

Declaration of Lithuanian Bishop

The Roman Catholic bishop, Julijonas Steponavicius from Lithuania, was born in 1911. In September 1955 he was consecrated Bishop of Panevezys. As a result of Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign he was exiled to the village of Zagare. In 1971 a group of 134 priests from his diocese claimed that he was removed because he "carried out his pastoral duties as a shepherd without compromise". In April 1972 Bishop Steponavicius wrote to the Soviet Government demanding the right to resume his duties, but he was refused. The Declaration printed below appeared in The Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church No. 20 and is dated 15 September 1975.

TO THE CHAIRMAN OF THE COUNCIL OF
MINISTERS OF THE LITHUANIAN SSR, J.
MANIUSIS

COPIES TO: THE BISHOPS OF LITHUANIA:
J. LABUKAS IN KAUNAS, J. PLETKUS IN TEL-
SIAI, L. POVILONIS IN KAUNAS, R. KRIK-
SCIUNAS IN PANEVEZYS, V. SLADKEVICIUS
NEMUNELIS RADVILISKIS, CANON J. ANDRIU-
KONIS IN VIEVIS AND TO THE CURIA OF
THE VILNIUS ARCHDIOCESE.

It is now over fourteen years since I was dismissed from my *proper* duties and compelled, by the administrative government, to live in the place to which I was assigned: the town of Zagare in Joniskis district. In removing me from my post no accusation was made against me. I still do not know why, for what reason and for how long, I am to be banished from my diocese. It is true that the then official for Religious Affairs, J. Rugienis, told me that I was being removed as the result of a resolution of the Lithuanian SSR Council of Ministers. However, the request which I made, that I be informed about the resolution, that I be given a copy or that it at least be read to me, was denied me by the CRA official. Wishing to remove me as soon as possible he resorted to force, with the help of administrative organs, who compelled me to leave Vilnius and the confines of the Vilnius Diocese. It is still not clear

to me, therefore, whether my removal from my current duties was effected by a resolution of the Lithuanian SSR Council of Ministers or by the arbitrary action of the official for Religious Affairs.

While I was at my post I attempted to fulfil conscientiously my duties as bishop and shepherd (of my flock), being concerned with the spiritual welfare of the priests and the faithful. I do not feel that I ever infringed Soviet laws. Nowhere have I ever said or done anything against the Soviet Union or the Soviet system.

At the invitation of the Soviet government I went to Hungary and after my return reported on my visit during a radio programme. I was invited to take part in peace conferences and did so. I tried to calm down the priests and believers when they had been provoked by the administrative interference of government officials in church life. I also had to defend my own juridical rights when the official for Religious Affairs sought to limit them by administrative interference. Here is the evidence of such administrative interference:

1. In January 1958 when I took up my duties as the Apostolic Administrator of the Vilnius Archdiocese with the rights of a residing Bishop, the official for Religious Affairs declared that I was to inform the priests that they could neither teach children preparing for first confession and Holy Communion nor carry out group examinations—that only individual examination was allowed. When I explained that Bishop K. Paltarokas during a visit to Moscow had clarified the matter and reached an agreement in the Council for Religious Affairs that priests could prepare children for first confession and Holy Communion in small groups and had announced the terms of this agreement in a circular after his return, the CRA official called the agreement a fantasy made up by Bishop K. Paltarokas. When I said that I could not announce to the priests a regulation forbidding them to prepare children for first confession and Holy Communion and allowing them only to examine the

children individually since this was contrary to a Bishop's conscience, the Canons of Church Law and the resolutions of the Bishop's Synod, the CRA official said that if the regulation was not carried out both the priests and the Bishop would experience unpleasant consequences. This was indeed the case; criminal cases were made out against priests who did not comply with the CRA official's ruling regarding the catechizing of children and the Bishop was constantly reprimanded.

2. The appointment of Bishops and their transfer is the responsibility of the Diocesan Administrator. The official for Religious Affairs issues a registration certificate to priests transferred to other parishes. This is necessary for the priest to be able to register in his new place of work. Making use of his right to issue the registration certificate, the CRA official began to interfere in the appointment of priests. The appointment of every priest has to be co-ordinated with the CRA official. In addition, the CRA official began to persecute some priests by taking away their registration certificates and requiring of the Diocesan Administrator that another priest be appointed in place of the one being persecuted. The latter was then to be left without a parish, without priestly work. The priests were most frequently persecuted for pure church work, e.g., for conducting retreats for priests and the faithful. I used to defend the priests who had been wronged. I did not agree to leave them without priestly work. I moved them to another parish and did not appoint another priest in their place until the CRA official had issued a registration certificate to the persecuted priest allotted to a new parish. While I defended the wronged priests, threats were heard from the CRA official that the diocese could be left without a Bishop.

It would seem that I was right in defending the persecuted priests because the CRA official's office does not nowadays deprive priests of their registration certificate and does not require the Diocesan Administrator to leave priests without priestly duties.

