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RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION IN LITHUANIA — SOVIET STYLE

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This is Lithuania today

Half the churches are closed. Priests are harassed in their ministry. Young people are forbidden contact with the Church. This is Lithuania today.

Freedom to print Catholic publications, religious manuals, catechisms, prayerbooks is denied. Documents of Vatican Council II are still not available to the people. Internal affairs of the Church are controlled not by the bishops but by the Communist commissar of cult.

This also is Lithuania today — showcase of religious persecution, Soviet style.

A small and independent country of three million on the shores of the Baltic Sea, 85% Catholic, Lithuania was forcibly occupied by Soviet armies in 1940. As a result of the surprise German attack in 1941 Lithuania fell under Nazi rule until 1944, when Soviet armies overran Lithuania again.

Having experienced the brutality of life under Communism in 1940-1941, about 75,000 Lithuanians succeeded in fleeing to the West before this final Red Army takeover. The United States has never given official recognition to the Soviet occupation of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.

"The Catholic Church in Lithuania is condemned to die." This is the stark conclusion of forty priests of the Vilnius diocese who signed a lengthy protest letter to top Soviet authorities in Moscow and in Lithuania in August of 1969.

Soviets isolate priests

It is Soviet policy to isolate the priest from the people. The priest is not allowed to attend wedding celebrations, baptismal parties or any such gatherings. He is forbidden to visit his own parishioners or to have contact with youth groups.

Even in the pulpit he is forbidden to teach Christ and the truths of faith. This would counter government sponsored atheistic propaganda. The priest would be accused of conducting religious propaganda and would be liable to punishment. His preaching must be limited to moralizing on such evils as stealing, drinking, idleness.

To accept any church position such as pastor or assistant, the priest needs a "work permit" from the Communist commissar of cult (the "delegate" for religious affairs, or "Bishop of bishops," as he is nicknamed in Lithuania.) Bishops cannot transfer priests without permission of the commissar. But the commissar can transfer pastors and assistants on his own authority.

If the Communist commissar of cult wants to punish a priest, he recalls his "work permit." The priest is then given one month to find civilian employment. If unsuccessful, he is subject to deportation to a concentration camp.

Freedom of conscience denied

For a priest to teach catechism to children is a crime against the Soviet state. On Aug. 26, 1971 Rev. Juozas Zdebskis, pastor of the parish of Prienai, was arrested and charged with violating the law of separation of church and state by teaching catechism to children in church.

On Sept. 16 two thousand parishioners of Father Zdebskis sent a signed petition protesting this arrest to Soviet leaders.

Before his trial Father Zdebskis was so badly beaten that, according to press reports, his mother was not able to recognize him. During his trial 600 people demonstrated outside the courthouse until dispersed by police, with 20 arrests.

In his courtroom defense Father Zdebskis stressed that atheistic officials violate freedom of conscience and freedom to exercise parental rights over children as guaranteed in theory by the Soviet Constitution.

In his arguments he said that because of the restrictions on the priest examining children for First Communion "Freedom of faith becomes similar to permission to live, but prohibition to give birth..."

"The fact that a charge such as this is brought against a priest, as well as the attempt to take children from parents, are these not violations of freedom of conscience?"

Father Zdebskis concluded that the trial "confronts priests with two choices." One is "to be a priest according to the mind of Christ, determined to perform the duties required by Christ and the law of the Church, and at the same time accepting whatever Providence allows one to endure."

The other choice is "to choose the so-called 'way of peaceful cooperation with atheists,' to try to compromise, to serve two masters; to be a priest, but not to be dangerous to atheism."

On Nov. 11, 1971 Father Zdebskis was sentenced to one year in prison. The following day, in another district, Rev. Prosperas Bubnys, pastor of Girkalnis, was also sentenced to a year in prison on the same charge: instructing children in catechism.

Human rights violated

Another important trial took place a year earlier. This time a Jesuit priest was involved, Rev. Antanas Šeškevičius, S.J.

