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BELARUS: Orthodox parish banned from worshipping

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

In what its priest, Fr Ioann Grudnitsky, has described to Forum 18 News Service as "the crudest violation of religious freedom," state officials in Belarus are refusing to register a Russian Orthodox Church Abroad village parish that has come into conflict with the local Moscow Patriarchate diocese. Activities of the parish are – against international human rights standards – illegal under Belarusian law. Non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox Christian communities can only gain state registration with the approval of a local Moscow Patriarchate bishop, and state officials have told Fr Ioann's parishioners to attend the local Moscow Patriarchate Church instead. Belarusian authorities have imposed large fines for worship in private homes on four occasions this year, "but we will carry on praying no matter what the state does," Fr Ioann told Forum 18. In a telegram to both Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko and Patriarch of Moscow Aleksii II, Fr Ioann's parishioners have complained about state restrictions on their holding of "religious events," demanding to know "where is there a law banning us from praying?"

In what its priest has described to Forum 18 News Service as "the crudest violation of religious freedom," state officials in the south-western region of Brest are refusing to register a village parish in conflict with the local Moscow Patriarchate diocese, imposing fines for worship in private homes on four occasions in early 2005. "But we will carry on praying no matter what the state does," the priest, Fr Ioann Grudnitsky, told Forum 18 on 28 October.

Fr Ioann's parish was part of the local Moscow Patriarchate diocese but, following escalating disputes with state authorities and the diocese, in July the 120-strong parish of SS Sophia and her Three Daughters, Faith, Hope and Charity in the village of Ruzhany joined the US-based Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCA) under Bishop Agafangel (Pashkovsky) of Odessa and Tavriya in Ukraine. According to the Ukrainian diocese's website, services are currently not held by the ROCA's four parishes in Belarus due to the state's refusal to register them. Non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox Christian communities can only gain Belarusian state registration if they have the approval of a local Moscow Patriarchate bishop (see F18News 6 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=177).

Under the restrictive 2002 religion law, which was strongly backed by the Belarusian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), state registration is compulsory for all religious communities and unregistered religious activity is illegal – against international human rights standards. Belarus' registration policy has been condemned by the UN Human Rights Committee (see F18News 4 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=682).

Earlier this year the second ROCA priest in Belarus, Fr Leonid Plyats, was interrogated by local officials in Minsk region about his "illegal religious activity" (see F18News 6 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=577).

Speaking to Forum 18 on 27 October, parish warden Lyubov Isakova explained that her community stopped attending the Moscow Patriarchate church of SS Peter and Paul almost three years ago in 2002, due to suspicion that its then parish priest had stolen a significant number of its icons. "We don't trust the new priest [Fr Aleksandr Sen] either," she added, maintaining that another valuable icon – bearing Second World War bullet holes – had been recently removed for renovation "but a completely different one came back." In a 24 December 2004 letter to the Ruzhany parishioners, Brest region's public prosecutor agrees that the criminal case into the disappearance of church plate and icons from SS Peter and Paul church between 1991 and 2002 was "not sufficiently investigated" before its closure by Pruzhany district police in July 2004. The letter announces that the case has now been re-opened and will be conducted by the regional authorities.

Another reason for the parishioners' distrust of Fr Sen is that, before being transferred from Brest to Ruzhany in 2002, he was dismissed as assistant priest by Fr Ioann Grudnitsky (then a priest in Brest) after Fr Sen had protested against the dismissal of his relative, the Brest parish's treasurer, under whom over three million Belarusian Roubles (9,250 Norwegian Kroner, 1,188 Euros or 1,394 US Dollars) were allegedly unaccounted for. Bishop Ioann (Khoma) of Brest and Kobrin responded to Fr Sen's dismissal by retiring Fr Ioann Grudnitsky from parish duties in late 2002. Fr Ioann disputes the validity of both this and the decision to defrock him.

On 18 January Ruzhany Village Council refused a parishioner of Fr Ioann's, Liliya Yukhnovskaya, the right to host services in her own home on the grounds that it did not comply with fire safety norms.

