

Lithuanian Catholic Chronicle

Lithuania is a centre of Catholic life in the USSR. The majority of the population of some three million are still practising Catholics. For many years these believers have suffered similar problems to other Soviet Christians. In 1972 the first number of the Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church appeared, an unofficial – and therefore uncensored – publication of some 50 pages which gives details about the harassment of Lithuanian Catholics. The new Chronicle received considerable publicity at a time when the world received news of riots and self-immolations in this small Baltic republic, where the Catholic Church is often associated with Lithuanian national feeling. In recent months the Lithuanian Chronicle has received less publicity, but it continues to appear. Here are some extracts from No. 7, written towards the end of 1973, and recently received in the West. (The translation is taken from ELTA Information Service, New York, March-April 1974). The following is a letter from a father to his son's teacher.

Since I deeply feel my great responsibility and am well aware of a parent's duties, I try to instil into my children from their early days such principles as would help them to remain honest, decent and strong human beings. I have obtained these principles from my own parents; I have tested and steeled them in my life's experience; I have sifted them through my reason; and I have resolved to make them my own in keeping with my conscience. My conscience obligates me to transmit to my children whatever I consider good and necessary. . . . I know that decent behaviour, fairness and love of one's neighbour are good – and this is what I want to make my children understand. I also know that if one wants to remain an honest human being, one must wage a constant fight against one's own weaknesses, vices, and external temptations. I am preparing my children for that struggle. And my life's experience has convinced me that such a struggle is most successful when man feels responsible not only before other men, but also before God, when he is convinced that his actions and deeds are of more than temporal and passing value, and when he obeys not only the laws but also the voice of his conscience. . . .

I want you to continue my work and not to destroy it. I want you to arm my child's mind with knowledge, to teach children how to use scientific information in their lives. Such, in my opinion, should be the task of the school. Yet it pains me very much when, instead of building you begin to destroy. Instead of providing knowledge in an objective manner, you are despising my and my son's convictions. You brand my convictions religious superstitions and my kind of education a compulsion, while you consider as free and normal the atheism you are forcibly imposing. If you do not value my views, leave them in peace, just as I do not attack and show contempt for yours. Teach my child to read and write, explain to him the rules of mathematics and the laws of physics, but don't turn these subjects tendentiously against the principles that I and my child respect. I am not afraid of objective scientific facts, but I do not want you to present them in a distorted and tendentious manner, with the sole aim of inculcating in my child an alien outlook. You are using not only appropriately slanted classroom materials, but even in activities outside the classroom you are trying to find ways to uproot from my child's mind what I have planted there. In total disregard of my wishes, you force him to enlist in the Pioneer and Komsomol organizations or

in the atheist circles. You ridicule his convictions in the wall newspaper, on posters, in atheist evenings and lectures. You compel him to answer questions on various questionnaires and you try to force your way into his conscience. . . . Ours is not a large country, therefore each of its members is precious and vitally needed. That is even more reason why each young man, each opening blossom of the nation, should be whole and fair. Yes, dear teacher, the children are our future, the future of our nation, and we must start giving serious thought to how we are treating this future.

Later in Chronicle No. 7, the editors printed the following statement from a group of believers – there are 540 signatures – to the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet. It is dated August 1973.

A sharp anti-religious campaign that does not shrink from distortion of facts, unjust accusations, mockery and humiliation of believers, is conducted in the press, public meetings, schools, on the radio, on television, in films, in the theatre. . . .

Religion is condemned, while atheism is forcibly sold to everybody. What are the results? Lenin taught that only practice confirms the correctness of ideas, theories and science. For almost 30 years now the young generation and the whole of society have been educated and conditioned in the spirit of atheism. Atheism is propagated and religion denigrated in schools during classroom hours and in all events outside the classroom. Cartoons mocking believers are exhibited in school displays. Churchgoing pupils are interrogated, intimidated, sometimes even penalized, as happened with Aurelija Racinskaite, whose mark for class conduct was lowered, according to her report, "for attending church".

What has this lengthy practice of atheist education demonstrated? While before the introduction of atheist education in Lithuania juvenile thieving, robbery, homicide attempts, sexual profligacy were very rare, now they are constant phenomena. Special children's rooms have been set up in police stations to combat juvenile delinquency. Alcoholism, crimes against property, murders, lies, dishonesty and the absence of a sense of duty were never before so widespread in Lithuania as in recent years. We meet with callous consciences wherever we meet workers and officials: in shops, factories, offices, clinics, everywhere. Practice has demonstrated that atheist education is incapable of fostering strong moral principles among the young and that atheist propaganda is unable to alter the society's moral level.

Christian morality, that has passed the test of the ages, that sensitizes the conscience, that urges man to assume his own control, to conquer his negative inclinations, to fulfil his duties conscientiously and to feel an inner responsibility for his own actions – that morality is negated and obstructed. The believers are under attack, but they are not allowed to defend themselves. . . .