The official charge read: "Šeškevičius, at the close of the month of June and at the beginning of July, 1970, collected the children of Dubingiai Parish in the church and there instructed them in the catechism. This is in direct violation of the established statutes and, in particular, against the Criminal Code of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Lithuania, Article 143 section 1."

Verdict: guilty. Sentence, passed Sept. 9, 1970: one year in prison.

In his defense, Father Šeškevičius stressed international guaranties of basic human rights and their violation in Soviet practice. He cited the United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Man, co-signed by the Soviet Union.

Article 18 states: "Each man has a right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion: this right guarantees. . . the individual... freedom to profess his faith singly or collectively, freely to study his religion's teachings, to hold religious services and to perform his religious obligations."

He also quoted from the United Nations' Convention adopted in Paris 1960, and ratified by the Soviet Union.

The fifth article states: "Governments participating in this agreement hold that... parents and legal guardians... may seek their children's religious and moral training according to their faith."

In spite of these international guaranties, Father Šeškevičius observed that "in practice, religious freedom — especially in the field of teaching children — is relegated to obscurity."

Attempted leap for freedom

The denial of basic human rights by the Soviets was brought into worldwide focus by the recent and famed Simas Kudirka case, in which a Lithuanian sailor tried to defect from a Soviet fishing vessel off Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts Nov. 23, 1970.

Simas Kudirka, a 32-year-old radio operator, leaped from the Soviet vessel onto the deck of the U.S. Coast Guard cutter Vigilant and pleaded for political asylum. After several hours of consultations among American officials, Soviet seamen were allowed to board the Coast Guard cutter, brutally beat Kudirka into unconsciousness and forcibly return him to the Soviet ship — to the shocked dismay of America and the world at large.

For this attempt at freedom Kudirka was tried for treason before the supreme court of Soviet occupied Lithuania and sentenced on May 20, 1971 to ten years at hard labor. His last request of the Soviet government was "I ask that you grant my homeland, Lithuania, independence."

In the courtroom he condemned Soviet oppression by saying that "The Atlantic Charter, which promised the enslaved nations freedom, was an empty promise, costing my people 50,000 dead (guerilla fighters resisting Soviet occupation) and 400,000 deported, of whom 150,000 found their graves in the earth of Siberia.

"The bravest and most resolute patriots of Lithuania were physically annihilated. But a new young generation has grown up which intends to go the road of their fathers."

Soviet authorities are fearful lest this "new young generation" come under religious influence. Children and young people under eighteen are forbidden to study religion or to participate actively in religious services. They cannot serve Mass, take part in processions, sing in choirs.

School children are indoctrinated in atheism and communism. They are taught that religious parents are backward and ignorant. A youth accused of being a believer or of practicing religion finds college or university education barred to him in Lithuania.

Hope for the future

In spite of hardships, Lithuanian Catholics cling tenaciously to their faith. Recently a Soviet official complained in the press, "In spite of scientific and atheistic propaganda and efforts of the Communist party, in 1968 51% of newly born infants were baptized, 57% of burials were performed with religious services." These official estimates are considered to be too conservative.

A Swedish Catholic newspaper reported in 1971 that "Out of 440 priests ordained in Lithuania after World War II only 17 have given up the priesthood. During that same time four bishops and 170 priests have died for their faith in Soviet prisons and Siberian slave labor camps."

The Lithuanian seaman's leap for freedom failed. But it succeeded in breaking through the wall of silence hiding Soviet oppression and religious persecution in Lithuania from the eyes of the world.

Lithuanians hope and pray that freedom loving people in the West will raise their voices in support of religious freedom and basic human rights for Lithuania and oppressed people everywhere.

Religious statistics of Lithuania

	1940	1971
Bishops	12	6*
Priests	1439	808**
Seminaries	4	1
Seminarians	425	35
Churches and chapels	1047	627

* Two of these are exiled from their dioceses and not allowed to carry out their duties.

** 97 of the 808 priests are forbidden to do priestly work.