

# Soviet Roman Catholics

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Less attention has been paid to the history and current situation of the Roman Catholic Church in the Soviet Union than to either the Orthodox or Protestant Churches. Nevertheless the Roman Catholic Church deserves to be studied for several reasons, not least because it shows signs of vigour, renewal and resistance especially when faith combines with nationalism as in Lithuania. At first sight it may appear strange that Catholicism, which has been in theory and practice a universal church whose members have suffered at the hands of nation states, including the USSR, for their supposed internationalism and supra-national loyalties, should begin to find itself closely involved with national consciousness. A deeper look into the history of Roman Catholicism would, however, reveal precedents and parallels: for instance, Spain, Austria, Italy, Bavaria, Croatia and Ireland where Catholicism became a means for emphasizing the separate identity of national or even provincial units. Few more striking examples of Catholicism as a vehicle of national identity can be provided than those of Lithuania and Poland, where attempted Russification before 1917 and since 1945, has strengthened rather than weakened both Catholicism and nationalism.

Not all the four million or so Soviet Roman Catholics live in Lithuania, though some of the communities outside it are made up of expatriate Lithuanians. For instance the single Roman Catholic churches allowed in Moscow and Leningrad are served by Lithuanian or Polish priests and have a predominantly Lithuanian and Polish congregation. The main Catholic seminary in the USSR is in Lithuania though there is a second, smaller one in Estonia which is undergoing considerable pressure, obviously directed towards its eventual closure. Half of the building which housed this second seminary was appropriated by the State some years ago, and the seminarians feared that the remaining half would also be taken away from them, leaving them only outhouses and sheds. As it was in 1972 with only half of the original building, people were forced to sleep in corridors and the library books were stacked in every conceivable nook and cranny. Any further compression would have promoted even greater hardship.

The churches in Moscow and Leningrad also labour under severe difficulties. The church in Moscow is extremely small and stands, somewhat ironically, adjacent to the KGB headquarters, on Malaya Lubyanka

near Dzerzhinsky Square. The church in Leningrad, while lacking such dramatic proximity to the authorities, also has severe practical problems. One elderly priest was all the authorities would permit to run it. In common with all other churches still functioning in the USSR, it was opened only for services and at these times the church was shown off by Intourist guides to bus loads of visiting foreign tourists as an example of religious freedom. The worshippers were then disturbed by groups of tourists brought round the church by the guides and subjected to the humiliation of being presented to these visitors as living museum specimens.

In Lithuania itself the Church is controlled by a similar combination of administrative methods and the application of social pressures against believers. As with the Orthodox Church, the authorities have chosen the seminary and the priesthood as the most strategic points for attack. By severely limiting the number allowed to study for the priesthood, by reducing their contacts with the Vatican to a minimum, by preventing the production or importation of liturgical and theological books and materials, by regulations which allow only one priest to each parish and prevent a neighbouring priest from standing in for another when necessary, the authorities hope to accelerate the predicted decline of religion. The evidence from the last five years suggests that far from achieving this goal, the authorities have slowed down or even reversed the process of "de-christianization" which independent Lithuania, like other parts of Europe, was undergoing in the 1920s and 1930s.

The energy shown by the Church in Lithuania in recent years is not new. It can be seen at work in the 1950s when the authorities permitted the construction of a church in Klaipeda. This task was undertaken with enthusiasm by the faithful, and, using volunteer labour and voluntary donations, the church was completed. However, the authorities withdrew permission, confiscated the church building and turned it into a concert hall. One can only guess at the enormous resentment which this must have caused and the residue of animosity towards the authorities which it must have left in the hearts of those who had given their time and savings for this enterprise.

In December 1971, more than ten years after this incident, the church in Lithuania was responsible for one of the most extensive protests to have occurred in the Soviet Union: more than 17,000 signatures were appended to a petition calling for religious freedom. This petition marked a new and higher level of militancy within certain sections of the Church, but it also brought to a head disputes within the Church, about the attitude which it should have towards the secular authorities. The official response of the hierarchy was a Pastoral Letter of April 1972, issued under

extreme pressure from the authorities, which condemned the petition and those who had organized it. A few weeks later, in May, the most dramatic events occurred in response to both the sacred and secular authorities. A young Catholic, Romas Kalanta, burned himself to death in the middle of Kaunas, the second city of Lithuania and on the following day riots swept the city and military units had to be called in to restore order.

