

war years, while Latvia remained an independent country, Vaivods wrote several theological works and gained a reputation as a compelling preacher. (Despite his age he still draws large crowds to the annual pilgrimage to Aglona — last year seventy thousand people went to the shrine.) In 1940 Vaivods was appointed Vicar-General of the diocese of Liepāja, and by 1947 he was one of the highest-ranking clergymen left in Latvia; three bishops had been forced to leave with the retreating Germans, Bishop Springovičs was old and ill, and an auxiliary bishop Dulbinskis consecrated by Springovičs in 1947 was imprisoned in 1948. Vaivods was therefore one of those responsible for holding the Catholic Church together in Latvia during the 1940s and 1950s, until he was himself imprisoned in 1958, for disseminating unofficial religious literature. After his release in 1961, he was appointed rector of the Cathedral in Riga, and a year later became Vicar-General of Riga diocese. In 1964 he was able to travel to Rome to be consecrated bishop and Apostolic Administrator of both dioceses. In practice his position was equivalent to that of Archbishop.

Vaivods has been remarkably successful in preserving the numbers of Catholic churches and believers in Latvia, while avoiding both unprincipled cooperation with the Soviet authorities and outright conflict. Despite confiscation of churches and

erosion of numbers, the Catholic Church has had fewer losses in Latvia than the former majority denomination, the Latvian Lutheran Church: 173 of the 200 Catholic churches which existed before the war are still open.

What makes Vaivod's nomination surprising is that the Pope might have been expected to choose a representative of the Catholic hierarchy in Lithuania, where Catholicism is the majority denomination. Two factors have prevented this. The first is the strong bond linking Catholicism with Lithuanian patriotism, which has always made it a target of the Soviet authorities. Secondly, the obvious candidate for Cardinal is Archbishop Steponavičius, who is still unable to carry out his duties as bishop since his appointment in 1955 has never been recognised by the Soviet authorities. (It is widely believed that the Pope has appointed Steponavičius Cardinal "in pectore".) To appoint a Lithuanian Cardinal, therefore, would mean apparently attempting to provoke the Soviet government, and thus jeopardising the already difficult situation of Catholics in Lithuania. The Pope's choice of a Latvian Cardinal, therefore, is a tribute to the tenacity under exceptionally difficult circumstances of Catholics in the Baltic region.

CAROLYN BURCH

An Interview with the new Latvian Cardinal

Last February, Mgr Julijāns Vaivods became the first-ever Latvian Cardinal (see above for background). The Soviet authorities allowed him to visit Rome to be invested as cardinal, and while there he gave the following interview to a journalist, Gianni Varani. It was published in 30 giorni, No. 1, March 1983, and a Russian translation appeared in Religija i Ateizm v SSSR, May 1983.

Q. Your Eminence! Your elevation to the post of Cardinal undoubtedly means a great deal to the Church in Latvia and the Soviet Union. In your opinion, could it change the position of believers in your country to any extent?

A. In my opinion the legal status has not changed in any way. I was and still remain Apostolic Administrator of the Riga diocese. However, my elevation to Cardi-

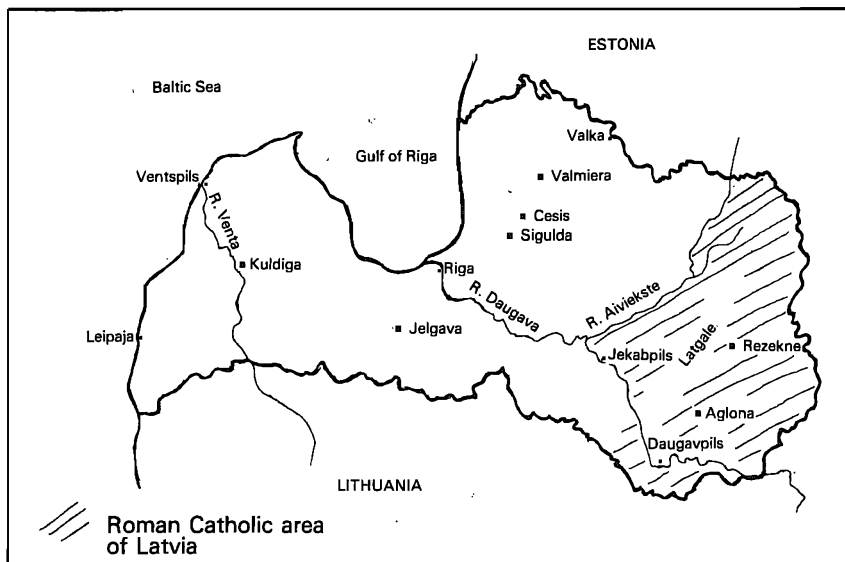
nal has great meaning for my small country: since the establishment of the Church in Latvia we have never had a Cardinal and this important fact may make our government respect the Catholic community more. It is clear that so far practically nothing has changed. Much will depend on our behaviour, as I have already said.

Q. But surely now Catholics in the Soviet Union have someone to look up to and unite around?

A. I think that it will especially serve to unite Latvians, going beyond denominational barriers. Perhaps you know that the head of the Latvian Lutheran Church in exile has thanked the Pope for appointing me.

