

# The Situation of the Roman Catholic Church in Belorussia

*Keston College has received a report compiled by a group of Christians based in Eastern Europe who have been in direct touch with Belorussian Catholics for over twenty years. The report, dated June 1979, on the Roman Catholic Church (Latin-rite) in the Belorussian SSR gives a valuable insight into the difficulties of a little-known group of believers. What follows is a summary and condensation of the report.*

According to statistics given in 1978 by the Belorussian Representative of the Council for Religious Affairs, there are 2,250,000 Roman Catholics in the Belorussian SSR—approximately a quarter of the population (9,559,000 in 1979). The overwhelming majority of Catholics live in Western Belorussia—territory annexed by the USSR from Poland during the Second World War. Nevertheless, thousands of Roman Catholics have survived, despite fifty years without priests, in the eastern dioceses of Mogilev and Minsk, which have been part of the Soviet Union since 1921. For example, there are 120,000 Catholics in Minsk itself. Until 1981 no Catholic churches were open in Eastern Belorussia—all church buildings had been confiscated for secular use and all priestly activities were carried out in secret. In 1981 a Catholic church was allowed to open in Minsk. All other officially registered Catholic churches are in Western Belorussia.

The Belorussian SSR has a mixed population of Belorussians, Russians and Poles. There is a close link between national identity and religious affiliation. Almost all Catholics are either Poles or Belorussians, although the average Belorussian or Russian tends to identify Catholicism more with Polish descent. It is difficult to compare relative numbers of national groups, as the real number of Poles in Belorussia is far higher than the official number of 382,000 (1970). Among Poles, the majority of religious believers are Roman Catholics, while among Belorussians the majority are Orthodox.

## *Church Organization: Pre-War and Post-War*

Before the First World War, the present territory of the Belorussian SSR included three Roman Catholic dioceses—Mogilev, Minsk and Wilno

(Vilnius)—as well as parts of the Łutsk and Zhitomir diocese. At that time, a very large proportion of the Belorussian population still belonged to the Catholic Church (Latin-rite or Uniate). Converted to Catholicism in the 17th century while Belorussia was under Polish rule, the Belorussians went over to the Latin-rite Catholic Church in large numbers during the 18th century, when Russian rule was re-established, to escape Tsarist persecution of the Eastern-rite (Uniate) Church.

After World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution, the territory comprising the Catholic dioceses of Minsk and Mogilev was allotted to the USSR under the Treaty of Riga (September 1921). Over the next twenty years, the Catholic church organization in these dioceses was almost entirely destroyed by fanatical planned persecution. By 1939, no Roman Catholic churches were open in this area and no priests were allowed to perform their duties. Only secret communities of Catholic believers remained.

In 1939, as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the USSR annexed 77,000 square kilometres of Polish territory—now Western Belorussia. This included part of two Polish Catholic dioceses: Wilno (Vilnius) and Pinsk. A further eight thousand square kilometres, including the diocesan town of Wilno/Vilnius, was annexed to the Lithuanian SSR (Lithuania itself having been annexed to the USSR as part of the same Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact). In 1944 the Archdiocese of Vilnius was divided into three parts:

	<i>Poland</i>	<i>Belorussian SSR</i>	<i>Lithuanian SSR</i>
Numbers of Roman Catholics	284,750	790,000	405,250
priests	121	303	293
parishes	56	233	81
Territory	5,540 sq. km.	41,500 sq. km.	8,000 sq. km.

The diocese of Pinsk was divided into two parts:

	<i>Poland</i>	<i>Belorussian SSR</i>
Numbers of Roman Catholics	92,000	474,000
priests	57	80
parishes	35	109
Territory	4,744 sq. km.	34,700 sq. km.

After 1945, parts of the Łutsk and Zhitomir diocese—seven parishes, nine priests and 25,000 believers—also became part of the Belorussian SSR.

