

Documents

Latvians Defend Dismissed Pastor

Since the incorporation of the Baltic states into the USSR, the Lutheran Church hierarchy in Latvia has tried to follow a policy of peaceful coexistence with the Soviet regime, consistently discouraging any kind of public protest among church members against state anti-religious practices. The recent emergence of active dissent within the Latvian Lutheran Church and its clergy is connected primarily with the case of Dean Modris Pláte, pastor of Kuldīga and Ēdole and a senior lecturer at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Riga.

Pláte's successes in increasing church membership and attracting young people to his services have made him a well-known figure among Latvian believers but have displeased the Soviet authorities. After Pláte's energetic defence of a fellow-clergyman (Máris Ludviks), whom the Council for Religious Affairs had refused to register, the Lutheran Consistory was put under pressure to dismiss him from Kuldīga. However, when the Consistory, headed by Archbishop Eriks Mesters, agreed to do so on 18 March 1987, they found that they had aroused unexpected opposition among Pláte's parishioners and fellow-clergy. Three hundred and

fifty members of the Kuldīga congregation and 19 Lutheran clergymen signed petitions reproaching their hierarchy for its unwillingness to defend Pláte against unfounded accusations of "provoking conflict" with the state. The signatories included three out of 15 deans and the rector of the theological seminary.

Archbishop Mesters reportedly refused to take into account the protests of Dean Pláte's admirers, including a personal appeal from Baptist activist Janis Rožkalns, and merely stated "some authorities cannot be ignored".

More protests were prompted by the Memorandum issued by the Archbishop and Consistory on 20 April, forbidding pastors to make independent additions to the liturgy. It was felt by many Lutherans that this instruction was aimed specifically at Pláte, who had instituted liturgical innovations and new forms of service as part of his evangelistic campaign and had prayed during services for certain prisoners of conscience, as other clergymen had prayed for him. Twenty Lutheran clergymen wrote to the Consistory, stating that their consciences would not permit them to follow its instructions. Dean Modris Pláte, with the support of the Kuldīga and Ēdole

congregations, has refused to leave his present parishes and has founded a "Rebirth and Renewal" group, together with four other Lutheran clergymen.

Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church
Consistory
226010 Riga 10,
Lačpleša iela 4-4
20 April 1987
Memorandum No. 208

To clergymen of the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church, congregational councils and inspection committees:

Uniformity in church services on Sundays and feast-days.

In 1986 a conference of clergy conducted an inquiry into the regular order of services in our church's congregations on Sundays and feast-days and concluded that, wittingly or unwittingly, pastors were distorting or leaving out parts of the service (the liturgical forms), and replacing them with components and forms which they had thought up themselves.

They also investigated the question of various features of services which are not mentioned in the *Order of Service*.

The March plenary session considered the recommendations made by the 1986 clergy conference and adopted the following resolutions:

1) Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church services on Sundays and feast-days must be conducted according to the same order of service in all congregations and churches.

2) According to the *Order of Service*, the general confession is made at the beginning of the service and the Holy Communion is distributed after the congregational prayer. At the pastor's request, however, the plenary session may — in particular cases, or

where extreme conditions demand it (e.g. because of difficulties of movement or space or to assist the sick) — permit an exception to be made, allowing the confession to take place just before the Communion.

3) The pastor may say the congregational prayer either from the altar steps or from the pulpit; however, it must be remembered that prayers involving congregational responses are to be said from the altar steps, and prayers from the pulpit should involve no responses. In services without Holy Communion, the congregational prayer is immediately followed by the holy prayer "Our Father", whether this is said at the altar or from the pulpit.

4) Some clergymen use the great litanies instead of the congregational prayer. This is not correct, as the litany should be used only three or four times a year (see *Order of Service*, p. 7).

5) On the Great Day of Prayer, a reading of God's ten commandments (Exodus 20:2-17) instead of the usual scripture reading is obligatory.

6) The plenary session of the Consistory noted the request made by congregations and pastors to be allowed henceforward to continue kneeling during the singing of "Holy, holy . . ." in the service of Holy Communion. It was decided that this should be permitted, in accordance with our church traditions.

7) Pastors may not add any unnecessary words to the liturgical forms and elements of church services, such as "Let us pray in the name of Jesus", or "Let us join in prayer and receive the blessing of the Lord", etc.

8) Some pastors, acting on their own initiative, have instituted two scripture readings in place of the reading from the altar, but following the Sunday *pericope*, the altar readings on liturgical church festivals remain as envisaged in the *Order of Service*.

9) Some pastors are accustomed to visiting parishioners before a church service and inviting each one to come to Communion that Sunday. In my view, this is a gross violation of pastoral ethics, as it places any parishioner who has not prepared himself to receive Communion that Sunday in an awkward position.

