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BELARUS: Why were Catholic priests and nuns expelled?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Seven Polish Catholic priests and five nuns were forced out of Belarus at the end of 2006, Forum 18 News Service notes. Fr Mariusz Iliaszewicz told Forum 18 that his high level of activity, including youth and alcohol rehabilitation meetings open to all, was responsible for the expulsion decision. Another expelled priest, Fr Jaroslaw Hrynaszkiewicz, expressed similar thoughts to Forum 18. Fr Mariusz commented that "They don't want priests who work and try to develop their faith. Anything a priest says is considered political - if he talks about the lack of truth or freedom in Belarus he is immediately considered an opponent of the system. But there are grave violations of human rights in Belarus." Speaking of a protest hunger strike - which has now stopped - Fr Mariusz noted that he was astonished by the parishioners' own initiative. "They overcame fear - solidarity is beginning even in these little villages." A parishioner told Forum 18 that a Belarusian parish priest was now in the parish and that local Catholics have been given "no reasons, no answers," for the expulsion. However, Forum 18 was told "we all support" their expelled priest. The Belarusian Consulate in Warsaw has warned priests on short visits "not to engage in any religious activity."

One of a group of seven Polish Catholic priests and five nuns forced to leave Belarus by the end of 2006, Fr Mariusz Iliaszewicz, has told Forum 18 News Service from Warsaw that he believes his high level of activity was responsible. During the 1990s officials twice withdrew his work permit claiming that the youth meetings he organised open to non-Catholics and attended by guests from France, Germany, India and Poland were illegal; in 2005 the fact that half those attending an alcoholism rehabilitation programme he set up were Orthodox also attracted state criticism, he said: "They don't like ecumenical meetings."

The Belarus-based Christian Human Rights House recently reported that a coach of more than 40 young Catholics and Protestants was detained and thoroughly searched for almost five hours on the Belarusian border with Poland on 3 January. The young people were returning to Belarus after a pilgrimage to Zagreb, Croatia, where they had participated in an ecumenical meeting of the Taizé Community. One of the pilgrims remarked that he believed the party had been targeted as "young, active Christians." Several copies of the independent political newspaper "Nasha Niva" were confiscated.

Speaking to Forum 18 on 12 January, Fr Iliaszewicz also maintained that the state's decision to bar the 12 priests and nuns was political. "They don't want priests who work and try to develop their faith. Anything a priest says is considered political - if he talks about the lack of truth or freedom in Belarus he is immediately considered an opponent of the system. But there are grave violations of human rights in Belarus."

While all 12 barred priests and nuns had worked in Grodno [Hrodna] Diocese, Fr Iliaszewicz suggested that the decision was part of central policy, as "officials in Grodno region aren't independent." He agreed, however, that the strength of both Catholicism and the Polish community in Grodno region might explain why that diocese was targeted.

Fr Iliaszewicz also confirmed that a hunger strike begun on 28 December by approximately 100 of his parishioners in protest at his forced departure was halted after four days. Bishop Aleksandr Kaszkiewicz of Grodno had been concerned that Fr Iliaszewicz would be arrested and sent to prison, he explained, "so he asked me and I asked them to stop - my visa ended on 31 December and my only option was to leave." Emphasising that the hunger strike was the parishioners' own initiative, he told Forum 18 that he had been astonished by it. "They overcame fear - solidarity is beginning even in these little villages."

There has been a mixed state response to such protests, by both Catholics and Protestants, against the state's violations of religious freedom (see F18News 20 December 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=893>). After exhausting other methods of negotiation with the state authorities, some religious believers are adopting tactics more usually associated with secular political activism in their pursuit of religious freedom. Mainstream opposition political activists are in turn drawing on religious ideas (see F18News 29 November 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=880>).

To Fr Iliaszewicz's knowledge, there has been no state response to subsequent efforts by local Catholics to get him reinstated at the Parish of SS Simon and Jude Thaddeus in Lazduny village, the Parish of the Transfiguration of Our Lord in Yuratishki village and the Parish of St Hubert in Bakshty village. Fr Iliaszewicz helped renovate the church in Lazduny and in 2003 - after nine attempts to obtain permission - built a church in Yuratishki to replace one demolished in 1948.

One of Fr Iliaszewicz's former parishioners confirmed to Forum 18 from Lazduny on 11 January that the villagers' hunger strike has ceased and added that a new parish priest - with Belarusian citizenship - has already taken his place. The parishioner also maintained that, while local Catholics have still been given "no reasons, no answers" concerning Fr Iliaszewicz's forced departure, "we all support him."

In a separate development in early December, Catholic parishioners of Our Lady of Ostrobrama Church in Grodno city halted their hunger strike after five days when they received preliminary endorsement from the regional authorities for the construction of a new church building (see F18News 29 November 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=880>). Their parish priest remarked that they had been inspired by the example of New Life, the Minsk-based charismatic church whose members and supporters went on a high-profile hunger strike in defence of their property rights in October (see F18News 20 October 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=858>).

