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BELARUS: Mass banned at Minsk's iconic Red Church

By Olga Glace, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Visiting the closed Catholic Church of Saints Simon and Helena (Red Church) in central Minsk on 12 October, the day the parish was ordered to remove its property, Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, retired Archbishop of Minsk-Mogilev, "was crying from the hopelessness of the situation". The worship ban and enforced closure followed a "strange and ambiguous" early-morning fire on 26 September in a small annexe. "Despite the small area of damage, the entire church is sealed and not accessible to the public for holding services," parishioners complained.

Officials have stopped Catholics from holding Mass or any other religious meetings at the 112-year-old Catholic Church of Saints Simon and Helena (also known as the Red Church) in central Minsk. The ban followed an early-morning fire on 26 September in a small annexe to the Church, which parishioners have called "strange and ambiguous". On 5 October, Minsk Heritage, the building agency that has control of the Church, ordered the parish to remove all its property from the entire building by 12 October. Officials have given no timetable for the repairs they claim to be undertaking.

"Despite the small area of damage, the entire church is sealed and not accessible to the public for holding services," the parish complained in an online petition for the Church to be reopened for worship. "Believers do not have the opportunity to participate in religious rites and the life of the parish has stopped." It called for services to be allowed to resume in the main part of the Church, the side chapels or the yard outside the Church (see below).

Forum 18 was unable to find out from Minsk Heritage why access to the church was banned when only a small part of it was damaged, when restoration works will start and whether the cost for repair works will be charged to the parish. The secretary refused to put Forum 18 through to the director Aleksandr Kokhan (see below).

No one at the police or Investigative Committee was prepared to discuss the investigation into the fire with Forum 18 (see below).

Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, the retired Metropolitan Archbishop of Minsk-Mogilev, and Kazimir Velikoselets, Assistant Bishop of Pinsk, visited the Church on 12 October, the day the ultimatum to remove all the parish's property expired. "The retired metropolitan was crying from the hopelessness of the situation," Christian Vision, a local Christian group monitoring political and religious developments, quoted witnesses as saying.

That evening, parish priest Fr Vladislav Zavalnyuk held a special Mass in his residence next to the Church, which has not been seized. "More people came than usual and they couldn't all fit in," Christian Vision noted. "Eye-witnesses say that police officers in civilian clothes were on duty around the building."

The previous day, police tried to pull Fr Zavalnyuk away as he was praying on the steps of the closed Church and also threatened parishioners who were praying the rosary outside (see below).

The evening Mass at Minsk's cathedral on 13 October, to be led by Yuri Kasabutsky, Assistant Bishop of Minsk-Mogilev, is to pray for the speedy return of the Red Church for worship.

In a 12 October statement (<https://belarus2020.churchby.info/christian-vision-statement-st-simon-and-st-helenas-roman-church/>), Christian Vision said the fire and its consequences "raise many questions". It called for an open and public investigation into its causes, with church representatives able to take part.

Christian Vision expressed "strong disagreement" with the "arbitrary and unjustified termination" of the parish's right to use the Red Church. "We consider such a decision to be pressure on the religious community, gross interference in the life of religious organisations, and an act of intimidation of all communities and religious organisations in the Republic of Belarus," Christian Vision maintained.

"We believe that on the part of the authorities the fairest and most adequate solution to the situation would be to restitute the Red Church and return ownership rights to it either to the local Roman Catholic community or to the Minsk-Mogilev Archdiocese of the

Roman Catholic Church," Christian Vision declared.

The regime has repeatedly rejected appeals over many years to hand the Church of Saints Simon and Helena back to the Catholic community. Minsk Heritage, an agency owned by the city administration, has been in dispute with the parish over repair works conducted without consultation (see below).

The mysterious fire in the Red Church came less than 24 hours after police banned Minsk's New Life Pentecostal Church from meeting for worship in the car park of the church building from which the authorities expelled it in February 2021. A Minsk court fined two pastors for leading the Church's worship meeting in the church car park the previous Sunday (see below).

The Red Church is among several historical Catholic places of worship which the state has repeatedly refused to hand back to the Church (see below).

