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Pope Francis criticizes Belarus' rules for Catholic priests

Catholics displeased by restrictions for foreign priests

Russia Religion News (29.03.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2E8agOY> - The head of the Roman Catholic Church of Belorussia, Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, is displeased with restrictions for foreign priests who may not conduct masses in the country without permission of the authorities.

Earlier Catholic bishops of Belorussia, at a meeting with Roman Pope Francis in the Vatican, touched on the situation for priests who arrive in the republic from abroad. According to information of the Roman Catholic Church of Belorussia, the pontiff was surprised that foreign priests, who visit the republic as tourists, may not conduct mass without permission of the authorities.

"It is incomprehensible for people who know the situation in the world and the Catholic church that a priest who. . . like any other person may come to Belorussia for five days (the five-day visaless rules apply for citizens of 80 countries who arrive through the Minsk national airport—ed.), may not conduct services (in Belorussia) without permission of the commissioner for affairs of religions (and nationalities—ed.)" Kondrusiewicz told journalists on Tuesday.

The head of the Belorussia Catholic also added that "nowhere in the world" is there such a practice.

Roman Pope Francis earlier noted that the situation for foreign priests in Belorussia "contradicts the general trend of the internationalization of the ecumenical church."

Demand to suspend activity of Jehovah's Witnesses arises in Belarus

Russia Religious News (19.03.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2psLTHa> - A petition to the commissioner for affairs of religions and nationalities in Belarus, Leonid Gulyako, with a demand to conduct a state religious studies expert analysis of the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses, has appeared on the website change.org. Its author is indicated to be a certain Maksim Arsentiev.

According to the petition, the Jehovah's Witnesses in Belarus have not undergone a religious studies expert analysis of their doctrines, which is required for state registration of religious organizations or associations. "Until the time of receiving the results of an expert analysis regarding said organization, we demand the suspension of the activity of all local religious organizations and the religious association of Jehovah's Witnesses of Belarus and the issuance of a prohibition on illegal recruitment activity and distribution of religious literature," the authors declare.

At the same time, they cite the experience of Russia where the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses was recently prohibited. "We all, as citizens of our country, cannot tolerate illegal propaganda work on the territory of our motherland attracting adherents of a religious organization whose doctrine and ideology have never been examined in detail by recognized experts and scholars (just who is not specified—Krynica.info) looking for its danger for the physical and psychological health of citizens of the republic of Belarus, and also for their social life," the petition says.

It is also reported that last summer activists sent to the office of the commissioner for affairs of religions and nationalities a letter with a demand to conduct a state expert analysis of Jehovah's Witnesses in connection with their conduct of an annual congress on the territory of Belarus. At the time, it was indicated that there is no basis for an expert analysis inasmuch as the planning of the Jehovah's Witnesses' congress was conducted legally.

One of their believers, the blogger Anton Chivchalov, commented for Krynica.info about another attempt to forbid the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses.

"The Jehovah's Witnesses are active officially and legally in all countries of the European Union, and they were registered in the republic of Belarus in 1994. In all these years they have cooperated closely with the authorities of the country at all levels. For example, all literature imported into the country undergoes required government censorship. The religious association of Jehovah's Witnesses in the republic of Belarus conscientiously pays all taxes and fees. Anybody who wishes may attend any event of the Jehovah's Witnesses and be persuaded that these are peaceful, law-abiding people. This is known by both Belorussian and Russian experts. Unfortunately, the authorities of the Russian federation have decided to follow the path of North Korea, Afghanistan, and several other countries, in which freedom of religious confession is severely restricted. The April decision of the Russian Supreme Court has already been accepted for review by the European Court of Human Rights. I would like to believe that Belarus will not want to step on the same rake, but will continue to respect the rights and liberties of its own citizens as is customary in Europe and generally in the civilized world," the interlocutor declared.

The Church is not demanding any privileges, but insists on its rights

By Eva-Maria Kolmann

ACN United States (08.02.18) - <http://bit.ly/2BpbXJZ> - ARCHBISHOP Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz of Minsk-Mohilev is speaking out about the violation of the rights of the Catholic Church in Belarus. To rectify the situation, he has called for the signing of a concordat between the Belarus and the Catholic Church—a pact that has been in the making for many years, but has yet to be signed. "Without a concordat in place, the Church in the Republic of Belarus cannot completely fulfil its mission as it does in other countries," the archbishop told us.

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A religious procession in Belarus

The Church is not demanding "any privileges," he said, "but an acknowledgement of its rights, so that it is able to adequately carry out its work."

The situation is especially problematic when it comes to state regulations affecting the activities of foreign priests in the country. Although the number of native Belarus priests has “significantly” grown—from 60 to 400 in the past 25 years—the contributions of the work of foreign priests remain “indispensable,” stressed Archbishop Kondrusiewicz. These priests, most of them coming from Poland, often have difficulties extending their residency permits.

The prelate explains: “they are often issued a visa for only three to six months. That is not conducive to doing any sort of real work as priest. As a result, the pastoral work with believers and youth formation are suffering. We are trying to develop local vocations, but that takes time. And then you have to factor in the demographic crisis, which also has a negative impact on the number of vocations.”

The archbishop reported that a growing number of foreign priests are being denied extensions when they try to renew their residence permits; a number have been deported under the pretext of minor offences such as speeding—even after having worked in Belarus for many years.

Again, the archbishop: “For some unknown reason, Belarus is afraid of foreign priests. But how many church buildings have been and are being built to serve believers in Belarus – and all thanks to the efforts of these foreign priests! These priests come to proclaim the Word of God in places where there are no local priests. How many pastoral and social programs have they launched!

“They get to know the culture of Belarus and the country becomes their home. And they bring fresh pastoral experience with them. Today’s world is not only undergoing economic globalization, but cultural and religious globalization as well; we need to get on board so that we are not left standing at the station, watching the taillights of the train disappear.”

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Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz of Minsk -Mohilev

Foreign priests who are only in Belarus for a short visit have to apply for approval from the authorities before they are allowed to say Mass. The application process that practically impossible to get through in limited period a time. “There is a paradox: a foreign priest may attend Mass as part of the congregation, but when he stands on the other side of the altar and celebrates Mass himself, he becomes a criminal,” the archbishop explained.

There also is the ongoing issue of the Church trying to reclaim properties—including many churches— that were expropriated under Soviet rule. These structures, said the archbishop, are “our cultural heritage. Tourists and pilgrims are more likely to come here to look at these churches;” they are far less interested in “the modern buildings with their often tasteless architecture.”

He cited the example of an 18th century church from his archdiocese that was expropriated during Soviet times and then restored by the Catholic Church with its own funds after the demise of the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, formal ownership of the church has yet to be returned to the parish and the Church has to pay rent in order to use the parish church. “Where is the justice?” the archbishop asked, calling for restitution laws similar to those on the books in several other Eastern European countries.

When it comes to the construction of new churches, the state treats such projects as it would state-funded projects and insists the building process is completed within one

year, which is impossible to achieve. This means the Church has to apply for extensions of building permits several times, at significant cost each time.

Finally, the archbishop said he “very concerned” about the state’s attempts to influence the content of catechetical material used in the Church’s Sunday school program. He said: “this is just interference in the internal matters of the Church. This cannot be reconciled with religious freedom and the freedom of conscience and the rightful liberty of religious organizations.”

Some 7 percent of the 9.5 million inhabitants of Belarus are Catholic. Last year, Aid to the Church in Need supported the Catholic Church in Belarus with more than \$900,000 in aid.