Roman Catholic believers of these dioceses suffered greatly at the hands of both Germans and Russians. Soviet mass deportations in 1940 included numbers of clergy and Catholic intellectuals. Pastoral work was brought to a halt in many parishes because of the lack of priests. Catholic schools, charities and orphanages were closed down. Some nuns and monks were arrested.

After June 1941, the German occupation began. During this period, numbers of priests were sent to German concentration camps or to forced labour in Germany.

After the Second World War, a large number of Poles—mostly the middle class and intellectuals—took advantage of the opportunity to be repatriated

to Poland. Peasant farmers and workers stayed, hoping Soviet rule would be short-lived. In 1953 total collectivization was introduced and farmers who refused to co-operate were sent to Siberian labour camps.

In the years 1946-53, Catholic priests were imprisoned in large numbers, both as part of Soviet anti-religious policy and because they were held to be encouraging the national aspirations of Poles and Belorussians. In 1946 there were about 380 priests working in 342 parishes in the Belorussian SSR. Almost every Belorussian parish still had a priest, as they had been ordered to stay with their parishioners by Archbishop Galbrzykowski and Bishop Bukraba at the end of the war. Numbers were later reduced by deportations, long sentences (10-25 years), natural death from old age and a state ban on theological education of new priests for Belorussia. Many priests died in the Stalinist labour camps while some stayed voluntarily in Siberia or Central Asia to serve Catholic exile communities there. Some priests were repatriated to Poland, after encouragement from the Soviet authorities.

After the death of Stalin in 1953, there was no-one to replace the priests who died annually. Attempts to bring in priests from Lithuania or Latvia failed. The Soviet authorities went on refusing to allow candidates from the Belorussian SSR to train for the priesthood at the seminaries of Riga or Kaunas. Meanwhile, the Belorussian candidates for the priesthood were getting tired of waiting, and some married.

In 1945, both bishops had been forced to abandon their diocesan centres and move elsewhere. Archbishop Galbrzykowski moved to Bialystok in Poland where his successor, Apostolic Administrator Edward Kisiel, still lives. Bishop Bukraba of Pinsk moved to Łódź, where he died. Since 1970, the Apostolic Administrator of Pinsk diocese, Bishop Władysław Jedruszka, has also been resident in Poland. Believers were thus cut off from their bishops for many years. After 1957, priests from Belorussia were able to visit the bishops or apostolic administrators while visiting relatives in Poland. The clergy in the Belorussian SSR have a strong desire to have their own resident bishop, if there could be a strong-minded candidate nominated by the Holy See, but fear the appointment of a weak bishop acceptable to the Soviet authorities.

The structure of the Roman Catholic Church inside Belorussia has been upheld largely due to the foresight of Archbishop Galbrzykowski, who in 1939 granted some senior clergymen of his diocese the status of Vicars-General. The post of Vicar-General—usually a temporary appointment between the death of one bishop and the consecration of another—is almost that of a “deputy” bishop. It confers the right to ordain, appoint and transfer priests, to confirm young people and declare marriages invalid. This measure was confirmed and extended in 1945 and again in 1955, after Galbrzykowski’s death. The existence of these Vicars-General, some unknown to the Soviet authorities, meant that ordinations could take place, even in the absence of a bishop, if the Soviet authorities refused to allow any



officially. The Council for Religious Affairs had to take them into account, as priests refused to be transferred from one parish to another without the permission of the Vicar-General. In 1970, Pope Paul VI again extended the authority of the Vicars-General, after consultation with the Apostolic Administrator. Today there are still three Vicars-General in the Belorussian SSR, two in Wilno/Vilnius diocese and one in Pinsk diocese.

The numbers of the clergy have fallen rapidly in recent years as priests continued to die from old age. In 1979 there were 49 priests working in the Belorussian SSR with the permission of the Soviet authorities (compared to 303 in 1944)—35 in the former Wilno Archdiocese, 13 in Pinsk diocese and one in Lutsk-Zhitomir diocese. The majority of priests are elderly and ill, many have survived years in labour camps, but most serve more than one parish. Fr Aronowicz and Fr P. Trubowicz in Grodno, for example, serve 60,000 Catholic believers in this town, as well as surrounding parishes which have no priest. In addition, Catholics from all over the USSR travel to places where registered Catholic priests live—for confession, confirmation and the

sacrament of the sick. Nevertheless, although overburdened, they are said to be “sensitive, wise and very self-sacrificing”.

