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BELARUS: Mixed state response to Catholic and Protestant protests

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Catholics in Belarus have halted a hunger-strike, after receiving endorsement for church construction from the Grodno city administration, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Parish priest Fr Aleksandr Shemet stressed to Forum 18 that the Church has not received permission to build, but permission to "gather documents" and "ask for final permission from the President." Parishioners are praying for all Belarusian churches without a building – including Minsk's New Life charismatic Church - and for the 12 Polish Catholic priests and nuns refused permission to work in Belarus after 31 December 2006. "We want not only the Catholic Church, but all Christians to be able to practise their religion freely," Fr Shemet remarks. "So we will pray that believers are not afraid to demand their rights." The 12 priests and nuns have been denied permission to continue working in Belarus, despite appeals from 12,000 people including Catholic bishops. New Life Church is supporting the Catholics of Grodno and praying for a forthcoming court session, on whether moves to terminate New Life's land rights and force the sale of its building are lawful.

Catholics in the north-western city of Grodno [Hrodna] have halted their hunger-strike, after receiving endorsement from the city administration for church construction on 6 December, parish priest Fr Aleksandr Shemet has told Forum 18 News Service. He stressed, however, that this does not mean that Our Lady of Ostrobrama Church has received permission to build. "It will be some time before anything actually happens," Fr Aleksandr explained to Forum 18 from Grodno on 11 December. "The document we have received is approval for us to gather the relevant documents and then ask for final permission from the President – it just means that the Governor and the city authorities endorse our application."

Grodno Regional Executive Committee chairman Vladimir Savchenko, in a 6 December letter seen by Forum 18, tells local Catholic bishop Aleksandr Kaszkiewicz that he supports the city authorities' proposal and "does not object to the construction of a Catholic church at 2 Repin Street." Savchenko adds that the city authorities have ordered a local firm dealing with construction projects "to compile, in accordance with Belarusian law, documentation allocating a plot of land for the construction of a house of worship."

According to Fr Aleksandr Shemet, 18 parishioners began their hunger-strike on 1 December at Our Lady of Ostrobrama Church's temporary wooden chapel at the Repin Street site (see F18News 29 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=880). On 6 December, Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko of Minsk's charismatic New Life Church visited the Grodno Catholics with various Protestant pastors and participants in his congregation's own October hunger-strike (see F18News 3 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=865). Photographs on New Life's website show a supply of bottled water brought by the visitors, as well as a sign - "New Life Church, Minsk – we are praying for you" - which the Catholics put on display in their chapel (see http://www.newlife.by/news_templ.php?art_y=06&art_mon=12&art_d=06&art_h=18&art_min=46).

New Life's example appears to have inspired the Grodno parish. "We are grateful to the Protestants for giving us courage," Fr Aleksandr remarked on the charismatic church's website. "We prayed for the hunger-strikers every day during their protest." On 24 November more than 100 Our Lady of Ostrobrama parishioners delivered an ultimatum to the offices of their local Regional Executive Committee, declaring their intention to go on hunger strike if they did not receive official state permission to build a church by 1 December (see F18News 29 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=880).

Photographs of the gathering, including one of anonymous men in plain clothes filming the Catholics, have been published by the Charter 97 Belarusian news website published (see <http://www.charter97.org/rus/news/2006/11/24/photo>). Monitoring of religious communities by the state authorities is routine (see eg. F18News 3 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=849).

Our Lady of Ostrobrama Church has been trying for the past ten years to obtain official permission to build on Repin Street land purchased by Grodno Catholic diocese, according to a lengthy 6 November 2006 article on Belarusian news website Euramost. The Grodno parishioners' six files of correspondence with the state authorities document their attempts to secure the necessary approval for a new church building from state departments dealing with land allocation, architecture, religious affairs, safety and hygiene, ecology and land resources, heritage, electricity, gas, heating, lighting, telecommunications, communal services and traffic police. In

October 2001, after gathering thousands of supporters' signatures, the Catholics finally received the regional authorities' permission to compile a construction project. Their request for official allocation of land for church construction has continued to meet with refusals, however. Moreover, the article continues, the construction of new houses of worship in regional centres such as Grodno requires the agreement of President Aleksandr Lukashenko as of May 2005.

