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Such is Soviet Freedom of Religion!

From the "Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania," No. 67, dated January 6, 1984. The Chronicle is published fairly periodically in the Soviet-occupied Lithuania at tremendous personal risks, in spite of the advertised freedom of press over there. The publication documents the struggle for human rights today. Excerpts by permission, Lithuanian Roman Catholic Priests' League of America.

SUCH IS SOVIET FREEDOM OF RELIGION!

With the sentencing of Father Alfonsas Svarinskas and the arrest of Father Sigitas Tamkevičius, the faithful of Lithuania began collecting signatures to petitions and protests addressed to Yuri Andropov, General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist party, and to the Prosecutor General, demanding the release of the unjustly arrested priests. In order that the expressions of protest with their signatures would reach the addressees, and not be held up back in Lithuania at KGB headquarters, the faithful would take them in sections to Moscow, and leave them registered at the reception desk.

The expressions of protest in behalf of freedom for the priests were signed by one hundred twenty-three thousand (123,000) of the faithful, of whom twenty-two signed in blood. More of the faithful would have signed, if the atheists had not taken repressive measures just to disrupt the collecting of signatures. The atheists of Lithuania tried with threats to tell even priests to forbid the faithful to sign texts of the declaration. KGB agents, using physical force, hunted down people gathering signatures, stuffed them into vehicles, and took them to militia stations. There they intimidated and threatened them, confiscated texts and signatures, and dealt out 50-ruble fines.

The public was warned in Lithuanian television programs that those collecting signatures could be sentenced to prison. In more than one rayon, KGB agents interrogated individuals who had signed the petitions, and pressured them to sign vague texts presented by them.

With the expressions of protest which were taken to Moscow were declarations to the Prosecutor General and to the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, which were signed in the name of the faithful of Lithuania by Aldona Šukytė, Albina Žemaitytė, Alfonsas Bumbulis and Juozas Kazlauskas.

To: The Prosecutor General of the USSR From: The Catholic Faithful of Lithuania

A Petition

Prosecutor General, we Catholic Faithful of Lithuania come to you with a request that you review the cases of our priests, Fathers Alfonsas Svarinskas and Sigitas Tamkevičius, and release them, because they were unjustly dealt with by the Supreme Court of the Lithuanian SSR in May, 1983, under Par. 68 of the Criminal Code: Alfonsas Svarinskas was sentenced to seven years of imprisonment and three years of exile, and Sigitas Tamkevičius was arrested in the courtroom, also under Par. 68.

1. We have often heard their sermons, and we can honestly testify that they never carried on any anti-Soviet propaganda, but just explained religious truth, defended the rights of the faithful, and sometimes, criticized the atheists' attacks on

religion and believers, all of which is allowed under Par. 49 and Par. 52 of the Soviet Constitution.

2. The atheists in Lithuania quite mistakenly and unjustly conduct propaganda against religion, the Church and the faithful, and force believers to accept atheism. Following is a whole list of real-life examples:

a. Newspapers, magazines, and pamphlets, often libelously attack religion, the Church and priests. Please read their articles against religion, and you will see what we mean.

Even irrational creatures defend themselves; surely the clergy and faithful have the right to defend themselves. Priests are supposed to defend the faithful, but how can they do so? For forty years now, we have no religious newspaper. The only possibility for self-defense consists of sermons in church. But this displeases the atheists greatly, because the priests demonstrate their untruthful and libelous attacks and calumnies.

b. In school, the atheists often force the children of the faithful, against the wishes of their parents, to join atheistic organizations, forbid them to go to church, and punish those who refuse to join. All children who are religious believers are obliged to attend atheistic meetings. Surely the priests and faithful do not have to keep silent about this, when Par. 50 of the Soviet Constitution guarantees freedom of conscience and religion.

c. For forty years now, the faithful of Lithuania have no religious publications: no books, no newspapers and no prayerbooks. It is true that in those forty years, some books have been published in small numbers, but these are only for the priests; there are so few prayerbooks that there was only one copy for each ten thousand of the faithful. Even beggars in the old days used to get more support from the people than the faithful receive religious publications from the government atheists. In other democratic countries, such as Poland, the German Democratic Republic, Hungary and others, it is a completely different world: There the children are taught religion in church, the faithful have religious newspapers and books. We envy the Negroes of Africa their religious freedom.

Prosecutor, you understand well that our people who are religious believers cannot and will not remain silent in such a situation, even though more priests go to prison.

d. While in other Communist countries, the faithful freely carry out religious processions to the cemetery and to other churches, in our country people are taken to court for that, even though such processions have been going on in our land for six hundred years, and Par. 50 of the Constitution permits them.

e. White-collar workers and teachers do not have the right to go to church freely. The faithful have neither radio nor television programs. Everything is devoted exclusively to the atheists.

f. Moreover, the frequent attacks of the atheists are completely incompatible with the Constitution. In this way, not only the Party is demeaned, but the entire Communist system: The atheists prevent young men from enrolling in the seminary, they forbid the preparation of children for First Confession and Communion; they forbid serving Mass, and they interfere in the assignment of priests and bishops.

3. Soviet newspapers often criticize the bad conduct of blue collar and white collar workers, and their negligence. Even fraternal trials sternly admonish those who disrupt good order.