We, the undersigned believers, ask the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Lithuanian SSR to prevent religious discrimination and to permit believers in Lithuania:

- (1) to defend and disseminate their views through the information media (press, lectures, radio, television);
- (2) to establish religious organizations;
- (3) to publish religious books and newspapers;

- (4) to allow pupils to attend church, to stop persecuting and punishing church-going pupils;
- (5) not to limit the number of candidates for the priesthood entering the seminary;
- (6) to stop all religious discrimination.

The following information and extracts have been taken from Nos. 8 and 9 of the Lithuanian Chronicle (translated by ELTA Information Service, May-June, 1974). Believers in the parish of Mielagenai in Ignalina Region have been pleading with the authorities to grant them a priest to perform regular religious services and give the last rites to the sick. Their own pastor is sick and old and no longer able to serve. In their church the sacrament of Confirmation has not been given by anyone in the past 35 years. These Catholics believe that there are priests who could serve them, but the authorities do not allow them to carry out their ministry. They write:

The Rev. Vytautas Merkys, for example, has been working at the Vilnius nursery garden for several years. If such priests are permitted to hold State jobs, why then are they not permitted to serve us, the believers? Since the Constitution guarantees us freedom of conscience, what are we being punished for?

Another case mentioned in the Chronicle is that of Virginijus Ivanovas, a young student who was interrogated after erecting a cross at an ancient holy place. After the incident, his mother wrote to the Prosecutor General:

There is a Hill of Crosses near Siauliai, very dear to the believers since olden times. In the night of 20 May, my sixteen-year-old son carried a cross with his friends to that hill. For this action, the security organs of Siauliai took my son away in the morning to the KGB headquarters and kept him there for 24 hours without food and sleep. My son had quite recently recovered from a brain infection, was excused from the spring exams, and was told to avoid any excitement in order to prevent the recurrence of the sickness. And yet my son was expelled from the institute of music, where he was in his first year, for nothing else but carrying a cross to the Hill of Crosses.

Issue No. 9 of the Chronicle also comments on the recent visit of the Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko to Pope Paul VI. The writers state:

The Catholics in Lithuania are convinced that the dialogue is necessary, but do not fall prey to illusions. The dialogue can be useful only when both sides show good will. The "good will" of the communist government is attested by the trials of priests for the catechizing of children, the imprisonment of P. Pliura, P. Petronis, J. Stasaitis for the production of prayerbooks and religious literature, the ban on complaints to the Soviet government about the administrative persecution of the believers . . . So far the communist government has used nothing but lies and brute force towards the believers. It seems that it needs the dialogue with the Church only so as to make the Vatican keep silent about the persecution of the Catholics in Lithuania in the hope of improving the situation of the

believers. The dialogue must serve to mislead world public opinion and to spread the notion that freedom of religion exists in Lithuania.

The Soviet authorities have made determined efforts to stop the Chronicle appearing. In issue No. 9 the editors boldly state:

Dear readers: Despite the government's repressions, the *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church* will be published in the future as well. It will stop appearing only when the government will grant to the Church and to the believers at least as much freedom as is guaranteed by the USSR Constitution. We ask our readers to continue with their assistance in collecting material for the *Chronicle*. It has, however, no use for unreliable information and inaccurate facts. Such material will not be published. Each piece of news, fact or event, relating to the situation of the Catholic Church, the present state of the nation, the arbitrary actions, repressions and other discriminations by the government organs, must be thoroughly checked, clear and accurate. Numbers, dates, names, places and other data must be especially clear, correctly recorded and authenticated. We await your information.

Soviet Propaganda against Islam

The following extract from "Twilight in the 'Taza Pir' Mosque" by L. Ashkerov, published in the Trade Union newspaper Trud (15 August, 1971) claims that Islam and Marxism-Leninism are ideologically opposed and that improved propaganda against Islam is necessary.

The reverend Mullah ceased talking. His black robe and the semi-darkness of the sacred chapel emphasized the whiteness of his carefully tended beard, and his brown eyes seemed to emit a ray of gentle, benevolent wisdom. The echo of his tuneful voice still sounded in the ears of his congregation. It seemed to touch something within them, melting the ice of distrust, dissipating the tensions which they had suffered up to now, and inspiring a childlike desire to move into a fairy tale world.

This is where religion originates. This is its cunning simplicity and its great weakness. It paralyzes the will, transports people out of life with all its complications, induces them to abandon the fight and replaces reality with a glittering mirage. I said as much to the reverend Mullah. He waved it away. "All words! All just words, my son." He paused for a moment, and then went on more loudly and firmly. "Tell me how you expect to convince me? We know all about your policy and your theory. But you have no knowledge of the Koran. You hold your intellect and your mind under control. We have all the dreams and the inexplicable that exists in people – feelings, the human soul. How can you hope to argue with me?" His bony fingers closed on the gold embossed cover of the Koran.

It struck me that, whether we liked it or not, there was a grain of truth in what the old man said. How many of us, atheists, know the sacred books well