### *Important Changes in Recent Years*

Since 1970, a number of men have been secretly prepared for ordination. Two candidates were found and approved by the Vicars-General—one in the Belorussian SSR, the other in Lithuania.

After a three-day retreat with their spiritual adviser, each candidate returned to his parish priest, who acted as his main teacher, though lectures were provided for the “domestic seminary” by various priests who had theological training. Both candidates had jobs, so they had to study alone, in the evenings. They met the priest three or four times a month to discuss material. Holidays were spent with their spiritual adviser.

After ordination, the Belorussian candidate began to work as a priest in a Belorussian parish, while the candidate from Lithuania, an older man, waited until his retirement, when he was to “reveal himself” to the Soviet authorities. Part of the reason for this exercise was to show the authorities that they could not stop Catholic priests being ordained for Belorussia merely by denying Belorussian candidates access to Catholic seminaries in Riga and Kaunas.

In 1971, the deans of Wilno/Vilnius Archdiocese had two meetings in Moscow with the Chairman of the Council for Religious Affairs (CRA), Kuroyedov, at which they expressed the dissatisfaction among Belorussian Catholics at the shortage of priests. The culmination of this campaign came in 1973, when Soviet authorities finally gave permission for a candidate from the Belorussian SSR to train for the priesthood at the Riga Theological Seminary. It was only in 1975, however, that a Belorussian seminarian finally took his place in Riga, as all the candidates put forward by the church authorities in 1973 and 1974 were rejected by the KGB. The first successful candidate was Antoni Chanko from Zholudek parish.

A change in Soviet attitudes seems really to have taken place in 1977, when another candidate for the priesthood, Alexander Tiereszko, was allowed to study at a seminary in Poland. In 1978, another candidate was allowed to study at the Riga seminary and Antoni Chanko, who had just graduated, was ordained in Zholudek in the presence of almost every priest in Belorussia and thousands of ordinary believers. Two candidates secretly prepared for the priesthood in Pinsk diocese were ordained with the permission of the authorities. The Soviet authorities had decided that registered priests, whose whereabouts are known, however objectionable they might be, were infinitely preferable to the wholly uncontrolled activities of secret priests. The best plan for the future might be to prepare candidates in the “domestic” seminary for two years and send them to the Riga seminary for

the third year. If they were rejected by the seminary, they could complete their studies at home. If permission for ordination were to be refused, they could be ordained in secret.

For the elderly priests of Belorussia, the authorities' change of attitude is a source of new hope. One said, "Dying, I know I can hand my chalice to a successor". Formerly, when a priest died, his parish often remained empty. Now one of the remaining priests is allowed to visit and take care of it. "The Soviet authorities allow this, perhaps because they hope such work will overburden old priests and bring them to the grave sooner, also because a parish that is already being served by a priest has less chance of being granted a new, young priest."

Recently, some priests have also been allowed to come "from outside" to work in the Belorussian SSR. In 1977, for example, Fr Jozef Trubowicz came from Riga to do pastoral work in Grodno.

Such concessions do indicate a distinct "change of line" towards the Church in Belorussia, a republic originally destined for total atheization. Apart from the threat of secret ordinations, the main reason for this is the uncompromising refusal of believers to give up their religion and their constant applications for new priests to fill parishes left untended by the death of the parish priest, as well as the courageous stand of the clergy themselves.

### *Organization of Parish Life and Forms of Pastoral Work in the Belorussian SSR*

According to Soviet law, a religious association must be formed by a committee of twenty persons (*dvadsatka*) representing other believers. This committee represents the congregation in all dealings with the Soviet authorities, pays and collects rent for the church building and employs the priest, organist and sacristan.