Father Alfonsas Svarinskas and Sigitas Tamkevičius also objected to the transgression against the Constitution and human rights guaranteed by international agreements. We should have been glad that people turned up who were concerned that good order be maintained, who criticized the unjust activity of the atheists with regard to believers (this is useful for the Party and the government), but for this, they were sternly punished. Is this intelligent, or just? This is how Stalin acted. For that, he was condemned by the Party and the entire world. Why repeat the same mistakes?

4. All of us, almost our entire public, also condemn the attacks of the atheists, like the aforesaid priests. Hence, we should also be arrested and thrown into prison. That will not help matters. Stalin tried to crush people's belief in God by force, but people cannot live without their rights, no more than without bread.

5. It is no wonder that the believing public was deeply disturbed by the trial of Father Alfonsas Svarinskas, and sympathized with him as though it were on trial itself. The militia chased people away from the courthouse by force, drove them forty kilometers into the woods, shut them up for ten days or fined them 50 rubles. In this way they aroused the people's ire all the more. Has the situation improved since the arrest of Father Svarinskas?

6. The believing public also supports the Soviet state: It works in the offices, factories and fields . . . often better and more conscientiously than the atheists. We, the same working people, ask you to review the cases of Father Alfonsas Svarinskas and Father Sigitas Tamkevičius, and to release them.

NOTE: On your advice, we appealed to the Prosecutor of the Republic, but he responded only verbally: "Svarinskas is a criminal and will not be released, and the case of Father Sigitas Tamkevičius will not be set aside." Therefore, we appeal to you and trust that you will review the cases and release the aforesaid priests, and in order that they would not have to be tried in the future, we ask you to see that the unjust attacks of the atheists not be repeated.

July 16, 1983

To: The Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet,

USSR

From: Believers of Lithuania

A Petition

Honorable Chairman, we turn to you on some vitally important questions in the belief that you will decide them intelligently.

According to Par. 52 of the Soviet Constitution, we have freedom of religion and of conscience, but in Lithuania, this paragraph is regularly breached.

1. For forty years now, we have had NO RELIGIOUS NEWSPAPER OR MAGAZINE; some religious books were received by the priests only; only one out of ten thousand faithful received a prayerbook. We envy our ancestors who lived in czarist time, and the Negroes of Africa, who have enough religious literature. In other democratic countries, the picture is quite different. We are the only ones cheated.

2. Schoolteachers force pupils who are religious believers to join atheistic organizations. Often they sign up the entire class by force; anyone objecting is permanently punished and persecuted; all are forbidden to go to church. Teachers who are religious believers do not have the right to go to church; for that they are discharged from work. This is how other white-collar workers are treated also.

3. The faithful have NO RADIO OR TELEVISION PROGRAMS.

4. The atheistic government INTERFERES IN THE INTERNAL AFFAIRS OF THE SEMINARY — by obstructing the enrollment of all candidates who wish to try for the priesthood. They impose their will on the appointment of bishops and priests. Why are we so humiliated as not to have any of the rights conferred by the Constitution of the land? One clear example: Bishop Julijonas Steponavičius has been exiled for more than twenty years from Vilnius, for conscientiously doing his duty.

5. While the faithful in other democratic countries freely hold RELIGIOUS PROCESSIONS to cemeteries and other churches, in our country that is subject to penalty, even though the Soviet Constitution in Par. 50 allows it. Why so? For six hundred years in our country, such processions have been taking place.

6. Why must we PAY SIX TIMES MORE THAN OTHERS FOR ELECTRICITY? It is said that THE CHURCHES ARE GIVEN TO US WITHOUT CHARGE, BUT IN REALITY, WE HAVE TO PAY HUGE SUMS, even though we ourselves built them. Where will you find another such state?

7. They have unjustly SEIZED THE CHURCH OF KLAIPĖDA, built by our own hands and money, and to this day, they have not returned it, but only keep promising to erect another. Where is the justice in this?

8. The atheistic administration in many places, AT THE INTERMENT OF A BELIEVER, FORBIDS HIM TO BE ACCOMPANIED BY A CROSS AND MOURNING BANNERS, as our ritual requires. Also, they DO NOT ALLOW ERECTION OF A CROSS ON THE GRAVES OF BELIEVERS, OR BEFORE ONE'S OWN HOME, as has been the custom among us from of old, so even the deceased do not have religious freedom.

9. In new cities like Akmenė, Elektrėnai and Sniečkus, HOUSES OF PRAYER MAY NOT BE OPENED, even though most of the residents desire it.

10. The Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Lithuanian SSR, on July 28, 1976, decreed: "Religious associations have the right to obtain MEANS OF TRANSPORTATION", but in practice, the faithful are not allowed even to rent a bus or to buy an old one.

11. According to Leninist principle, the phrase "the Church is separated from the school" means that religion may not be taught. But in our country, the atheists FORBID THE TEACHING OF RELIGION TO CHILDREN, EVEN IN CHURCH. In democratic countries, that is done freely.

12. The atheistic leadership FORCES THE FAITHFUL TO work on Sundays and holy days, even though they are the majority. In Poland, Catholics can freely celebrate, and they get the work done anyhow.

13. The results of atheistic oppression clearly manifested themselves in the arrest of Fathers Alfonsas Svarinskas and Sigitas Tamkevičius, who tried to defend the rights of believers.

These and other painful facts seriously oppress and annoy the entire believing public; we can no more do without freedom of religion, than we can without bread. We ask you to do away with such anti-Constitutional oppression by the atheists.

Lietuva, Kaunas
Mažoji g-vė 1-10

Juozas Kazalupskas
July 25, 1983