

unashamedly political view, but this view should not be thought of as binding on the man in the pew. There

are problems in this area which I beg you to respect.

## Leading Lithuanian Priest Killed

In Lithuania, the only republic in the USSR where a majority of the population are Roman Catholics, Catholic priests are still regarded as more than "cult servants", in the Soviet phrase. They are often seen by Lithuanians as community leaders, and sometimes as national figures. This year Lithuanian Catholics lost one such priest, well-known all over the country — Fr Juozas Zdebskis, who was killed in a car crash on 5 February. He was one of the five priests who founded the unofficial Catholic Committee for the Defence of Believers' Rights in 1978, and had been a leading campaigner for religious rights since the 1960s. Reports in the *samizdat Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church* (No. 70) strongly imply that Fr Zdebskis's death was no accident but "a carefully planned and executed act of violence".

As the most influential and active surviving member of the Catholic Committee, (since the imprisonment of Frs A. Svarinskas and S. Tamkevičius in 1983), Fr Zdebskis was becoming a distinct embarrassment to the Soviet authorities. They had already received mass petitions from Catholic clergy and lay people, signed by over 120,000 people, calling for the release of Frs Svarinskas and Tamkevičius. If Fr Zdebskis too had been put on trial, more protests would undoubtedly have followed. He was a popular figure, and his earlier arrest and trial in 1972 for teaching children the catechism had led to an upsurge in organised

Catholic protest and was one of the reasons for the establishment of the *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church* as the leading unofficial journal in Lithuania. In recent years Fr Zdebskis had been subjected more than once to threats by the KGB and had also been involved in a number of suspicious "accidents", including car crashes. On one occasion he was arrested while driving an invalid to hospital and was charged with "drunken driving", although he was known to be a total abstainer from alcohol. In 1980 he suffered mysterious burns while driving his own car; when he went to a hospital for treatment, the KGB unsuccessfully tried to bully doctors into diagnosing his condition as venereal disease.

Other prominent Lithuanian priests suffered in similar incidents. In 1981, Fr Bronius Laurinavičius, a member of the Lithuanian Helsinki Monitoring Group, died in a traffic "accident". He fell under a lorry, and had apparently been pushed.

On the day of Fr Zdebskis's death, the Soviet authorities seem to have been well prepared. In the morning the rectory telephone in Fr Zdebskis's parish of Rudamina was disconnected, so that friends learnt of the event only a day later. A report on the crash was broadcast on state television — itself a suspicious circumstance — stating that a *Zhiguli* car owned by Zdebskis had collided with a milk-truck after crossing the centre lane, and three of the passengers, including Zdebskis, had been killed. No mention was made of

the milk-truck driver's surname and no information was given about a car which Fr Zdebskis was allegedly overtaking. Although this car could have been the cause of the accident and its driver a witness, the car's number was not recorded.

The fourth passenger in the priest's car, R. Žemaitis, was taken to hospital. He was forbidden visitors by the Soviet authorities; he issued contradictory accounts of the collision and, on release from hospital, wrote a letter to the local paper praising friendship between Soviet nations and expressing his thanks to those who saved his life.

Issue No. 70 of the Lithuanian *Chronicle* is dedicated to Fr Zdebskis, a "zealous apostle of Christ's love and loyal son of the nation", and includes an account of his funeral in Rudamina on 10 February. He was buried in Rudamina churchyard despite objections from the authorities, who delayed for a long time before releasing the priest's body and his belongings. At the funeral service, two huge mounds of white wreaths sent by parishes all over Lithuania stood on either side of the coffin, significantly reducing the space available for the mourners. It is indicative of the place held by Fr Zdebskis in the Lithuanian Catholic community that more than a hundred priests attended the funeral, as well as two bishops — Bishop Sladkevičius of Kaišiadorys and Bishop Juozas Preikša, assistant to the Archbishop of Kaunas. The "countless throngs" of ordinary believers who took part in the funeral consisted largely of young people, according to the *Chronicle*.

The speech made at the graveside by Fr V. Jelinskas, the Dean of Lazdijai, emphasised Fr Zdebskis's active pastoral work and his influence on many of those present since their youth. Fr Zdebskis had

been among the first parish priests after the war to allow children and young people to act as altar-servers, and he had held private retreats for young Catholics. He had travelled all over Lithuania to hold services for young people and all over the USSR to visit Lithuanian recruits in the army, holding services for them and local Catholics, often in places where there was no church.

He taught us pure Christian joys, as well as Lithuanian folk songs. He attended our festivals and our song and dance groups. He was with us in our tribulations, when we were summoned for investigation for the sake of Christ and Lithuania . . . We would not be standing here, we would not have learnt to love absolute beauty, the attraction of temperance, or loyalty to the truth, if we had not met Fr Juozas on our way through life. He brought us to God, to a national ideal, not through his own frail human power but by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Fr Jelinskas also praised Fr Zdebskis's work with the unofficial Catholic youth organisation "The Friends of the Eucharist". His involvement in this organisation was further emphasised in an obituary composed by representatives of the Friends of the Eucharist. They thanked him for the *samizdat* religious booklets he helped to produce and the heritage he passed on to them, referring to "the strong sense of unity, the joy despite risks, which filled our meetings and made them like those of the early Christians". The writers recall that "when we were oppressed by harsh brutality, terror, and icy fear . . . when we wanted to flee," Fr Zdebskis had always reminded them, "if God is with us, who can be against us?"