The priest's work and daily life depend largely on the make-up of this committee. The Soviet authorities try to influence the membership, to ensure the chairman is a weak character, and thus turn the parish committee into an organ of state pressure on the church. However, priests working in the Belorussian SSR say they are able in most cases to influence the choice of committee members and thus work together with the *dvadsatka* to put pressure on the State in obtaining concessions for the Church. The Soviet authorities often refuse to talk to the priest but will have dealings with the parish committee. Catholic priests are lectured by the local Council for Religious Affairs for trying to run the congregation themselves and not keeping to the regulations, unlike Orthodox priests.

All presbyteries and parish buildings have been confiscated. In the past, believers were forbidden to rent rooms to priests, so priests were sometimes reduced to living in barns or pig-sties. However, such humiliation only

caused deeper respect for priests, so today all priests either rent rooms or even flats from believers. Some priests have had houses bought for them by believers, but the Soviet authorities have often transferred such priests to other parishes.

Priests have a small basic salary, paid by the parish committee, but they are also given secret gifts by believers "for Mass". Officially, this is illegal, but it helps the priest to have a reasonable standard of living. Sometimes parishioners pay for a priest to go on a holiday to a health resort, though only if a visit can be arranged from a Polish priest in the meantime.

Priests celebrate three or four Masses a day, usually for baptisms, marriages, funerals, or first confessions. Believers often come a long way for these services and usually require a special instruction period beforehand, especially in the case of marriage, as ignorance among young people is often great. Priests also try to give instruction during sermons. The busiest time for them is during Advent and Lent, as most people try to come to confession then and they may have to stay up all night to hear them all. Some services, for example the Christmas "Service of the Manger" and the Lent "Way of the Cross", are especially aimed at young people, who are encouraged to ask the priest questions.

The clergy in the Belorussian SSR use liturgical books from Poland, introduced after the Second Vatican Council. Most services are in Polish, though some priests have kept to Latin. Only two parishes use Belorussian. All priests understand Russian and Belorussian for the purposes of confession, but problems will arise when the older generation dies out, as the younger generation knows little Polish and will require a liturgy in Russian or Belorussian. Because of the decline in knowledge of Polish, there is also a need for catechisms and prayer-books in Russian and Belorussian.

### *Churches*

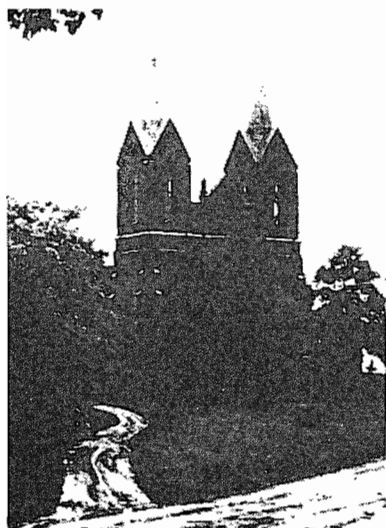
In 1979, there were 112 registered Roman Catholic churches in Belorussia compared with 349 in 1944. Eighty-eight of these either have their own priest or receive regular visits from priests. Twenty-four churches are run by the parish committees; priests are officially forbidden to hold services in these churches, but they are kept open and believers gather there to pray. They still hope to have a priest of their own some day, especially since the authorities have softened their attitude on priests running more than one parish and have allowed priests to apply for permits to visit priestless parishes.

For a few years, church circles have been working out liturgical aids for services without a priest, in churches where believers gather every Sunday for prayers. Those who lead such services need a special prayer-book, in line with the new liturgy. There is also a need for laymen to be prepared and



Fr Pyotr Pupin (*right*), photographed shortly before his death in 1979, was one of the small number of elderly, hard-pressed Catholic priests ministering in Belorussia (see report on pp. 178-87). His funeral (*above*) in the parish of Rubiezewicze, was attended by ten thousand people, an indication of the widespread support for the Catholic Church and love for the priests which persists in the republic.

