Documents

The Fight for the Church in Klaipeda, Lithuania

The campaign for the return of the Catholic church in Klaipeda, which was confiscated by the Soviet government in 1960, has been one of the recurring themes in the Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church *since 1972. It was in issue No. 2 that the first mass petition to L. Brezhnev from 3,023 Klaipeda believers was published; and a second petition signed by 10,241 people (and dated 6 March 1979) was published in issue No. 38. The Catholic Committee for the Defence of Believers' Rights has given its support to the Catholics of Klaipeda (Document No. 15 of the Catholic Committee for the Defence of Believers' Rights, 5 May 1979). The sense of outrage this case has aroused among Catholics in Lithuania is largely due to the fact that the Soviet government originally gave permission for the construction of the church, allowing believers to spend their own time, labour and money in building it, before confiscating the finished building just before its consecration. It is the only church to have been built in Lithuania since the war.*

The latest petition for the return of the church dated 1 July 1979, was signed by 148,149 people. As far as we know, this is the largest number of signatures ever attached to a petition of this nature in the USSR. The following document, which appeared in the Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church, *No. 41, introduced the list of signatures sent to President Brezhnev.*

In 1979 signatures were collected all over Lithuania on a declaration asking for the return of the Catholic church of the Queen of Peace in Klaipeda, seized by the atheists.

148,149 signatures were collected, bound into a book consisting of 1,589 pages and sent to L. Brezhnev, Chairman of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet. 56 photographs were included in the book. We give below the text of the introduction to the book and a copy of the declaration which was signed by 148,149 Lithuanian believers.

[*We have not included the latter since it contains substantially the same information as the introduction.* Ed.]

To L. Brezhnev,
Chairman of the USSR Supreme Soviet.

Copies to:

1. The Lithuanian SSR Council of Ministers.
2. P. Anilionis, Commissioner for Religious Affairs for the Lithuanian SSR.
3. All Bishops and Diocesan Administrators in Lithuania.
4. The Catholic Committee for the Defence of Believers' Rights.

From the Catholics of Klaipeda and the whole Lithuanian SSR. (Address: Jonas Saunorius, son of Petras, Chairman of the Church Committee, Klaipeda ind. 235800, Tarybines Armijos 41–5.)

We Catholics of Klaipeda and all Lithuania again address ourselves to you, Chairman of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet, asking you to help us so that we can use the church building situated in Rumšiškes Street, No. 6. In the four years after 1965, when we received a written permit signed by M. Šumauskas, Chairman of the LSSR Council of Ministers, we built this church with our own hands and our own funds, buying material in accordance with state allocations.

We are writing to you once again as we think that our first declaration (signed by over 3,000 believers) and our second declaration (signed by 10,241 believers) did not reach you, because if it had we would have received a positive reply.

The Catholic churches in our town were destroyed during the War. For this reason, the Soviet government just after the War allowed us to use the small Baptist church, which we are still using today, even though the town has over 170,000 residents. In 1956, when the population of Klaipeda was 80,000, believers who wished to attend religious services were unable to fit into this small church. This was why the Soviet government gave written permission for the construction of a large new church. The architect Baltrenas and the engineer Zdanavičius drew up plans which were accepted by the chief architect of Klaipeda and other responsible officials; allocations were made for the legal provision of building materials. In the churches of Klaipeda and other towns, people donated money, which was paid into the State Bank and used to pay the cost of building materials. On 30 June 1957, the foundation stone was ceremonially blessed by Bishop P. Maželis in the presence of tens of thousands of believers; under the foundation stone a deed inscribed on parchment was sealed in. The building took years to build, during which we contributed about 3 million roubles. We ourselves went to unload bricks, cement and iron. To avoid delay in releasing trucks, we even worked at night with our own hands, digging trenches for the foundations. Believing craftsmen built the walls and decorated the church. In the summer of 1960, the church was completed: a central heating system had been installed, together with electricity, parquet flooring, three altars and 14 alabaster stations of the Cross. The ceremonial blessing of the church should have taken place in August that year. The church was to be named after the Queen of Peace. All those who had taken part in the construction or had subscribed to it felt that in some way we were contributing to peace, which we so longed for at that time.

Alas, just before we began using it for services, the local government began to seek out pretexts to prevent us from doing so. At first, the Commission set up for this purpose under the leadership of the town architect Stumbrys began to assert that the church could not be used until the ceilings had been tested, as they might fall on the heads of the praying believers. Under the direction of architect Baltrenas, a number of concrete blocks were then hauled up above the ceiling, which withstood the weight. A second pretext was found, however: the church could not be used without a second (reserve) electric cable being installed. This cable was laid, after being allocated by the Vilnius Supply Department. Demands were then made for reinforced concrete steps up to the top of the steeple, anti-septic treatment, anti-lightning measures and so on. All demands were complied with, but still no permit was issued for the use of the church. Since administrative measures had failed, legal measures were adopted. The priests in charge, L. Povilonis* and B. Burneikis, were arrested and imprisoned.

