

Lithuanian Catholics on Trial

MARITE SAPIETS

On 29 December 1974, an article entitled "Slanderers are Punished" appeared in *Sovetskaya Litva*. The article concerned the trial (2-24 December) in Vilnius of five Lithuanians, including a certain Petras Plumpa, who were charged with producing and distributing anti-Soviet literature. According to the article, the accused men "copied and disseminated literature which was full of hatred for Soviet society, incited people to act against the State and was also published abroad". Further details on this literature were not given. Yet some time previously, in October 1974, an appeal on behalf of Plumpa and others arrested with him, sent by five Lithuanian Catholic priests to the Committee for the Defence of Human Rights in the USSR and re-addressed to the World Council of Churches by Dr. Sakharov, had already revealed that the charges were connected with the distribution of the *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church* and other religious literature. This was confirmed in May 1975 in issue No. 13 of the *Chronicle*.

Four of the defendants—Petras Plumpa, Povilas Petronis, Jonas Stasaitis and Virgilius Jaugelis—were among those listed in the appeal sent by the five Catholic priests in October. The others mentioned in the appeal, J. Grazis and N. Sadunaite, are now being tried. Grazis appeared as a witness at this trial. The fifth defendant was A. Petrubavicius, who seemed to have taken part in copying and distributing the anti-Soviet literature, but was charged with causing a road accident (which apparently had little connection with the case). Petrubavicius pleaded guilty to the charge and during the trial acted mainly as a prosecution witness. J. Stasaitis was charged with setting up printing presses for producing prayer-books and a duplicating machine on which the *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church* was reproduced. He did not regret producing the prayer-books, but had repented of his work on the *Chronicle* and acted partly as a prosecution witness. P. Petronis was charged with copying the *Chronicle*, prayer-books and other religious literature. He was 63 years old and when asked by the prosecution why he was not engaged in socially useful work, replied that he had started work at the age of six and had worked full-time for 41 years—as well as studying for his qualifications as a doctor's assistant. He had now decided to devote the rest of his life to the service of the Church. P. Plumpa, a married man with two children, was the main defendant. He had previously spent seven years in a labour camp

on a political charge and was now accused of having set up two copying machines for reproducing the *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church*. He was also charged with having falsified his surname on identity papers. V. Jaugelis was charged with distributing copies of the *Chronicle* and other publications, and with gathering signatures for a petition.

It is clear, therefore, from the account in issue No. 13, that the defendants were being tried primarily for their work in copying and distributing the *Chronicle*. That they had reproduced 20,000 prayer-books (of which they had distributed 16,000) was also regarded as a crime—but this aspect was played down in the Vilnius trial in favour of a concentrated attack by the prosecution on the *Chronicle*. This was represented as a political publication of nationalist content. Attempts were made at the trial to demonstrate the falsehood of statements made in it. However, the witnesses called for this purpose were not always satisfactory from the prosecution's point of view. The witness Ermalauskas, for instance, was questioned about the incident reported in issue No. 1 in which a priest had allegedly been refused permission to give the last rites to a patient in hospital. Ermalauskas confirmed that he had been the patient. The priest had visited him in hospital at his wife's request, in order to administer the last rites to him. But as the wife had not obtained permission for this from the hospital authorities, the priest had been made to leave by doctors before he had time to do more than hear the patient's confession.

The defendants constantly tried to emphasize that they had acted from purely religious motives, that they had no anti-Soviet aims and that they did not consider the *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church* to be anti-Soviet. Petras Plumpa himself stated that he had spent seven years in a labour camp for taking part in a nationalist demonstration, but had become disillusioned with nationalism whilst in the camp. Instead, he tried to find a moral philosophy to live by, and had decided to begin by reading the French philosophers. But these too did not satisfy him and he stated :

In reading the works of the philosophers, I saw the constant battle which atheists waged against God. I began to think—if God does not exist, why should anyone fight the non-existent? But what if he does exist? . . . Wanting to hear the other side of the question, I began to read religious books. In this way I found God and came to believe. Until 1961, I despised religion and never went to church; I understood nothing of God. Since 1969 I have not been deceived in my faith, and I firmly believe to this day.

Plumpa maintained that he had not produced seven issues of the *Chronicle*, as the prosecution asserted, but that he had only reproduced issues Nos. 6 and 7. He also stated that he did not consider the *Chronicle*

to be anti-Soviet. He declared that people were constantly being persecuted for producing purely religious literature.

Plumpa's co-defendant, Povilas Petronis, also insisted that his motives for reproducing literature had been purely religious. Like Plumpa, he did not regard the *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church* as anti-Soviet. He believed that criticism of atheist activities could not be equated with criticism of the State system—and that if the causes of grievances mentioned in the *Chronicle* were removed, there would no longer be any need to write about them.

Three of the defendants drew attention to the basically unlawful nature of the trial. To begin with, Plumpa and Petronis had both been held without trial for 13 months. This is contrary to Article 106 of the Lithuanian Criminal Code, which states that a person may be held without trial for a maximum of nine months. Petronis also pointed out that the Soviet Constitution guarantees freedom of press. Ironically, 5 December was Constitution Day in the Soviet Union and 10 December was the anniversary of the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Both fell during the course of the trial. Plumpa felt that the authorities' behaviour towards him had been unlawful: "I could make accusations against the authorities," he said, "but they have nothing to accuse me of." He claimed that he had been deprived of the right to work, the basic right of a citizen, because of his labour camp record. This was the reason why he had forged his surname after his marriage. His final defence words were:

According to the charges, under which I am accused, it would appear that I was an agitator, slandered the Soviet system, formed an organization. Allow me to inquire: Where? When? With whom? Where is the evidence? Where are the witnesses?

All the defendants were found guilty on 24 December, 1974, of reproducing and distributing anti-Soviet literature, especially the seven issues of the *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church*. P. Plumpa received the most severe sentence—eight years in a strict regime labour camp, under Articles 68 (2), 70 and 212 (2). Petronis was sentenced to four years in a strict regime labour camp, under Articles 68 (1) and 70. Jaugelis received two years in an ordinary regime camp under Article 199 (1). Stasaitis and Petrubavicius, both of whom co-operated with the authorities during the trial, received suspended sentences.

Issue No. 13 of the *Chronicle* ends with a short account of the systematic extermination by the authorities of illegal religious publishing centres. Almost all such centres have been discovered and closed. Yet issues 13, 14 and 15 of the *Chronicle* have still managed to be published and to reach the West.