoked at the end of December. The three are Fr Jan Bronowski, Fr Jan Skonieczny, and Fr Andrzej Krawczyk. Marina Tsvilik of the Office of the Plenipotentiary told Forum 18 it was because they did not know the state languages, Russian and Belarusian (see F18News 23 December 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1235).

The bans brought to 29 the number of foreign religious workers – including Protestants and Jews as well as Catholics - banned from working with local religious communities since 2004 (see F18News 23 December 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1235).

Rybakov of the Office of the Plenipotentiary insisted to Forum 18 that the state makes no distinctions between different religious communities. However, he was not able to recall any foreign Orthodox priests who had been banned from conducting religious work in Belarus.

"I broke no laws, but they thought I was too active"

Fr Grygorcewicz, assistant priest at the Nativity of the Virgin Mary parish in the town of Borisov [Barysaw] for the past three years, was told verbally that his permission to conduct religious work both there and in the small town of Okolovo some 70 kms (45 miles) north of Borisov would not be extended after its expiry at the end of December 2008. "Nothing was in writing," he told Forum 18 from Warsaw on 6 January. "I broke no laws, but they thought I was too active. It is a violation of human rights."

Fr Grygorcewicz said that another priest has had to be assigned from Minsk temporarily to serve at the Okolovo parish, where there is no resident priest. He said he had collected money to build a new church there to replace the one destroyed during the Soviet period. He added that the local authorities had provided a former shop for the small parish to use for worship.

In Borisov Fr Grygorcewicz arranged for a sports pitch for local children to be built, helped provide humanitarian aid as far as the authorities allow it and promoted ecumenical activity among the town's Christian churches.

Catholic priests and nuns previously expelled from Belarus have also been involved in social care and ecumenical activity (see F18News 12 January 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=899).

As well as serving in the parishes in Borisov and Okolovo, Fr Grygorcewicz taught part-time for the past two years at the SS. Methodius and Cyril Theological Institute at the Belarusian State University in Minsk. In approving this part-time work at the request of Russian Orthodox Metropolitan Filaret, the Plenipotentiary Leonid Gulyako made clear that this permission did not extend to allowing Fr Grygorcewicz to conduct any religious activity within the city of Minsk. Foreign religious workers are only allowed to conduct religious activity in the locations for which they are approved.

Fr Grygorcewicz said that when he asked the senior religious affairs official for Minsk Region, Leonid Parkhimovich, in late December why his permission to continue his pastoral work was not being extended, the official told him verbally that it was because of a Christian music festival he had planned to hold in his church in September 2008. The festival was cancelled by state officials minutes before it was due to begin (see F18News 25 September 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1193).

Parkhimovich's telephone went unanswered when Forum 18 called on 5 and 6 January, while 7 January is a public holiday. No other official was prepared to explain to Forum 18 who had taken the decision to ban Fr Grygorcewicz from further religious work. Aleksandr Myadeltsov, the main specialist on religious organisations within the Ideology Department of Borisov Executive Committee, told Forum 18 on 6 January that the decision not to extend Fr Grygorcewicz's permission for religious work was "not in our competence".

Myadeltsov said permission to conduct religious work locally is signed by the head of the Executive Committee, but "the decision is taken by the Office of the Plenipotentiary in Minsk". He referred all further enquiries to Valentina Shutko, deputy head of the Executive Committee with responsibility for social issues. However, reached the same day she refused to discuss anything with Forum 18, referring all questions to the Office of the Plenipotentiary in Minsk.

Rybakov of the Office of the Plenipotentiary in Minsk said the decision over Fr Grygorcewicz – as with all such cases – was taken locally.

"I'm committed to the country"

Although not required to leave Belarus, Fr Grygorcewicz said that he chose to do so and returned to Poland on 30 December.

Fr Grygorcewicz insisted to Forum 18 that he would like to return to his parishes and says he will wait in Warsaw for a new invitation to conduct religious work which would then allow him to apply for a new visa as well.

Fr Grygorcewicz pointed out that his parents – who are both now dead – were born before the Second World War to the west of Minsk in territory that is now in Belarus. "That's why I'm committed to the country," he told Forum 18. "I want to get Belarusian citizenship." He said he had begun the process of collecting documents from archives proving that his parents had been born locally.

Parishoners back priest

Fr Grygorcewicz enjoys vocal backing from his parishioners in Borisov, as well as from staff and students at the university. "All parishioners are awaiting his return," parishioner Lena Okolovicz told Forum 18 from Borisov on 7 January. "The respect Fr Zbigniew has could only inspire delight among the population." She said some 430 parishioners have signed a petition calling for him to be allowed to resume his work.

Okolovicz said that parishioners had appealed to Borisov Executive Committee, the Office of the Plenipotentiary and to the Presidential Administration in Minsk. "When we went to the Presidential Administration, officials told us a commission would meet and consider our petition," Okolovicz reported. She said a group of nine had also gone to visit Shutko at the Executive Committee on 29 December and she had told them if Fr Grygorcewicz came for an "audience" the issue could be resolved. "He went, but there was no result."

Myadeltsov of the Executive Committee acknowledged that parishioners had presented an appeal for Fr Grygorcewicz's return. "It is being considered and they will get an answer," he told Forum 18. Asked if the answer will be positive he responded: "I don't know."

Catholic parishioner Okolovicz told Forum 18 she believes it is "absurd" that foreigners need special permission from the state before they can conduct religious work in the country. "I think believers should take the decision over which priest should serve where, not the state."

Past expulsions of priests and nuns

Seven Polish Catholic priests and five nuns – also working in Grodno Diocese - were forced out of the country at the end of 2006, apparently because of their high levels of religious activity, including youth and alcohol rehabilitation meetings open to all. A petition and other campaigns by local Catholics failed to get the decisions overturned. At the end of 2005, two Catholic parish priests working in the Minsk-Mohilov Archdiocese did not have their annual visas renewed and were thus forced to return to their native Poland (see F18News 12 January 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=899).

Another priest, Fr Grzegorz Chudek, had to leave Belarus at the end of 2007, apparently due to his discussion of Belarus' social problems in the Polish press (see F18News 20 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1090).

A January 2008 Council of Ministers decree imposed tighter restrictions on inviting foreign religious workers to the country. The Office of the Plenipotentiary was given sole discretion in deciding whether religious work by foreign citizens is necessary. The decree specified that only registered religious associations have the right to invite foreign religious workers. These consist of ten or more communities, at least one of which must have functioned in Belarus for 20 years. Applicants have to attest the knowledge of Belarusian and Russian for most of those they invite (see F18News 20 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1090). (END)

For a personal commentary by Antoni Bokun, Pastor of a Pentecostal Church in Minsk, on Belarusian citizens' struggle to reclaim their history as a land of religious freedom, see F18News 22 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1131.

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

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