To this day, it is unclear to any thinking person what crime had been committed by people who built a church with their own hands and funds, but were now prevented from using it for their religious needs, even if the priests in charge of the building had committed some offence. After all, it is the State's duty to protect the people and their needs.

Having arrested the priests, the local authorities locked the church and refused entry to believers. They knocked down the steeple, took away the statue of Mary, Queen of Peace, which was in the facade, hacked away a granite mosaic of Jesus Christ, tore down all the altars, destroyed the fresco on the main altar (of the Queen of Peace), destroyed the bas-reliefs of the stations of the Cross and a frieze decorated with angels' heads, removed the stained glass windows and converted the church into a concert hall. People who objected to such arbitrary action by the government and demanded an end to dismemberment of the church were loaded into lorries, driven far out of town and deposited there.

Believers wrote to N. Khrushchev, Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, regarding the injury done to them, but he did not defend their human rights, and as a result we have suffered this wrong for 17 years. Our pursuit of peace has been trampled underfoot.

You, Mr Chairman, have introduced a

*Now Bishop of Kaunas and Vilkaviškis. *Ed.*

new Constitution which basically defends the rights of all Soviet citizens without discrimination. We trust that having learned of the wrong done to the believers of Klaipeda and the whole Lithuanian SSR you will speedily arrange matters so that we can use the church we ourselves built and pray in it to Mary, Queen of Peace, for peace throughout the world. We do not doubt this, for we know how much you value peace and how much energy you have expended in the struggle for peace.

Appendices: 1,434-page book containing 148,149 signatures
56 documentary photographs

Poland: The Meaning of "Dialogue" Between the Church and the "Left".

In 1977 a book which could not be printed in Poland was published in Paris and has been the subject of a great deal of intense discussion amongst the Polish intelligentsia. This was Kościół, lewica, dialog (The Church and the Left: a Dialogue) *by Adam Michnik. Born to communist parents, Michnik describes himself as a democratic socialist. He has been active in the Social Self-Defence Committee (KOR) set up after the arrests of striking Polish workers in 1976 to defend their interests, and is a prominent lecturer in the Flying University (an unofficial institution which aims to fill the gaps in the official Polish education system).*

In RCL *Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 42–46 we published a review of Michnik's book by a Polish priest, Fr Salij. We are now publishing a more recent comment on the same work. This is the final chapter of* Polski kształt dialogu (The Polish Form of Dialogue), *a book by Fr Józef Tischner published this year by "Spotkania" (64 Ave. Jean-Moulin, 75014 Paris).*

Fr. Tischner is head of the Philosophy Department and a professor of Christian Philosophy at the Papal Institute in Kraków. Born in 1931, he studied at the Jagielonian University in Kraków and was ordained a priest in 1959. He then studied at the Theological Academy in Warsaw (ATK) and again at the Jagielonian University where he worked on his PhD thesis The Transcendental 'I' in Husserl. *His tutor was Professor R. Ingarden, himself a pupil of Husserl. Fr Tischner continues his research on man's relation to moral values at the Husserl archive in Belgium. He has been described as a "philosopher of Hope". He also continues to organize pastoral work amongst academic circles in Kraków, an assignment he received from Cardinal Wojtyła (now Pope John Paul II). In 1980 he wrote a series of articles in the Kraków newspaper* Tygodnik Powszechny *on the significance of the name "Solidarity" from a moral, ethical and theological point of view.*

Fr Tischner's comments in this present extract bring home to the reader just how radically the political situation in Poland has altered over the past years. The ideology of the Communist Party, still presented as a "socialism", has during the 1970s proved incapable of positive adaptation or revision and is now in fact dead as a credible system of thought. This situation has placed those like Michnik who adhere to the idea of "Democratic socialism" in an ambiguous position. To what extent, Fr Tischner wants to know, are they prepared to endorse any aspects of contemporary Polish reality? What is their true attitude towards Christianity? It is the Catholic Church which now has the overt allegiance of the Polish people and is able to take moral initiatives in society (see the article by Alexander Tomsky in RCL *Vol. 9, Nos. 1–2, pp. 29–39). Fr Tischner comments on the possibility of "dialogue" between Christians and socialists in the light of this shift in the moral balance of power. "Suddenly", he says, "proportions had changed. It was no longer socialists and communists who were inviting Catholics to join in a dialogue and cooperate, but the Catholics who were inviting everyone else."*

[. . .] Michnik's book is a historical outline yet contains certain political or even philosophical ideas. Aided by sources which include pastoral letters from the Polish Episcopate and the Primate, press editorials and articles and official government legislature, Michnik analyses the history of relations between Church and State, and between the so-called secular Left and Catholics. He arrives at conclusions which not so long ago were still unacceptable to that same Left: i.e., that Catholics and Catholicism in general have