Communities which do not already have state-recognised places of worship often struggle to get permission to build or use them (see below).

Worship bans, place of worship denials

The regime imposes tight restrictions on all aspects of the exercise of freedom of religion or belief (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2612). Only registered religious organisations are allowed to hold meetings for worship or for other religious purposes and only at state-approved places.

On 25 September, Police banned Minsk's New Life Church from meeting for Sunday worship (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2777) in the car park of the building from which officials forcibly evicted it in February 2021. Police detained the Church's pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko and another pastor Antoni Bokun. A judge fined each two months' average wage for leading the 18 September service which police had observed.

Minsk City Executive Committee refuses to return New Life's seized church building or allow the Church to meet for worship in the car park.

Some religious communities face official obstruction to opening or maintaining places of worship. After struggling since 1998 for a church, Minsk's Pomore Old Believers were in March 2022 denied building permission (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2739). Minsk District Executive Committee Head Vladimir Yurgevich claimed it was "inexpedient", and that completed building plans were not lodged by an August 2021 deadline.

Refusal to return Red Church

The Church of Saints Simon and Helena (known locally due to its brickwork as the Red Church) is a prominent Catholic church in central Minsk, built in 1910. It was confiscated during the Soviet period. Although Catholics have used it again from 1990, it was not returned to the Church and remains state property.

By a Presidential decree of 13 September 2013, the Church was handed over to Minsk City Executive Committee with the understanding that Catholics would continue to use the Church free of charge. The Executive Committee designated its own building agency Minsk Heritage to be responsible for maintenance of the Church and the priests' residence attached to it.

The Red Church has been in conflict with Minsk Heritage over restoration work costing more than 5,000,000 Belarusian Roubles which the agency undertook without consulting the parish (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2591). The restoration work did not tackle problems such as repeated flooding of the basement.

The city authorities also charged the parish monthly rent of just under 13,000 Belarusian Roubles. "Why should we pay the state 13,000 Belarusian Roubles a month to pray in our own church?" parish priest Fr Stanislav Stanevsky asked independent news agency Naviny.by in July 2020 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2591).

In January 2021, the state stopped charging the parish a monthly fee, but the large debt remained.

In July 2020, parishioners launched a petition asking the Presidential Administration to return ownership of the Red Church (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2591) to the parish. More than 5,000 people had signed within the first week.

Catholics in Mogilev, Grodno and Bobruisk have also tried without success to regain ownership of historical churches they use (see below).

Circumstances of fire "strange and ambiguous"

A fire broke out in the sacristy, an annexe to the Church of Saints Simon and Helena, in the early hours of 26 September 2022. Fire-fighters used a lot of water in their response, flooding the Church. The fire damaged 20 square metres (215 square feet) of the sacristy. The entire building is 3,300 square metres (35,500 square feet).

"At night, the alarm went off, there was a lot of smoke, fire-fighters responded to the call," the parish noted on its website on 3 October. "Broken windows were discovered. During the past week, investigations were conducted, video surveillance data was recorded."

Parishioners told Katolik.life website on 26 September that, according to the Church watchman, "before the smoke appeared in the church, a rumble was heard. The fact that the Investigative Committee arrived practically together with the Emergency Situations Ministry also caused surprise. Believers call the situation strange and ambiguous - especially after the announcement of the decision to close the church for believers."

Katolik.life noted the following day that two windows were found to have been broken at the entrance close to where the fire broke out. "It is possible that the fire-fighters could have done it to put out the fire – there were traces left there, probably from water. But, as you know, an electrical wiring fire cannot be extinguished with water - for safety reasons." It added that OMON riot police had closed off the square some three hours before the fire. Investigators also took away computers and video surveillance recordings.

The parish has not been given access to information about the course of the investigation. The parish has sent a request to the Investigative Committee to provide information on the results.

Forum 18 called Moscow District Police to enquire about the suspicious circumstances of the fire and the progress of the investigation. However, the duty officer refused to comment or put Forum 18 through to an officer who could comment. "This is a dispatch centre and we don't give phone numbers," he told Forum 18 on 12 October.

