

Lithuanian Catholics appeal to the Kremlin

In Lithuania, a traditionally Catholic nation, it is not unusual for petitions to the state authorities calling for greater religious freedom to be signed by hundreds and even thousands of ordinary people — a situation which exists nowhere else in the Soviet Union and is more like that in Poland. The *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church* has just provided another instance of this mass support for religious rights and opposition to the Soviet State's attempts to impose official atheism on the population.

Catholics in Lithuania have been appealing to the state authorities in large numbers for the release of two priests who were arrested and tried last year for "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda". Over 123,000 people have signed petitions expressing their support for Fr Alfonsas Svarinskas, sentenced last May to seven years' imprisonment and three years' internal exile (see *RCL* Vol. 11 No. 3, pp. 334-6), and Fr Sigitas Tamkevičius, tried at the beginning of December 1983 and sentenced to six years' imprisonment and four years' exile. The petitions were addressed to Yuri Andropov and the General Procurator of the USSR and denied that the priests were guilty of any crime:

"Frs A. Svarinskas and S. Tamkevičius opposed violations of the Constitution and of human rights guaranteed by international agreements. We can only rejoice that such men have come forward — men who were concerned for the maintenance of law and order, who criticised the unjust behaviour of the atheists towards believers. Was this not beneficial to the government and the Party? However, they have been cruelly punished. Was this sensible or just?"

Almost all of our people condemn atheist attacks, just as these priests did. Should we all therefore be arrested and thrown into prison? That would not help. Stalin tried to strangle the people's belief in God by force but people cannot live without rights any more than without bread [. . .]

The believing masses help maintain the Soviet state. They work in offices, factories, and fields [. . .] often more conscientiously than atheists. We, the same working masses, ask you to

review the cases of Fr Svarinskas and Tamkevičius and to release them."

Large numbers of priests in each diocese in Lithuania are also reported to have signed petitions calling for the release of Frs Svarinskas and Tamkevičius and asking for fuller implementation of religious rights. Declarations from 96 priests of Kaunas diocese (including the exiled Bishop Steponavičius), 69 priests of Vilnius diocese and 125 priests of Panevežys diocese were published in the most recent issues of the *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church* (Nos. 60 and 61). Earlier protests against the arrest of Fr Svarinskas, signed by 67 priests of Kaišiadorys diocese (including the recently reinstated Bishop V. Sladkevičius), 117 priests of Panevežys diocese and 99 priests of Kaunas diocese (as well as Bishop Steponavičius) appeared in *Chronicle* No. 59. The signatories represent an overwhelming majority of priests in Kaunas, Kaišiadorys and Vilnius dioceses, and in Panevežys diocese only two priests refused to sign. All nineteen members of the Kybartai parish committee also signed a petition calling for the release of their pastor, Fr Tamkevičius. The priests of Kaunas diocese quote the speech made by Konstantin Chernenko at the June 1983 Central Committee Plenum: "It is known to all that our Constitution guarantees freedom of conscience. Communists are steadfast atheists but do not thrust their views on others." They go on to ask "But how does this come out in practice? In all Lithuanian schools pupils are made to choose: if you are not a member of the Communist Youth League you will find all doors closed to you. Is that not discrimination? [. . .] and when the arrested priests stated this publicly they were accused of slandering the state and system!"

Frs Tamkevičius and Svarinskas were among the five Lithuanian priests who founded the Catholic Committee for the Defence of Believers' Rights in 1978. The Committee has produced over 50 documents dealing with discrimination against religious believers in the Soviet Union, particularly in Lithuania, and sent them to the Soviet state authorities as well as to international agencies such as UNESCO. Many of the Catholic Committee's documents were also reproduced in the *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church*.

Unlike the Russian Christian Committee (founded in 1976) and other groups set up in the USSR to defend religious and other human rights — most of whose members have already been imprisoned or exiled — the Catholic Committee survived intact until 1983. This was undoubtedly due to the fact that all its members were Catholic priests: although many lay Catholics have been tried and imprisoned for their involvement in the Lithuanian religious movement, the Soviet authorities have avoided arresting priests for the last ten years, as a concession to popular feeling in this largely Catholic republic where — as in Poland — religious and national loyalties are closely linked.

With the arrest of Fr Svarinskas in January 1983, this period of relative tolerance towards the clergy came to an end. The Soviet authorities were obviously determined to begin by making an example of Fr Svarinskas. Fr Tamkevičius, a very active priest suspected by the KGB of editing the *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church*, was arrested at the courtroom during Fr Svarinskas' trial, after giving evidence for the defence. His own trial in December was very similar to that of Fr Svarinskas: both trials, held in the Supreme Court of the Lithuanian SSR in Vilnius, were virtually in closed court, with no friends and only a couple of relatives being admitted, while other enquirers were detained, fined, arrested for a few days or driven out of town and released in a deserted spot. The evidence in both cases, according to reports in the *Chronicle* (Nos. 58 and 61), consisted largely of tape-recordings of sermons delivered by the two priests and descriptions of their parish activities. In the case of Fr Tamkevičius, for example, both the court and the local Soviet press (*Tiesa*, 3 December 1983) expended a great deal of indignation on the fact that he had organised a Christmas tree gathering in his churchyard for the parish children. His sermons were described as "insolent provocations", apparently because he was prepared to tell his parishioners from the pulpit about his meetings with local Soviet officials and the warnings he had received.

The court (and the Soviet press) were far more reticent when referring to Fr Tamkevičius' real "crimes" — his association with the Catholic Committee and his allegedly close links with the *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church*, described by *Tiesa* as a "pseudo-publication" which

"publishes blatant lies", "insults officials", and "vilifies Soviet institutions". The Committee was described by the prosecution as "an organisation that has nothing to do with religious ritual" whose documents were meant for "anti-Soviet centres" abroad. The contents of these documents were never read out or discussed, however: they were referred to by number and file-reference and described in a general way — "he called on people to act against Soviet power". Fr Tamkevičius' links with the *Chronicle* do not seem to have been proved at all, unless his openly expressed support for the unofficial journal's aims was regarded as proof. During the trial he declared that he respected the *Chronicle* and saw nothing false in it.

In his final statement in court, Fr Tamkevičius declared that he did not regard himself as guilty of any crime, as he had only carried out his duties as a priest. "I am merely a pupil of Christ [. . .] I have loved God and my people, old and young, especially young people, to whom I have dedicated my life and for whom I will, if necessary, sacrifice it. I have worked wherever God sent me and now he is sending me where I am most needed. I have tried to accept all crosses given to me by God and so now I take up this cross, embrace and kiss it. Glory be to Jesus Christ and to Mary the Blessed."

Fr Svarinskas too, in a recent letter sent from a labour camp in Perm, stated, "I have no regrets, except that the Lord might blame me for doing too little [. . .] I did what I could for the good of the Church in my country. Pray for me, that as a priest I might always face up to the enemies of God and the Church."

The Soviet authorities have often described Frs Svarinskas and Tamkevičius as "extremists", despite the support expressed for them by people all over Lithuania which has remained completely unacknowledged officially. When the petitions and signatures of over 123,000 Lithuanians were taken to Moscow by four Catholics in August 1983, the documents were confiscated by the police before their bearers could leave the railway station. In September, copies were taken to the General Procuracy of the USSR by the same four Catholics. Though they were received by Procurator V. B. Golov, it was only to be told that "Fr Svarinskas is an enemy — you and all believers are enemies of Soviet power".

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