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BELARUS: Why is state Financial Investigation Committee investigating a priest?

By Olga Glace, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

A Belarusian regional state Financial Investigation Committee is examining the activities of Fr Vyacheslav Barok, a Catholic priest in the northern Vitebsk Region. Committee officials have told him that he is suspected of evading tax on alleged earnings of about 1,000,000 Euros from pilgrimages he and a number of volunteers organise - but they will not put the allegations in writing to Fr Barok, or clarify them to Forum 18 News Service. Fr Barok strongly denies the allegations, which were made on the basis of an anonymous letter officials claim they were sent. The Financial Investigation Committee has also been questioning some of the pilgrims. One pilgrim questioned - who had been on two foreign pilgrimages - told Forum 18 that she was asked if Fr Barok made her donate money for the church or demanded extra money during the trips. "It was silly to assume such things, they are not true," the pilgrim indignantly stated. Forum 18 contacted one local tourist agency, and found that they charged about twice as much for a tour similar to a pilgrimage organised by Fr Barok.

Belarus' Novopolotsk Financial Investigation Committee is examining the activities of Fr Vyacheslav Barok, priest of the Catholic Parish of St Josaphat Kuncewicz in Rassony in the northern Vitebsk [Vitsyebk] Region. Committee officials have told him that he is suspected of evading tax on alleged earnings of about 1,000,000 Euros (10,930,000,000 Belarusian Rubles, 7,497,000 Norwegian Kroner, or 1,322,000 US Dollars) from pilgrimages he and a number of volunteers organise to religious sites in Belarus, other European countries and Israel. Fr Barok strongly denies the allegations, and officials have refused to state to Fr Barok in writing, or to Forum 18, what exactly he is being accused of and on what precise basis the claims are made.

Under the supervision of the Vitebsk Catholic Diocese, Fr Vyacheslav Barok, together with his brother and fellow-priest Fr Yuri Barok, has been since 2007 organising and leading pilgrim tours within Belarus and abroad. The pilgrimages gained popularity, his supporters say, due to affordable prices, the high quality of information and the possibility for participants to pray together. Thousands of people - mostly Catholic and Orthodox as well as Baptists and atheists from Minsk, Svetlogorsk, Polotsk, Vitebsk and other cities - have taken part in the pilgrimages, he told Forum 18 on 14 February.

Bishop Wladyslaw Blin of Vitebsk Diocese told Forum 18 on 17 February that Fr Barok organises pilgrimages with his permission, and that Fr Barok does not receive any payment from the diocese either for his work as a priest or for the pilgrimages. "Every priest lives on donations," Bishop Blin told Forum 18 from Vitebsk.

The state tightly limits freedom of religion or belief in Belarus. For example, the launch of a CD in a Catholic church was stopped due to state pressure (see F18News 1 February 2010 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1402>). Political prisoners who are religious believers - such as Catholic journalist Andrzej Poczobut - have been denied the possibility to receive clergy visits in jail (see F18News 4 July 2011 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1589>). Raids on people meeting to exercise their religious freedom without state permission also continue (see forthcoming F18News article).

Anonymous letter?

On 29 December 2011 Fr Barok was summoned to the Financial Investigation Committee. There he was told that he was being investigated on the basis of an anonymous letter, accusing him of "illegal tourist activities and earning up to 1,000,000 Euros from this". In this context he understands that he is being accused of evading Belarusian tax.

Fr Barok told Forum 18 that he was not allowed to see the letter, but that it was read out loud to him. He said he had "serious doubts" that the anonymous letter was even written by a person who participated in pilgrimages with him, as all the facts were "confused".

Committee officials would not state to Forum 18 what precisely they are claiming in relation to Fr Barok. Committee officials who would not identify themselves told Forum 18 from Vitebsk on 3 February that, while the investigation is in process, no comments would be made.

Fr Barok commented that he "can't say how the situation will develop, but the authorities had better get interested not in me but in finding the provocateur who sent the anonymous letter. Otherwise I'll consider that no real person stands behind it."