The telephone of the deputy head of Minsk City Investigative Committee, Colonel Andrei Grib, went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 13 October. A colleague refused to put Forum 18 through to him the same day.

Emergency Situations Commission bans parish use of Church

Later on 26 September, the Emergency Situations Commission of Minsk's Moscow District Administration held a meeting to discuss the Red Church's future, which Fr Zavalnyuk was allowed to address. The Commission banned the further use of the entire building until restoration work is completed. It gave no timetable for this. No one – including the parish priests – was allowed into the Church.

The telephone of the head of Moscow District Administration's Emergency Situations Department, who chairs the Emergency Situation Commission, Andrei Goncharov, went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 13 October. The same day, a deputy head, Pavel Logodyuk, refused to answer why the whole Church has been closed, insisting repeatedly that he was "not competent" to respond.

Minsk Heritage director Aleksandr Kokhan told Minsk-Novosti news website on 6 October that the electricity system in the Church is "in a state of disrepair" and that electricity, heating and water supply to the Church had been turned off. He gave no timetable for repairs.

On 3 October, Minsk Heritage's Director Kokhan wrote to the parish priest, Fr Vladislav Zavalnyuk, informing him of the Red Church's closure and ordering him to remove all parish property from the Church by 12 October.

The letter, seen by Forum 18, added that "representatives of Moscow District Emergency Situations Ministry and Minsk Heritage officials .. examined the damage to the property, wiring systems and networks and found significant defects in the examined property, its wiring systems and equipment functional capacity." It declared: "Due to this, further use of the Red Church is impossible."

On 5 October, director Kokhan of Minsk Heritage wrote again to Fr Zavalnyuk (in a letter seen by Forum 18) insisting that he also had to vacate the free-standing priests' house 20 metres (65 feet) from the Church by 13 October. Kokhan claimed that the priests' house could not be used as it is connected to the same electricity and heating circuits as the Red Church.

Forum 18 was unable to find out from Minsk Heritage why access to the church was banned when only a small part of it was damaged, when restoration works will start and whether the cost for repair works will be charged to the parish. The secretary refused to put Forum 18 through to the director Kokhan on 12 October. "Please send your questions in writing, we'll try to answer them," she said.

Prayers, fast for reopening of Church

On the evening of 26 September, a group of parishioners gathered outside the walls of the closed Church to pray the rosary. They said they would gather there each day until the Church was reopened for worship.

Parish priest Fr Vladislav Zavalnyuk began a fast on 1 October. The parish complained on 4 October that no work had begun to remedy the damage from the water used to put out the fire. It called on church members to join the fast.

However, on 11 October police tried to interfere with church members' prayer outside the Church. "More than 20 people were praying the rosary outside the church when two police cars arrived and the police ordered us to leave," a church member told Christian Vision. Officers claimed that an assembly of more than two people is considered an "unauthorised mass event".

Those who hold unapproved meetings for any purpose can be brought to court for "Violation of the procedure for organising or conducting a mass event or demonstration" under Administrative Code Article 24.23, Part 1. Punishments are a fine of up to 100 base units (about two months' average wage), or community service, or 15 days' imprisonment.

In 2022 so far, courts have used Administrative Code Article 24.23 to punish four Protestant pastors in Gomel for holding outdoor baptisms, and two Protestant pastors in Minsk for leading worship (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2777) in the car park of the confiscated New Life Pentecostal Church (see above).

Police officers also tried to stop Fr Zavalnyuk from praying on the steps of his closed Church on the afternoon of 11 October, trying to pull him away. However, they eventually left him alone. No church members were detained and were allowed to pray by the Church in small groups.

Catholic spokesperson Fr Yuri Sanko told Forum 18 that Fr Zavalnyuk is allowed to stay in the priest's house next to the Red Church and hold worship services there together with parishioners.

Petition, appeal to reopen Church

On 7 October, the parish launched an online petition to the Presidential Administration and Minsk City Executive Committee calling for the restoration of services at the Red Church. By the time the petition was submitted on 10 October, 633 people had signed it.