10) Last year, pastors who had consciously violated our church's code of pastoral discipline by high-handedly changing the established order of church services were penalised according to the regulations; some even incurred the extreme penalty of being removed from their position as pastor and having their registration as clergymen cancelled. Therefore, in order that such extreme measures and consequences may in future be rendered unnecessary, I ask every individual pastor, vicar and theological student to observe our *Order of Service*, to refrain from making any changes in it, and to refrain also from other independent activity.

11) At Christmas, some pastors have seen fit to advertise their congregations' services during or after concerts of religious "rock" music given by popular groups of singers. I consider this a breach of discipline, as a church is not a concert-hall, and there is no need to organise concerts of this kind. Let me point out at the same time that church services can be enriched by suitable spiritual songs and music presented by choirs, soloists, quartets and other kinds of instrumental ensembles.

12) Information has reached the Consistory that at Christmas some pastors saw fit to wear an alb during services. The last General Synod did not give permission for this, so this was a breach of discipline.

This is my last warning. If this is repeated, those responsible will be punished, and may even be relieved of their position as pastors. It also

applies to other services, for an alb is not part of official clergy dress.

Improving the work of deans in our church.

In its March plenary session, the Consistory discussed how the work of deans could be improved. The plenary session decided that the role of deans in our church has diminished in recent years and that often the Consistory and Archbishop do the deans' work. The authority of deans is diminishing, and there have even been some individual cases of disobedience on the part of clergymen in the execution of their duties.

Such a situation is not acceptable in view of our church's historical traditions and practices, according to which the Lutheran dean is the head of the relevant church administrative district, that is, the spiritual leader of his district.

In order to improve the work of deans, the Consistory plenary session has decided:

1) To extend the rights and duties of deans, so that they may become the true spiritual leaders of their district.

2) It is obligatory for a district's clergy, vicars and students from the Theological Seminary doing practical work in the district to obey their district dean, honouring and respecting both his work and his being. In all matters and problems they should first consult their dean; if the dean cannot solve the problem, then clergy should turn to the Archbishop for advice.

[. . .]

5) The dean is to be responsible for calling a district conference of clergy two or three times a year, at which lectures should be given on topical questions and problems such as the improvement of pastoral work and the education of the clergy in a religious-ethical spirit should be dis-

cussed, so that clergy may lead their congregations capably and purposefully. If a district pastor is incapable of leading his congregation or fulfilling his duties, it is the dean's duty to inform the Archbishop of this in writing. The dean's district conferences have no right to discuss or criticise the work of the Consistory, or the church calendar.

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An open letter to Latvian society.

"But if the watchman see the sword come, and blow not the trumpet, and the people be not warned; if the sword come, and take *any* person from among them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at the watchman's hand. So thou, O son of man, I have set thee a watchman unto the house of Israel . . ." (Ezekiel 33:6-7).

There are no positive developments in the case of Dean Modris Pláte, whose activity in the parish of Kuldīga the authorities have decided to bring to an end. The leadership of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia, bowing to the authorities' persistent pressure, has decided to dismiss M. Pláte from the parish of Kuldīga as of 1 May 1987.

Following that decision, which was taken by the Consistory of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia on 18 March 1987, a number of Lutheran clergymen addressed two submissions to the leaders of the church. One submission, signed by 19 pastors, reads:

Without any evidence of his guilt being produced, one of the best clergymen in Latvia is being punished before our very eyes . . . His only fault is consistent and uncompromising service rendered to God and for the furtherance of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Latvia. It is painful indeed to see

the Consistory failing to defend one of its own clergymen. Our faith in the Consistory is being undermined. If injustice and lies are to win the day in the case of Dean Pláte, then we must ask: "which of us will be the next victim?"

The other submission, signed by five pastors, included the following:

The Dean of Kuldīga has worked very diligently in his church and parish, earning thereby the deep respect and esteem of his parishioners . . . Even nowadays, in many places, local *soviet* representatives are ignoring the rights of congregations . . . The Consistory's action with regard to Dean M. Pláte, taken at the insistence of the Kuldīga Executive Committee, is another telling illustration of the process of "democratisation" in the country . . .*

The leaders of the church — the Consistory and Archbishop Eriks Mesters — have disregarded these submissions, deciding instead to cooperate with the state and make their clergy submit to the despotism of its atheistic machinery. This means that pastors cannot rely on their church leaders. In practice, in following the dictates of their conscience, they are forced to adopt increasingly radical positions against both the relevant state institutions and their church leaders. The most disturbing factor in the case of Dean Pláte is that an atmosphere full of falsehood and lies has been created; also, the situation has arisen at a time when the principles of democratism and openness are being proclaimed throughout Soviet society. State representatives have said in private that they are dissatisfied with the continuing uncompromising activity undertaken by