He insisted to Forum 18 that he violated no laws, there were no grounds for any suspicions, and that he was working as a priest getting no financial benefit from the pilgrimages. Speaking of the Pilgrimage Centre he runs, he stated that "our Statute provides the right to organise pilgrimages, including those abroad". Fr Barok noted that "conducting religious activities doesn't imply any income, that's why it's not tax-deductible, and the Diocese fully supports me."

The Pilgrimage Centre

Every year the Pilgrimage Centre Fr Barok runs in Novopolotsk organises about 16 pilgrimages abroad involving a total of between 700 and 900 people. More than 1,500 people per year join walking pilgrimages to religious sites in Belarus - including Budslav, Bratslav and Rositsa. The Pilgrimage Centre told Forum 18 on 3 February that the pilgrimages were very popular, and that there were never any complaints, including about the financial aspect.

A participant of two pilgrim tours to Italy and Greece from Polotsk, who preferred not to give her name, told Forum 18 on 15 February that she was content with the way the trips were organised. She stated that when she took part in the first pilgrimage she did not know much about it and decided to participate because of the low price. "I had no doubts about my second tour and booked it three months in advance," she said.

Fr Barok explained to Forum 18 that they keep prices affordable thanks to the use of volunteers and the support of sponsors. He said that sometimes they took people who could not afford pilgrimages. The Pilgrimage Centre has no office, and the two volunteers who provide information, sign pilgrims up for tours and help with the travel arrangements work from home.

Elena Litko, one of the volunteers who has travelled to Israel for free, said that she was happy with the trip. "It was performed exactly as it was described," she told Forum 18 on 15 February. She pointed out that not everyone in Belarus could afford such a trip, which costs about 600 Euros (6,580,800 Belarusian Rubles, 4,500 Norwegian Kroner, or 800 US Dollars), "as Israel is an expensive country".

Forum 18 contacted one local tourist agency, and found that a similar tour would cost about twice as much as the price of a pilgrimage organised by Fr Barok.

"Intimidated by the state for making a pilgrimage"

The Financial Investigation Committee has also been questioning some of the pilgrims. Fr Barok complained to Forum 18 that people were scared and bewildered after this questioning. "It's unacceptable when people who travelled with me get intimidated by the state for making a pilgrimage."

One pilgrim questioned - who had been on two foreign pilgrimages - complained to Forum 18 that the meeting with the Financial Investigation Committee left her feeling uneasy. The pilgrim said the interview lasted about an hour, and she was asked if Fr Barok made her donate money for the church or demanded extra money during the trips. "It was silly to assume such things, they are not true," the pilgrim indignantly told Forum 18 on 15 February.

Asked by Forum 18 if she was deterred from future pilgrimages, she answered that she had already signed up for another pilgrimage to Portugal and Spain in October.

Another pilgrim, Vadim Bolbas, who described himself as an atheist, told Forum 18 on 11 February that he was aware of the interrogations and prepared to face the Financial Investigation Committee. "I think the letter was written by a person who was mentally ill," he told Forum 18 on 11 February. "I'll tell the truth to the Financial Investigation Committee and I don't fear them." Bolbas has participated in four pilgrimages with Fr Barok.

Fr Barok told Forum 18 that the work was continuing. In 2012 there are about 13 tours to Western European countries planned (including to Germany, Lithuania, the Vatican, Italy, Greece, and Austria), and three to Israel.

Connection with earlier protest?

On 1 July 2011, during the annual feast day of the Sanctuary of the Mother of God in Budslav, a pilgrimage shrine in Minsk Region, Fr Barok and pilgrims from Vitebsk Diocese protested against a security turnstile gate installed by the police and their checking of personal possessions. Police refused to allow pilgrims to bring any metal items and also even umbrellas. Fr Barok insisted to the independent news agency Westki.info at the time that the clergy took responsibility for the pilgrims' personal items.

Asked if he would see any connection with the protest action in Budslav, Fr Barok responded: "I wouldn't like to make any connection with those events." (END)

For a personal commentary by Antoni Bokun, Pastor of a Pentecostal Church in Minsk, on Belarusian citizens' struggle to reclaim their history as a land of religious freedom, see F18News 22 May 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1131>.

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1311>.

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Belarus can be found at <<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=16>>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351>.

A printer-friendly map of Belarus is available at <<http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Belarus>>.

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