*Below left* the Roman Catholic church in the parish of Zadroze, Belorussia. The interior of the church in Luzki (*right*) was destroyed in the 1950s and parishioners were not allowed to restore it. However, the atheists apparently feared to destroy the one remaining figure, that of Christ. (*All photographs* © Keston College).







Romanian believer Ioan Clipa (*top right*) suffered a breakdown and committed suicide after being arrested, interrogated and tortured by security police for distributing Bibles (see p. 221). Mihai Closs (*left*) was one of five Christians arrested in January 1981, also for distributing Bibles, but later amnestied. During interrogation, Closs and Paul Gross were injected with drugs to make them reveal all they knew (see p. 225). (*Both photographs* © *Open Doors*).

The Dragu family (*below*) have suffered all manner of unpleasantness since applying to emigrate from Romania, alleging religious persecution (see p. 219) *Left to right* father Paul Dragu, daughters Marcela, Georgeta, Tasia, Mirela, wife Paulina.



The statue "Let us beat Swords into Ploughshares" (*right*) which stands in front of the UN building in New York, and which young East German Christians are reproducing on shoulder patches, to the displeasure of the DDR authorities (see *Chronicle*, pp. 202-4). The statue was sculpted in 1957 by the Soviet artist Ye. V. Vuchetich. *Reprinted from Sovestsky khudozhnik (Soviet Artist); courtesy of the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR, London.*



ordained as acolytes, so that they can give out Holy Communion.

Grodno, a regional centre, has three open churches. Two have a priest, but one has been kept open by the parish committee alone for twenty years, despite numerous attempts by the authorities to take it over for secular purposes. The committee successfully defended the church, but as a punishment the electricity has been cut off. Lida has two churches, both in good condition.

Churches in Belorussia are in a worse condition than those in neighbouring Lithuania. There is no central heating in churches, few have electric lighting and amplifiers are forbidden in church, though it is often difficult to hear elderly priests. It often takes over two years to get official permission for repairs or installation of electricity, but even then difficulties in obtaining materials and workers ensure that the job will take at least another two years to complete. However, the believers are prepared to make sacrifices to care for their churches.

### *Monastic Orders*

No Catholic monastic orders are officially permitted in the USSR. After Soviet rule was established in Western Belorussia in 1944, monastic orders were dissolved, monastic buildings confiscated, monks and nuns arrested or encouraged to return to Poland (after 1945). Some monastic priests took over parishes at the bishops' request. In the first years after the war, monks and nuns worked in parishes as organists, sacristans and catechists. Some nuns worked in hospitals and even in primary schools.

There are far fewer monks than nuns. At least eighteen members of male monastic orders are working within the Belorussian SSR, some as priests, some as sacristans. Some have been ordained to help in filling the shortage of priests. The monks receive a small salary in churches where they work as sacristans. They are looked after by the local priest and believers.

The female monastic orders have built up a number of secret convents. The nuns act as catechists, organists, nurses and assistants to elderly priests. In 1972, nuns wrote out fifteen thousand catechisms by hand. Now they are said to have typewriters. Since 1975 nuns have been helping the clergy in a project for renewal of the Catholic family—by preparing monthly readings for fathers, mothers, teenagers and children.

The conditions in which nuns have to live and work (there are no enclosed orders) do not always allow them to obey all the rules of their order. Nevertheless, their spiritual life is perhaps on a higher level than in countries where monastic orders are freely permitted. In all monastic houses where access to a church is difficult, a Reserved Sacrament is kept and sisters can take Communion themselves, according to a special permit from the Holy See. (Since 1975, nuns in some parishes take Communion to sick and old people. Where it is possible, they try to attend Mass daily or at least on Sun-

days, though they often have to travel great distances to do so.) Every year the nuns have their own retreat, led by a priest.

All nuns work for a living, unless they are pensioners or invalids. Most of them try to work in hospitals, as nurses or orderlies. Since 1975, monastic orders in Lithuania and Belorussia have tried to obtain work in orphanages, childrens' homes and primary schools, in order to impart the Christian faith to children.