3. According to the Canons of Church Law and the decrees of the Apostolic Throne, the true stewards of a priests'

Seminary are the Diocesan Ordinaries. The Diocesan Ordinaries of Lithuania therefore have the unfettered right to appoint freely the directorate staff lecturers of the inter-diocesan priests' Seminary in Kaunas and to accept and refuse students. Without any basis in law, however, the official for Religious Affairs has appropriated these rights. The final selection of candidates to the priesthood is not made by the spiritual administration but by the CRA official and other officials who check the suitability both of those wanting to join the seminary and of the youths already studying there and "throw them out" according to their own judgment. The inter-diocesan priests' seminary experienced one of these painful "expulsions" in 1958, when on the instructions of the CRA official the Rector was removed together with some of the lecturers and a significant number of students were made to leave, including Vytautas Merkys of the Vilnius Archdiocese. The representative accused Merkys of anti-Sovietism. After leaving the seminary, Father Vytautas Merkys joined the Agricultural College where he was an exemplary student and later won renown as a diligent and conscientious worker in the Vilnius Nursery Garden. For some years now he has been performing priestly duties in the town of Khmel'nitsky in the Ukraine as an exemplary priest and a good and loyal Soviet citizen. When, at that time, I attempted to defend the wronged Father Merkys, the CRA official attacked me for defending a theological student with anti-Soviet tendencies and threatened me with exile.

4. Neither was the sphere of purely religious, spiritual matters overlooked. In 1960, the official for Religious Affairs informed me that children were forbidden to take part in religious rites: boys serving at Mass, girls taking part in processions. Also forbidden were retreats for the faithful, invitations without government permission to other priests to help in annual local festivals, visits by priests to their parishioners, the collection of alms by means of visits. Priests were not to gather in significant numbers for group retreats. The CRA official demanded that I inform the priests of all these prohibitions

in writing and remind them that those who did not comply with the restrictions would be punished. I was merely informed verbally of these restrictions.

Having listened to these unjust and inconsistent demands I pointed out that I could not announce them to the priests because, as a Bishop of the Catholic Church:

(a) I am obliged to nurture the religious and spiritual life of priests and believers and not to hinder and destroy it. The Canons of Church Law and the rulings of the Synod of Archbishops require that priests themselves have retreats and that they conduct them for believers;

(b) I must urge the whole flock, with no age discrimination, to take part in religious services and make zealous use of the means of salvation—prayer and the sacraments;

(c) I know of no Soviet law which forbids children to go to church and take part in liturgical services. If the laws of the State do not forbid children to accept the sacraments of baptism, penance, communion and confirmation then on what basis is it required that they be forbidden to take part in liturgical services which are of less significance than the acceptance of sacraments?

Finally the USSR Constitution, in common with the obligations accepted by the signature of the Soviet government, acknowledges freedom of conscience and the practice of religious rituals without any age discrimination.

I refused to meet these demands and was removed soon after.

The facts outlined in this declaration show that pretexts were constantly being sought for my removal. When I refused to implement the various unjust demands of the official for Religious Affairs and defended my rights and those of my flock, I was constantly threatened with removal from my current duties. The CRA official described me as being stubborn, impossible to talk to and disloyal. Can the defence of the rights of the faithful, of the priests

and myself, be regarded as a crime and as disloyalty to the Soviet system?

In reply to my last declaration, written in 1972 to the Chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers, the official for Religious Affairs, J. Rugienis, to whom the matter had been referred for a reply, said that I could not carry out my proper duties for the time being. It would be interesting to know how long that "for the time being" is going to last. According to paragraph 28 of the Lithuanian SSR Penal Code, exile can last from one to five years. I have now been living in exile for over 14 years. This is not because I have committed any crime but is due to the errors and arbitrary actions of the official for Religious Affairs and some officials of the Security Service.

I request the Chairman of the Council of Ministers to turn his attention to the wrong that has been committed against me and to the abnormal situation of the Vilnius Archdiocese. The capital of the Lithuanian SSR is without a Catholic Bishop. The Archdiocese of Vilnius has now been managed by a temporary administrator for 15 years, whilst the Orthodox Church which is a minority faith in our republic, has its Bishop permanently in Vilnius. This abnormal situation in the Vilnius Archdiocese provokes the priests and the faithful and causes dissatisfaction amongst them—and this creates unpleasantness for the government which is subjected to reproach both from within the country and from abroad.

When the Church, celebrating its jubilee year, urges all towards peace, when the results of the European agreement on Security and Cooperation offer the opportunity of reaching mutual confidence and putting full freedom of religion into effect, it would be helpful if differences were also removed from beneath our own skies, so that reconciliation and trust could prevail.

I trust that my exile will be reviewed and that I will be allowed to pursue my duties as bishop-shepherd of the Vilnius Archdiocese.