It would be wrong to see the events of the Spring, 1972 as a peak in Lithuanian Catholic protest. On the contrary they were a take-off point. Since then protest has become partly organized around a *samizdat* journal, the *Lithuanian Catholic Chronicle* set up as a conscious imitation of the Moscow *samizdat* journal, the *Chronicle of Current Events*. This journal provides a wealth of detailed, factual description of incidents in the life of the clergy and laity in Lithuania and has, remarkably, resisted extensive efforts by the authorities to suppress it. It has even widened its scope to include news not directly related to the affairs of the Church, such as strikes and actions against Lithuanian nationalism. One of the most recent issues to reach the West, published in the Summer of 1974, gave details of one of the most extraordinary political trials to have occurred in the Soviet Union. The defendant, Zakauskas, only 24 years old, was arrested during a drive against "amateur ethnographers" and was charged with founding an underground organization. Reading between the lines it appears likely that an extensive underground nationalist movement has come into existence in Lithuania in recent years. The *Chronicle* reports that Zukauskas made a speech in his own defence which lasted for an hour and constituted a mature and forceful statement of his views. He said that he was not protesting against the socialist order as such but against non-socialist features of the Soviet system, especially "Russian chauvinism". "The Russian empire," he said, "is still a prison of nations." Zukauskas was eventually sentenced to six years of imprisonment under strict regime.

This issue of the *Chronicle* also added information on the views of the militant section of the Lithuanian Catholic Church. Some sections of the hierarchy were accused of "making concessions to the atheists" and "concealing things from the priests and the faithful". The militants fear that instead of supporting their stand against the Soviet authorities, the Vatican might come to an agreement to replace bishops who are loved and respected by the people and to appoint in their place men more acceptable to the authorities. The *Chronicle* "begs" the Holy Father and the Curia "not to make diplomatic concessions to the atheists by trusting to their good will". Finally the editors confessed themselves "astonished" that the events in Lithuania had attracted so little attention abroad and

that the Catholics of the world were not defending those who had been arrested. They asked people in the West in this respect to emulate the communists who have shown such energy in defending Angela Davis and go on defending the Chilean communists.

If the large scale protest of the Lithuanian Church is one extreme of Catholic life in the USSR, then the other must be the survival of a small Catholic community scattered across Central Asia and Siberia, which possesses only one known church and represents only a tiny proportion of the population compared to the 85% in Lithuania who are Catholic. There is very little reliable information about this Church but one West German bishop, A. Kindermann, who has been involved in interviewing emigrants from the Soviet Union, claimed in 1969 that "it is true that in a vast expanse of Siberia there now exists a true diaspora church - a church, to be sure, without organized parochial life and pastoral care, but with several hundred so-called 'itinerant priests' and undoubtedly some secretly consecrated bishops." The life of these itinerant priests was described by an elderly woman from Kazakhstan, who told Bishop Kindermann that the town where she lived in Kazakhstan was visited by one of them after a ten year interval. "He arrived in working clothes, unnoticed and unrecognized, yet well-known to the Catholic families." In the space of a week he prepared people for Baptism and the Holy Eucharist, heard confessions and gave nuptial blessings. In one night four marriages were performed and five children received Holy Communion for the first time. These services were conducted without candles, rosaries or prayer books. During the long periods without priests, laymen often took over their functions.

In between these two extremes lie many more distinct Catholic churches, each facing different problems: in Byelorussia, Armenia, and in the Ukraine where Eastern rite Catholics still maintain a precarious existence despite the attempted suppression of the late 1940s. Although no generalization can adequately cover these different areas, it is safe to say that Soviet Catholics can face the future with as much hope as any of their brethren, secure in the knowledge that despite being traditionally weak numerically in Russia and the Russian empire, the most concerted efforts by the authorities to eradicate the Church have failed and produced a new mood of resistance.