*The wording used here differs slightly from that of the original document — *Ed.*

pastor Pláte in the course of his parish work, in which — in the manner typical of Soviet functionaries — they discern political danger. On the other hand, the official answers (from the Executive Committee of Kuldīga to the Evangelical Lutheran congregation of Kuldīga, and from the Head of the Council for Religious Affairs in the Latvian SSR to the Evangelical Lutheran congregation of Kuldīga) state quite another position: the authorities have had no part in the dismissal of Dean Pláte — the dismissal is a purely internal church affair, the responsibility of the Archbishop and Consistory. Over a period of one week, the parish of Kuldīga has collected about 350 signatures to a submission protesting against the dismissal of the pastor and requesting that he be allowed to continue his work in the parish. The authorities, in their turn, have embarked on counter measures: from 13 to 19 April, a group of KGB men visited some people in Kuldīga — people who have not attended church for a long time and who may have some private dislike of pastor Pláte — and suggested that they should write official submissions against the pastor. To those who refused to comply with such instructions, the KGB men offered prepared submissions, ready for their signature. Perhaps this is how “the facts” are collected for satirical articles in newspapers.

The dismissal of Dean Pláte from the parish of Kuldīga has deeply disturbed both the congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia and its clergy. Many pray openly for Modris Pláte in their public acts of worship. The church leadership's obedience and subservience to the authorities' desire “to teach a lesson” to this pastor who stands fast against the temptations of compromise proves yet again that in the USSR the church's independence

from the state is just a myth. In fact, church leaders operate under conditions in which every step, of whatever level of importance, is dictated, directed, and controlled by the KGB and its organ, the Council for Religious Affairs. The case of Dean Modris Pláte is another striking witness to the discrimination practised against believers and clergymen in the USSR. Pastors in Soviet society have only two choices — they can co-operate with the atheistic state, which means that they can then go abroad and participate in conferences, thereby supporting and strengthening the USSR's foreign policy and furthering the dissemination of the myth that full freedom of faith exists and that the church really is independent of the state; or they can refuse to compromise and submit to the humiliating despotism, false defamations, organised campaigns and hypocritical actions of their church leaders. If political leaders or representatives of Western churches wish to obtain objective information on the situation of believers in the USSR, there is no point in asking those of our pastors who take part in conferences abroad; Westerners must seek out those clergymen who, because of their unwillingness to resort to compromise, are perpetually in disgrace — both in the eyes of the authorities and of the leadership of the church.

Many pastors in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia — who are for the time being forced to remain anonymous — have entrusted to me the task of making an official request to the World Council of Churches, to the Lutheran World Federation, to Christian people all over the world, and to our fellow-countrymen abroad: support Dean Modris Pláte, a victim of tyranny. These clergymen cry out, “Help us! Find strategies that work! Ask the Soviets how the case of Dean

M. Pláte matches up with slogans about democratisation! Ring up the leaders of the church in Riga, write to them — you can still do such things. We rely on your help!”

Since we were in Kuldīga, we both — my wife and I — added our signatures to the document in which the parish defends its pastor. That document was also one of the reasons for my visit to the Archbishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia — Eriks Mesters. I put only one question to him, “Will the submissions from the Lutheran clergy and from the parish and people of Kuldīga be examined before 1 May, that is, before the official date of Dean Pláte’s dismissal?” The Archbishop’s answer was, “I would like to thank all those who support Modris Pláte. It shows that Dean Pláte is loved and honoured everywhere, and this knowledge gives me real pleasure. But some authorities cannot be ignored. For that reason, the submissions will not be examined.” During the conversation, the Archbishop emphasised that on 27 April, in his presence, L. Barinova, the representative from the Kuldīga Executive Committee, stated that the demand to dismiss pastor M. Pláte still remains valid. At the same time, however, the parish leaders of Kuldīga received a document from that same Executive Committee saying that it does not demand the pastor’s dismissal. Evidently, the Executive Committee hopes that the comedy being enacted by the authorities will confuse and split the parishioners of Kuldīga and other Christians.

Soviet power in Latvia has

deprived our nation of many values, including the possibility of pursuing a truly Christian way of life. In the civilised countries of the 20th century, people can freely buy and study the Bible, publish and subscribe to religious publications, and bring up and educate their children in a Christian spirit. Such activities have been forbidden to Latvians for 47 years now. In this way, the soul of the whole nation has been intellectually deprived and confused; the absence of spiritual values results in criminality, drug addiction and prostitution. There is no means of coping with these social evils other than by popularising Christian ideas.

Dean Modris Pláte, as a pastor concerned about the spiritual life of the nation and as a fearless representative of truly Christian conviction, is naturally perceived by the atheistic authorities as a danger. Services of worship in his parish are attended not only by the inhabitants of Kuldīga but also by people from other regions of Latvia. The name of Kuldīga and that of Dean Pláte are therefore well known to Latvians, especially among intellectuals.

It is for these reasons that the Soviet authorities, despite all their slogans and signed agreements, have so harshly and crudely decided to render impotent this troublesome pastor. The dramatic situation in which Dean Pláte finds himself is no longer his personal affair, but that of all Latvian society, both within Latvia and abroad.

Jánis Rožkalns.
Latvia, Riga, 29 April 1987.