"Despite the small area of damage, the entire church is sealed and not accessible to the public for holding services," the parish complained. "Believers do not have the opportunity to participate in religious rites and the life of the parish has stopped." It called for services to be allowed to resume in the main part of the Church, the side chapels or the yard outside the Church.

On 10 October, Fr Zavalnyuk published his letter to President Aleksandr Lukashenko asking to allow the parish to participate in examination of the premises and damage estimation. "The duty to examine the damaged constructions and to report the results is assigned to both Minsk Heritage and the Parish," he insisted. He pointed out that, in his view, the fire was caused by malicious intent rather than an accident.

On 10 October, Fr Zavalnyuk also wrote to Minsk Heritage reminding it that under the Emergency Situations Department's 26 September decision, both Minsk Heritage and Church representatives were to assess the damage and report on it. He called on Minsk Heritage to organise a joint inspection "in the shortest possible time".

"Trying to conduct a constructive dialogue"

The parish "is trying to conduct a constructive dialogue" with Minsk Heritage "to eliminate the consequences of the fire as soon as possible", the Minsk-Mogilev Archdiocese noted in a 7 October statement.

"Alternative possibilities are being sought to continue the activities of the parish community in the current conditions," the Archdiocese added. "We hope for fruitful cooperation with state structures of different levels. We believe that the shrine, which was built by the faithful of the Catholic Church, will continue to serve the faithful. We hope that the life of the parish will be restored in the near future."

Catholic spokesperson Fr Yuri Sanko confirmed to Forum 18 the Archdiocese's statement. He insisted that Minsk Heritage has no intention to terminate the free-use agreement with the parish. "In any case, in the official letter the termination of the free-use agreement is out of the question," he maintained to Forum 18 on 10 October. "Only the church's functioning is suspended because Minsk Heritage cannot fulfil the lessor's obligations."

Fr Sanko also explained that the order to remove the property from the church building was made to protect it from damage during the repair works.

On 7 October, the regime's senior religious affairs official, Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Aleksandr Rumak, received Archbishop Iosif Staneusky of Minsk-Mogilev and the Vatican Nuncio to Belarus, Archbishop Ante Jozic. The two sides

discussed the ban on use of the Church of Saints Simon and Helena.

Rumak claimed to the official news agency Belta the same day that the Church of Saints Simon and Helena would reopen "for its primary purpose" once the causes of the 26 September fire have been investigated and restoration has been completed. He said that Minsk City Executive Committee would pay for the works, as the building belongs to it. He added that in the meantime, Catholics can attend other churches in Minsk.

Rumak attacked those who had criticised the regime's ban on the Catholics using their Church. "This provoked a storm of indignation on destructive Telegram channels, which accuse the regime of allegedly taking the Red Church from Catholic believers," he told Belta. He claimed that critics failed to recognise that this followed damage to the electricity circuits in the church.

The phone of the Head of the Religious Affairs Department at the Plenipotentiary's Office, Andrei Aryaev, went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 11 and 12 October. Asked on 13 October to confirm that the Red Church is to be returned for free use by the Catholic parish after repair works, and why church members are obstructed from praying outside their closed Church, the Deputy Head Yelena Radchenko responded: "The Plenipotentiary is not responsible for the issue of returning churches. I will not answer questions because I do not know whom I am talking to."

Mogilev Co-Cathedral still not returned

The state similarly owns the Catholic Co-Cathedral of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St Stanislaus in Mogilev, but the rent charged to that parish has been nominal.

In its statement on the 7 October meeting of Archbishop Staneusky and Archbishop Jozic with Plenipotentiary Rumak in Minsk, the Catholic Church website noted that the state authorities would transfer the Co-Cathedral to the parish community "for free use for a period of five years".

"At the present time, in this ancient place of worship, which has an exceptional historical value, serious repair work is being carried out by the efforts of the parish community to preserve and restore the church," the statement noted.

Mogilev Executive Committee has refused to return the Co-Cathedral (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2591) to Catholic ownership. (END)

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Belarus (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=16>)

For background information, see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey (https://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 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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