Because nuns live communally together, they have quite a good standard of living, though the authorities have stopped the pensions of women known to be nuns. They are helped materially by believers. What they lack most is religious literature, especially concerning the monastic life.

### *Forms of Interference by the State Authorities in Church Life*

Despite the formal phrases in the Soviet Constitution which guarantee "equality of all citizens before the law, irrespective of their beliefs", "right of all citizens to profess any religion or none" and "the right to perform a religious cult", in practice the local atheist authorities are able to interfere constantly in the life of the church, priests and believers.

The clergy are harrassed in various ways, for reasons as trivial as wearing a cassock outside the church building. For giving religious instruction to children and teenagers, allowing them to be present at Mass or in church processions, or organizing an altar boys' group, a priest can be deprived of his state licence for periods of one to six months. This punishes not only the priest, but the believers, as they cannot then receive the Sacraments. Quite often no reason is given for the withdrawal of the priest's licence. If he asks why, he is told "You know why".

Pastoral work is also disorganized by the State transferring priests from one parish to another, which disrupts plans and relationships long and carefully built up. On the other hand, priests who want to work in neighbouring parishes, to help out on feast days, for example are refused permission to do so. The clergy are forbidden to hold regional conferences or retreats and no religious conferences or meetings are permitted outside the church buildings.

Believers who openly confess their religion meet with various forms of discrimination, usually in advancement at work. Children and young people face intimidation at school if they are known to attend Mass and are forced to hide their religious beliefs if they want to enter university. The Soviet official viewpoint, as expressed by the CRA chairman, V. Kuroyedov, in *Izvestiya* (28 January 1978), is that separation of church and school defends a child's right to freedom of conscience by protecting him from religion and leaving him free to be an atheist. In Belorussia, the Soviet authorities have made great efforts to bring up the younger generation as atheists. Because Belorussia has a largely uneducated population and lacked a dynamic

national intelligentsia, it was picked out as experimental territory for a systematic campaign to wipe out religion. Both the Pioneers and the *Komsomol* (Young Communists—Ed.) have meetings twice a week promoting atheism and ridiculing religion. There are also “atheist groups” in schools, in which children are often included without being asked and against their will. Teachers often stand outside the local church on Sundays and spy on children who participate. This merely leads to double standards among children and young people—they say one thing at school and another at home. The most dangerous arguments against religious faith are those put forward by pseudo-scientists and academics, as children are impressed by them and priests lack appropriate religious literature to counter them.

With the help of religious laymen, however, some parishes have shown great courage in disregarding the atheist campaign to keep children away from the Church. In Breslava, near the Latvian border, Fr Czeslaw Wilczynski has openly celebrated First Communion for children since 1976, despite threats from the authorities. In 1976 Fr Alojzy Tomkowicz in Ostrowiec organized a Corpus Christi procession in which about a thousand children and young people took part. Because of the obstinacy of believers they were only fined “for religious propaganda”.

Believers often try to quote the Helsinki Agreement in defence of their rights but are told by officials “This agreement is not meant for you.” One official even alleged that Brezhnev was drunk when he signed it.

### *Family Services and Prayer*

Catholic families in the Belorussian SSR need help to uphold family religious traditions as the older generation dies out. A special book should be prepared explaining baptism, First Communion, confirmation, marriage, blessing of the sick before death when a priest is not available and such traditional ceremonies as blessing eggs for Easter.

Many forms of personal piety have been introduced from Poland—for example, the idea of Rosary Families. Fifteen hundred have been set up over the last fifteen years. More recently, rosaries blessed by Pope John Paul II have been sent to families in the Belorussian SSR and special services held in their homes.

A new trend among the more courageous Catholics has been to recite the Angelus at noon. This was an old tradition people had missed for years.

The report calls on Pope John Paul II publicly to emphasize the importance of sanctifying everyday life by issuing a Pastoral Letter on the subject. This would act as an antidote to increasing atheization and secularization. It would remind Soviet Catholics especially of the responsibility of parents to pass their faith on to their children and the need for family prayer.