

The Anniversaries of Christianity in the Baltic Republics

The years 1986 and 1987 mark the formal anniversaries of the Christianisation of two of the last nations in Europe to be converted — the Latvians and the Lithuanians. Eight hundred years ago, in 1186, a German monk called Meinhard, who had spent six years preaching to the pagan inhabitants of Livonia (now Latvia and Estonia) and had built a Catholic church in Ikšķile near Riga, was consecrated as the first Livonian bishop by the Bishop of Bremen. Two hundred years later, in 1387, Prince Jogaila of Lithuania agreed to be baptised as a Christian, thereby cementing a marriage alliance with Catholic Poland and becoming king of a united Lithuanian-Polish state. The two events were very different and are viewed very differently in the two countries concerned, despite the similarities in their culture and history.

Both Latvia and Lithuania are now Soviet republics, having been annexed in 1940 after a brief twenty years of independence. Before that, they both formed part of the Russian Empire. They are closely related, ethnically and linguistically. Yet the difference between them in the religious sphere is very noticeable. Even the Soviet authorities admit that in Lithuania Catholicism remains extremely strong. It is one of the most active centres of religious dissent and *samizdat* in the USSR. A majority of the Lithuanian Catholic clergy have openly defended religious rights, and protest petitions by the laity have been signed by as many as 148,000 people. The Catholic Church is also strongly identified with Lithuanian national traditions.

The picture in Latvia is quite different. Here religion has not

played a major role. Very little Latvian religious *samizdat* reaches the West. Active religious dissent is largely confined to the Baptist Church — a minority denomination. Unlike Lithuania, Latvia has traditionally been divided in its religious affiliations between the Lutheran, Catholic and Orthodox churches, none of which is identified with national feeling. Before the Second World War (when just over half the population belonged to the Lutheran Church), it was regarded as a Protestant country, but since the Soviet take-over there has been a massive decline in Lutheran church membership.

The 600th anniversary of Christianity in Lithuania is seen as a national festival to commemorate a positive event in the life of both church and nation. The conversion of Jogaila in 1387 came when the Lithuanians were already united in a nation-state, and Lithuania's largely peaceful conversion under the rule of its own princes coincided with the rise of Lithuania-Poland as a leading power in Eastern Europe. By contrast, Latvia's introduction to Christianity took place at a time when each "Livonian" tribe still had its own regional ruler; thus there could be no united opposition to the German military threat which followed Meinhard's Christian mission. Meinhard was an Augustinian monk whose policy was peaceful conversion of the heathen but he was succeeded as bishop by two Cistercian monks, Bertold and Albert, who succumbed to the passion then prevalent for crusades. Having proclaimed a Livonian crusade, Bishop Bertold himself died in battle against the pagans. In 1202, a monastic order of crusading



The Church of the Dormition at Kondopoga, in Karelia, is one of the finest examples of wooden church architecture in Russia. Its restoration has been hindered by long delays. See *Chronicle* item on pp. 206-209.



Iosif Begun, the prominent Jewish refusenik and Hebrew teacher, was released from camp on 20 February 1987. Scores of Jews met him on his arrival at Kazan Railway Station in Moscow.

(Photo © Martin Gilbert)

See *Chronicle* item on pp. 193-95 for a report on recent Soviet releases.



Veniamin Markevich, a Baptist from Ordzhonikidze and father of 11 children, was released from strict regime camp on 6 February 1987.

(Photo © Friedensstimme)



This mosque in Silistra, Bulgaria, is now closed. The notice on the boarded-up doors says "Cultural monument under repair". We report the situation of Turkish Muslims in Bulgaria in the *Chronicle* item on pp. 209-12.



Part of the Pskovo-Pechersky Monastery. Despite problems in recent years, this monastery continues to function. It has been suggested of late that non-functioning monasteries might be adapted for use as hotels or rest homes. See *Chronicle* item on pp. 206-209.