Fr Aleksandr Shemet, in a further comment on New Life's website, states that Our Lady of Ostrobrama parishioners continue to pray not only for the plight of all Belarusian churches without a building, but also for those Polish Catholic priests and nuns who have been refused permission to work in Belarus after the end of 2006 (see F18News 3 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=850). "We want not only the Catholic Church, but all Christians to be able to practise their religion freely," he remarks. "So we will pray that believers are not afraid to demand their rights."

Bishop Aleksander Kaszkiewicz, in a 5 December open letter in Polish to members of his diocese, also requests prayer for the 12 Polish priests and nuns. He insists that, when he presented the state authorities in June with a list of foreign priests and nuns who would continue to work in Grodno diocese next year, "I expressed my pastoral trust in all of them. I do not see any reason why I should withdraw that trust." Bishop Aleksander also expresses his "regret and protest" at the state's decision to bar the 12 – reiterated in a 29 November letter in Russian from top religious affairs official Leonid Gulyako circulated with the open letter.

The Bishop, who is Chairman of the Conference of Catholic Bishops in Belarus, points out that the authorities have refused to overturn their decision despite the submission of 12,000 signatures in protest at the decision. Bishop Kaszkiewicz has also made repeated personal appeals, as has the Apostolic Administrator of Minsk-Mohilev [Minsk-Mahilyow] Archdiocese Bishop Antoni Dziemianko and Bishop Wladyslaw Blin of Vitebsk [Vitsyebsk] Diocese.

Since "the law of the universal Church entrusts a bishop with government of the Church," writes Bishop Aleksander, and Belarusian law allows a bishop freedom to invite citizens of foreign countries, "interference in the authority invested in a diocesan bishop violates both the law and the freedom of the Church."

The state Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Leonid Gulyako, in his 29 November letter, tells Bishop Aleksander that he "was informed in person" on 10 and 23 November about the state's decision not to extend the relevant religious work permits. Maintaining that the invitation of foreign citizens for religious activity in Grodno Catholic diocese "lies within your area of competency," he adds that "in this regard we are prepared to consider for approval communication from you regarding the invitation of foreign citizens to parishes" – except for 12 Polish priests and nuns refused permission to continue working in Belarus after the end of 2006 (see F18News 3 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=850).

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).

Foreign religious workers invited by local religious communities are increasingly being barred from Belarus. The State Committee for Religious Affairs – which has to approve all such invitations and agree that such visits are "necessary" - denied the charismatic Full Gospel Union permission to invite Nigerian pastor Anselm Madubuko to preach in three of its churches in August. A foreign national pastoring a Protestant church - who prefers not to be named - did not have his annual religious work permit renewed in early 2006. The Hare Krishna community is among those unable to invite foreign citizens as they do not have the required ten registered religious communities (see F18News 18 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=856).

Belarus has officially rejected the United Nations Human Rights Committee's finding that it has violated its citizens' religious freedom by refusing to register a national Hare Krishna association (see F18News 3 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=822). However, in a recent change of fortune for Belarusian Lutherans, the Independent Evangelical-Lutheran Church in the Republic of Belarus was finally registered as a republic-wide association on 14 December 2006, its chair Pastor Sergei Heil told Forum 18 on 17 December (see F18News 31 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=863).

Meanwhile, the Minsk-based charismatic New Life Church has announced that it will devote 20-22 December to fasting and prayer for an important forthcoming session of the Higher Economic Court. At a hearing scheduled for 11am local time on 22 December, the Court is expected to rule on whether the city authorities' moves to terminate the church's land rights and force the sale of its building are lawful (see, for example, F18News 6 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=851).

As the Minsk authorities began to push through the sale in early October, New Life embarked on its high-profile hunger-strike, which culminated in a presidential administration official advising the church to appeal to the courts once again (see F18News 20

October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=858). On 26 October a senior judge cancelled a 27 October 2005 decision against New Life and called for the church's case to be heard again (see F18News 3 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=865). On 4 November the presidium of the Higher Economic Court cancelled every court decision issued against New Life since 27 October 2005. On 7 December the preliminary hearing of the new case took place, at which both sides set forth their positions.

Forum 18 News Service notes that - after exhausting other methods of negotiation with the state authorities - some religious believers are now adopting tactics more usually associated with secular political activism in their pursuit of religious freedom in Belarus, which has the tightest controls on religious activity anywhere in Europe (see F18News 29 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=880). (END)

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

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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