(An alleged unsuitability of premises is a reason commonly given by the state authorities for denying religious communities permission to meet for worship, see F18News 21 February http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=516, 30 September http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=664, 25 October http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=676 and 4 November http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=682 2005).

On the basis of testimony from two local police officers, 65-year-old Yuhknovskaya was fined three times the monthly minimum wage, or 72,000 Belarusian Roubles (214 Norwegian Kroner, 27 Euros or 32 US Dollars) on 2 February by a local administrative commission for "making her house available for a religious event at 10am on [Sunday] 23 January" despite being warned on 20 January.

On 1 February the local district court in Pruzhany fined the Brest-based Fr Ioann Grudnitsky 20 times the monthly minimum wage, or 480,000 Belarusian Roubles (1,424 Norwegian Kroner, 183 Euros or 215 US Dollars) for "conducting a religious service at 10am on 7 January [Orthodox Christmas] with the inhabitants of Ruzhany village" not having obtained permission for the organisation and holding of religious events in the lawfully prescribed manner." Fr Ioann denied to the court he had committed an offence, maintaining that he led the service at the villagers' request and "as a free priest, has the right to conduct a service in any church or home."

On 16 March the same court fined Fr Ioann 150 times the monthly minimum wage, or 3,600,000 Belarusian Roubles (10,682 Norwegian Kroner, 1,372 Euros or 1,610 US Dollars) for holding subsequent "religious events" at the same address at midday on 15 February (the Orthodox feast day of the Meeting of Our Lord in the Temple) and at 11.30am on Sunday 20 February.

In a 2 February 2005 letter to Liliya Zasimovich of the Ruzhany parish, the chairman of Brest region's Council for Religious and Ethnic Affairs explains that the local authorities "took lawful measures to curtail the unapproved activity" of Fr Ioann's parish because it is unregistered. Vasili Marchenko also urges its members – four-fifths of whom are aged between 60 and 80 - to attend the local village Moscow Patriarchate church of SS Peter and Paul, where "normal conditions have been created for the performance of religious rites by all who wish."

"In our opinion," continues Marchenko, who is responsible for registration of organisations in Brest region, "the behaviour of your associates in bringing about a schism in the parish does not conform to Orthodox teaching, which calls for meekness, unity and love for one's neighbour. The only sensible way out of the present situation is for everyone who has broken away to return to the normal life of the Orthodox parish of SS Peter and Paul."

In the wake of these fines, Liliya Zasimovich wrote to Brest region's public prosecutor asking for measures to be taken "to prevent the state organs from interfering in church affairs, in particular in relation to Fr Ioann Grudnitsky." A 25 February reply from Pruzhany district's public prosecutor explains that, while the 2002 religion law requires all religious communities to register with the state, a check-up on the Ruzhany community revealed that it was conducting religious events at a residential address while unregistered. The prosecutor's reply also points out that Fr Ioann Grudnitsky "was defrocked by the Synod of the Belarusian Exarchate of the Moscow Patriarchate on 30 January, depriving him of all rights connected with performing divine office (Vespers and Matins in Ruzhany village on 7, 9, 16 and 19 January 2005)."

In an undated letter to Russian Orthodox Patriarch Aleksii II, the Ruzhany parishioners maintain that they do not intend to join or form a rival community: "We are faithful Orthodox people and we have one Mother – the Russian Orthodox Church." On 14 January Liliya Zasimovich tried unsuccessfully to obtain the support of Bishop Ioann for the community's state registration as a new parish of the Moscow Patriarchate's Brest diocese, with Fr Ioann Grudnitsky as their chosen priest. It was only after this attempt to stay within the Moscow Patriarchate failed that the parish joined the ROCA.

The Ruzhany parishioners also complain about the state restrictions on their holding of "religious events" at home in a 16 March telegram to both the Russian patriarch and President Aleksandr Lukashenko: "Surely prayer is not an 'event'? And where is there a law banning us from praying?"

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

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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