(Photos courtesy Keston College)

knights known as the "Brethren of the Sword" was recruited in Germany by Bishop Albert, with the blessing of Pope Innocent III, and dispatched to Livonia, which was now given the title of "the land of Mary". Over the next two centuries the Latvian pagans were subjugated and forcibly converted by the German knights. An attempt to extend their campaign to the Lithuanian pagans ended in a total defeat for the "Brethren of the Sword" at the battle of Šiauliai in 1236; the remaining crusaders then united with another German order, the Teutonic Knights, whose Grand Master became virtual ruler of Livonia. His only rival for power was the Bishop of Riga, whose claim rested on the fact that he represented the interests of the Pope, the "land of Mary" being, theoretically, the Pontiff's personal fief.

Lithuania's conversion was probably delayed by the activities of the Teutonic Knights: the Lithuanian ruler Mindaugas, who was baptised in 1251, reverted to paganism after the German Knights tried to establish strongholds on the Lithuanian coast. After 1387, the Teutonic Order could no longer claim that their campaign against the Lithuanians was a crusade — they were now attacking fellow-Christians — but the struggle continued intermittently until 1409, when the Order was finally defeated at the battle of Tannenberg. By the 16th century, the Teutonic Order was forced to call on the Lithuanians for help against the invading forces of the Russian Tsar. In return, the last Grand Master, Gotthard Kettler, ceded to Lithuania-Poland the south-eastern region of Latvia, Latgale, which remained under Lithuanian-Polish rule until the 18th century and, as a result, became the true cradle of Latvian Catholicism. The Latvian Catholic shrine of Aglona is in Latgale.

The Teutonic Knights were overtaken by the Reformation: the Grand Master eventually became Grand Duke of Courland, while the knight-monks were transformed into secular landowners. Whether the Latvian serf-population noticed that the Catholic Church, imposed on them by the crusading orders, had been transformed into a Baltic German Lutheran Church is a debatable point. The Lutheran clergy were overwhelmingly German and their ranks were infiltrated only gradually by the Latvians during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. For a long time German was the main liturgical language. Because of this, the Lutheran Church was often seen by Latvians as the church of the German ruling class. This link with the beginning of German rule has also affected Latvian attitudes to the Christianisation of the country. The 800th anniversary, while theoretically marking an "older" Christian commitment than the Lithuanian anniversary, is thus often viewed negatively from the Latvian-national angle. It has acquired popular religious significance for one denomination only — officially, the 800th anniversary was celebrated by both the Lutheran and the Catholic Churches in Latvia, but it was the Catholic celebrations which aroused large-scale support and popular enthusiasm.

The Catholics held their main anniversary service in Riga — a Mass in St James's Church (now the Catholic Cathedral) celebrated by the elderly Cardinal Vaivods on 5 June 1986. Despite the fact that it was an ordinary working day, Western clergymen present reported that the church was full to overflowing and that many people had to stand in the street. The three-day celebrations of the anniversary at the Marian shrine of Aglona, on 13-15 August, were attended by about 50,000 people

from all over the republic and led by three Latvian bishops — Vaivods, Zondaks and Cakuls. The numbers participating in the August celebrations testifies to the growing strength of the Catholic Church in Latvia in recent years.

The anniversary events in Latvia are described, in an interesting comparison with the 1987 Lithuanian anniversary, in the *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church* (No.72), the chief unofficial journal in Lithuania.

The authors draw attention to the presence of a German Catholic delegation at the June services in Riga.

The Catholics of Latvia experienced the joy of a visit from a group of West German bishops and clergy, including the Archbishop of Munich and Preising, Cardinal Wetter . . . The Latvian Catholics were gladdened by a present from the German Catholics — a statue of Meinhard, first bishop of Latvia. The guests visited the grave of Bishop Meinhard in the now-profaned Riga Cathedral of the Mother of God, which has been converted into a concert hall. Here a concert of religious music was organised for the guests from Germany. In the "concert hall" the guests were able to put some flowers on the grave of the man responsible for the conversion of Latvia and to say a prayer there. If an ordinary Latvian Catholic tried to do this, he would be punished for disturbing public order or for hooliganism. It will be interesting to see who will be allowed by the atheists to place flowers on the tomb of a man who helped to convert Lithuania — that of Grand Duke Vytautas in the desecrated Cathedral of Vilnius.