Like Fr Iliaszewicz, Fr Jaroslaw Hrynaszkiewicz served in Grodno Diocese for ten years, and also appears to have been particularly active there prior to his forced departure on 31 December. Speaking from Italy on 11 January, he told Forum 18 how he had founded and edited "Word of Life", Grodno's Catholic diocesan newspaper, taught Italian and media studies as a professor at Grodno's Catholic seminary and served at the Parish of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross in Makarovtsy village, some 40km south of the city.

"And now it's all over," Fr Hrynaszkiewicz rued, pointing out that, while Bishop Kaszkiewicz has managed to appoint a young Belarusian priest in his editorial role, the diocese does not have anyone with sufficient expertise in Italian and media studies to replace him at the seminary. This is further complicated by the legal requirement that all teaching personnel at religious educational institutions be proficient in the state languages of Belarusian and Russian.

Fr Hrynaszkiewicz also told Forum 18 that no official grounds have been given for his expulsion. "No one has said anything, no reasons have been given," he remarked. "We - and the people there - want to know why." His only guess was that the authorities might have disliked something about his diocesan newspaper - but he had no idea what.

The telephone of Grodno region's main religious affairs official, Igor Popov, went unanswered on 11 and 12 January. Reached on what appeared to be a clear telephone line on 2 October, Popov confirmed his name and patronymic but then claimed not to be able to hear Forum 18's questions. Popov's telephone went unanswered when Forum 18 rang back immediately.

In a 29 November response to more than 12,000 signatures protesting against the expulsions of Fr Mariusz Iliaszewicz, Fr Leonard Czuchonski, Fr Andrzej Sadowski and Fr Jaroslaw Hrynaszkiewicz, Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Leonid Gulyako tells Bishop Kaszkiewicz that he "was informed in person" on 10 and 23 November about the state's decision not to extend the relevant religious work permits. Maintaining that the invitation of foreign citizens for religious activity in Grodno Diocese "lies within your area of competency," he adds that "in this regard we are prepared to consider for approval communication from you regarding the invitation of foreign citizens to parishes" - except for those 12 Polish priests and nuns refused permission to continue working in Belarus after the end of 2006 (see F18News 3 October 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=850>).

Bishop Kaszkiewicz distributed Gulyako's response in a 5 December open letter to members of his Diocese, requesting prayer for the 12 Polish priests and nuns. He insists that, when he presented the state authorities in June with a list of foreign priests and nuns who would continue to work in Grodno Diocese next year, "I expressed my pastoral trust in all of them. I do not see any reason why I should withdraw that trust." Bishop Aleksandr Kaszkiewicz also expresses his "regret and protest" at the state's decision to bar the 12 (see F18News 3 October 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=850>).

Parishioners and colleagues of Fr Czuchonski were unable to provide Forum 18 with contact details for him on 11 January. He served at the Parish of Archangel Michael in Mikhalishki village and the Parish of St George in Bolshyye Sviranki village, both of which are near to the Lithuanian border. Forum 18 has also been unable to reach Fr Sadowski, who served at the Parish of the Finding of the True Cross in Grodno and the Parish of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the nearby village of Kozlovichi.

While territorially smaller than each of the other three Catholic dioceses in Belarus, Grodno Diocese has approximately twice as many parishes, putting it on a par with the Belarusian Orthodox Church in that region. According to 2005 state figures, there were 170 Catholic parishes in Grodno region supported by 168 clergy, of whom 72 were foreign citizens.

Of the 350 or so Catholic priests in Belarus, more than half are foreign citizens. Two did not have their annual visas renewed at the end of 2005, and were thus forced to return to their native Poland (see F18News 22 December 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=710>, 6 January 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=713> and 13 January 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=715>).

A Council of Ministers decree, dated 23 February 1999, controls the activity of foreign religious workers in Belarus. Should the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs grant a religious community permission to invite a foreign religious worker for up to one year, the decree states, he or she may conduct religious activity only within houses of worship belonging to or premises continually rented by that community. The transfer of a foreign religious worker from one religious organisation to another - such as

between parishes - requires permission from the relevant state official dealing with religious affairs, even for a single service.

Even foreign Catholic priests making short visits are subject to tight restrictions. "One Polish priest recently went to Belarus to study the language, but was warned at the Belarusian Consulate in Warsaw before he went not to engage in any religious activity," Polish Catholic sources have told Forum 18. "When local Catholics in Belarus saw he was a priest and asked him why he wasn't serving as a priest there, he had to tell them he had been warned not to conduct religious activity and was abiding by the law." A Polish Catholic priest was detained after celebrating Mass while passing through Minsk in September 2006 (see F18News 3 October 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=849>).

Foreign religious workers invited by local religious communities of various confessions are increasingly being barred from Belarus (see F18News 18 October 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=856>). (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=888>.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806>.

A printer-friendly map of Belarus is available at <<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=belaru>>

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