Q. Could you tell us about the most difficult and the happiest times in your life?

A. The most difficult was undoubtedly



the time I spent in a labour camp in the Khrushchev era. We were not allowed to keep anything with us to comfort ourselves, even a rosary; even in the days of Stalin this wasn't so. The most wonderful moment was when on 2 February the Pope made me a Cardinal. That was really an exceptional moment. I heard about it on 5 February: one of my assistant priests rang me up from Riga (I was out of town) and told me that the appointment of eighteen new Cardinals, including me, had been announced on the radio. At first I answered that he must have mis-heard but later I became quite alarmed.

Q. According to international press reports you were acquainted with Lenin when he was taking part in demonstrations in 1917 . . .

A. I must emphasise that I was not personally acquainted with him. I saw him more than once at public meetings but all the rest is the invention of journalists. At the time of the 1917 revolution I was studying at the Catholic seminary in Petrograd; I began my studies under the Tsar and completed them under the Bolsheviks. I was a witness of all that took place, I lived through all the horrors of that time but I repeat I never knew Lenin personally.

Q. How did you experience the call to be a priest?

A. Naturally I had thought about it since childhood: I come from a peasant family of six brothers. I was the first to

attend the Russian language school, which was of course outside our small village. The call to be a priest was a natural consequence of my early life and my family's Catholic upbringing.

Q. What are the main tasks of the Church in Latvia today? What does it mean to be a believer in your country?

A. It is not easy to be Catholic. We believers are able to meet and hold meetings in the churches, but only there. We have no Catholic organisations, no Catholic newspapers or journals and so we mainly concentrate on the pastoral work permitted in churches under the leadership of the priests. For us, therefore, it is very important to take part in the liturgy. I must point out that the services are always well attended, especially by young people. This is something the Lutherans, for example, find surprising. We know very well what we want but, of course, we are obliged to work within strictly circumscribed limits. [. . .]

Q. Could it be said that the position of the Orthodox Church is better than that of your church?

A. In practice, yes; the Orthodox Church is still a state-supported religion, rather like it was under the Tsar. In the Soviet Union we Catholics are believers of the second rank but I think that my appointment may make some difference in this respect.

Q. Western Europe is now full of fear

about the possibility of an atomic war. What do you think about that?

A. I would say that we also fear atomic war, even more than you. The communists have been propagandising the struggle for peace even more than in the West. What can I, who have lived through three wars — the Russo-Japanese war, the First and Second World Wars — say about that? I lived through the last war as Apostolic Administrator because the Germans had imprisoned our bishop. I hope I shall not live to see a new war.

Q. Do you think that a third world war is possible?

A. Yes. But I am sure that everything possible will be done to avoid it.

Q. What do you think of the church in the West?

A. I think that I would not allow some western theologians to cross the threshold of our Riga seminary.

Q. Why?

A. We live under a communist regime, yet we are more true to our faith and to the Church than many Christians in the West. Certain theologians interpret the laws and dogmas far too tolerantly and liberally, especially in the field of moral theology. During the war, by the way, many of our young people were deported to Germany and the Germans were astonished at their behaviour, especially that of our young girls who were prepared to defend their honour in every way. It appears that even then this was not very highly thought of in Germany. In my opinion this "moral divergence" from the West has even increased at present.

Q. How do you feel about pontificate of John Paul II?

A. I travelled to Rome for the funeral of his predecessor and was invited to stay on until the election of the new Pope. When I heard from television of the election of Karol Wojtyła, I exclaimed in Russian (the language I use in daily life) "Now there's something unexpected!" Warsaw is closer to us than Rome and so we know each other quite well. During the Second Vatican Council I was the first Latvian bishop in thirty years to travel to Rome and I had to study Latin once more and learn a few phrases in Italian, but now I talk to the Pope in Polish.

Q. Has the election of Pope John Paul II led to any changes in the consciousness and expectations of Catholics?

A. It is still too early to give a decisive answer to that question. The Polish events have made a great impression on our people. Throughout our history we have had firm links with Poland and the West, but this has not yet had an effect on our situation, with perhaps one exception: maybe the Soviet government has been more careful in its actions so as not to provoke trouble. It is clear that the position of our church differs greatly from that of the Polish church although the latter is often called "the church of silence". Personally I think that there will be no substantial changes in Poland. The Poles are an impulsive nation and pay little attention to what can be achieved in reality by means of prudence and thus they risk losing what they have gained.

Q. Could you give us some statistics about your Church?

A. I now have three assistant clergymen and 145 priests carrying out pastoral work in parishes.* On the other hand, I must point out that there are thirty thousand "militant" atheists at work in our little Latvia — a whole army, by comparison with whom we are indeed few. Because of this many people have withdrawn from the church. However, this mostly happened in the first years of communist power and for the most part among people of other nationalities. In my experience it is rare for a Latvian to abandon his faith: they are loyal to their traditions. That is why I dare to say that the situation of the Catholic Church in our country has not grown worse.

Q. How will the authorities receive you when you return to Riga?

A. I don't have the slightest idea. This is the first time in my life that I have given an interview (abroad). Before my departure for Rome I had a meeting with the authorities: they said that they were not about to jump for joy at the news of my elevation but they behaved very politely and allowed me to come here.

*Another Italian news agency reports Vaivods as saying that there are 116 priests in 145 parishes — *Ed.*