The atheist government made yet another concession to the delegation of West German clergy

— they allowed them to celebrate Mass in the rubble of the first church built by Bishop Meinhard in Ikškile, now in the storage yard of a car works. Ordinary Catholics were not informed about this service.

In an account of the celebrations at Aglona, the Lithuanian *Chronicle* mentions improvements in the Latvian Catholic position *vis-à-vis* the authorities in recent years. In a speech to the pilgrims, Cardinal Vaivods

. . . expressed joy because the most severe period of persecution seems to be past. At one time, about twenty years ago, when Bishop Struods used to try to travel to the Aglona festival from Riga, the militia used to stop his car and make him turn back, but now nobody dared to hinder him from going to the holy place.

More pilgrims attended the ceremonies than in previous years. A lot of pilgrims, especially converts from Lutheranism, came to Aglona on foot, even from as far away as Riga. The militia did not hinder them, though they were quietly praying and saying the rosary as they went.

However, the Lithuanian *Chronicle* rejects the idea that this is a sign of further liberalisation on the part of the authorities. Children are still forbidden to serve as altar-boys in the provinces, where tourists are not allowed — although in Riga such altar-servers are permitted. Church services are often deliberately disrupted by local atheists, for example by means of loud music.

The Lithuanian *Chronicle* is not correct in comparing Meinhard to the Lithuanian spiritual figure Mykolas Giedraitis, popularly regarded as a saint. Meinhard has not generally been regarded as a saint in Latvia, because he has been associated — perhaps unjustly — with the German

crusaders who followed him. The recent attempts by the Latvian Catholic Church to rehabilitate him in the popular mind as "a devout and wise man, gifted with the Holy Spirit" may spring from a desire to have a saint associated with Latvia, to boost the Catholic revival of the last few years. In fact the image of Aglona, as a native Latvian shrine, is likely to be far more influential, as was shown by the numbers present at the anniversary services.

The increasing attraction to Latvians of the Catholic Church is probably also due, in part, to admiration for its firm stand against the regime in Lithuania and Poland, as well as to the hopes aroused by the election of Pope John Paul II. In a message read out to the pilgrims at Aglona, the Pope urged Latvian Catholics to remain "firm in faith, courageous in hope and ardent in charity", despite the difficulties they might encounter. Aglona has been given the status of "minor basilica" by the Pope.

The 600th anniversary of Christianity in Lithuania has been regarded with some apprehension by the Soviet authorities. The date originally chosen for the main celebrations was 14 June 1987, but it has now been changed to 28 June, as the authorities belatedly recognised the national significance of the earlier date — it is remembered as the day in 1940 when Stalinist mass deportations of Lithuanians to Central Asia and Siberia began. An anniversary service on 14 June might have turned into a national demonstration.

The authorities have granted a number of concessions to the Lithuanian Catholic Church in 1987: a jubilee medallion is to be issued, as well as 50,000 prayer cards. There is

to be an issue of 11,500 New Testaments, 25,000 calendars and 50,000 abridged catechisms, together with 6,500 copies of a church magazine. However, the request made by the official church committee for the 600th anniversary (headed by Bishop Preikša) for the anniversary to be marked by the return of three well-known churches confiscated by the government — Vilnius Cathedral, St Casimir's Church and the Klaipeda Queen of Peace Church — did not meet with a positive response from the Council for Religious Affairs. The request was supported by letters from the diocesan clergy of Panevežys and Vilkaviškis, but this only further infuriated the Commissioner for Religious Affairs: his refusal was accompanied by threats (so far unfulfilled) to cancel the anniversary celebrations and ban the bishops from leaving the country. The hierarchy was accused of links with "extremist priests".

Hopes among Lithuanian Catholics, voiced in the *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church*, that Pope John Paul II might be able to visit the republic for the anniversary are very unlikely to be fulfilled. The Pope has more than once expressed his wish to be in Lithuania on the occasion "by love, prayer and any other possible means" but even if a visit were to be permitted during the Millennium of Christianity in Russia in 1988, he would probably only receive an invitation to Moscow. He has indicated that he would not visit the USSR unless he was allowed to go to Lithuania, as the centre of Catholicism. It is just possible that the Soviet authorities might offer him a trip to Latvia instead.