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Human Rights and Medicine in Soviet-Occupied Lithuania

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In Svedasai Hospital, Lithuania, a communal farmer, "comrade" Tuskenis, lies critically ill. His wife requests the attending physician, Dr. Kamarauskiene, to allow a priest to visit him in order to administer the sacraments. The doctor replies: "Crawl on your knees like a dog, but I will not allow it!"¹

In Skuodas Hospital, patient Jablonskis in a trembling hand writes to the chief of staff, Dr. Mazrimas, "Please let them bring me a priest." After repeated efforts by his sister and cousin fail to obtain permission, the patient finally requests that he be taken out of the hospital in order to make his last Confession and to receive Holy Communion. This request is also denied. "Since the old man was paralyzed, he was left to die in the hospital with heartless physicians."²

These are not isolated cases but everyday examples of the treatment Christians receive in Soviet hospitals. Constantly harassed in one way or another, religious believers in the Soviet Union find themselves in the position of second class citizens.

The Soviet constitution contains glowing guarantees of freedom of conscience, of assembly, of press and of speech. According to doctrinaire atheists such as Dr. Mazrimas and other Soviet officials, however, because of the separation of church and state, priests are not even to enter hospitals or any other government institution.³ Priests are

forced to visit the sick as ordinary visitors and must minister to patients in secret — a difficult assignment when eight or more patients may be found in a single ward room.

Pastoral Care Suffers

Scenes from present day Soviet Lithuanian hospitals are actually reminiscent of war-time conditions. To avoid the watchful eyes of vengeful atheists and hospital KGB informants, priests and patients must resort to extraordinary efforts, such as jamming elevators on the way to surgery to make time for Confession. One priest tells of having to give four sacraments to a person in the space of a few minutes: Baptism, Confession, Communion and the Sacrament of the Sick, then hiding in a closet while the dying patient had to explain the presence of the extra coat on the bed to the patrolling ward supervisor.

Thus the Soviet government can say to the world that it grants human rights and religious freedom, but it does nothing formally to assure it. On the contrary, in practice any such constitutional guarantees are overridden by an unwritten law which makes aggressive atheism the established order in all public affairs.

Since 1972, in the only Catholic republic of the Soviet Union, the clandestine *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* reports in detail the unconstitutional discrimination against believers. Laboriously typed by hand and distributed secretly from one trusted friend to another, the *Chronicle* gives names, dates, addresses and lists interrogations, searches and arrests. The message of the *Chronicle*, loud and clear, is that the atheistic government is slowly strangling the Church in Lithuania, while doing its best to make it look like the Church is dying a natural death.⁴

When deputy for religious affairs Kazimieras Tumenas was asked by the international press whether clergy are allowed to conduct religious services outside places of worship, he stated outright:

The priest has the right to give the last rites to patients at home, in the hospital or in places of incarceration, if the patients themselves desire it. In the latter two cases it is mandatory that the rites be carried out in separate facilities. . . . It sometimes happens that some hospital authorities do not wish to admit the priest into their institution, arguing that there are no separate facilities, etc. Of course there is sometimes a problem with facilities, but the administration does not have the right to keep the minister from the critically ill patient; it is mandatory to find a separate facility.⁵

Separate facility or not, in Anykstis Hospital, this "Soviet guarantee" is blatantly ignored. In Anykstis, the *Chronicle* reports, Director Sinkunas has continually denied patients their rights by personally creating obstacles for the clergy. "This situation has existed in Anykstis for more than 15 years. Hundreds are seriously deprived of their religious rights, since their final wish was not carried out, at the most critical moment of life — the hour of death."⁶

These facts were reported to the Ministry of Health personally by the pastor of Anykstis, relatives and patients who sent telegrams, and by the Bishop of Panevezys, who informed the deputy for religious affairs. In all cases, they were told the "situation will be looked into." However, in fact, nothing was ever done about it. There has yet to be a report of atheists being reprimanded for breaking the Soviet law regarding religious rights.⁷

When Rev. Babonas arrived at the Old People and Invalids' Home of Aukstelke at the request of patients there, his way was barred by a female wardrobe attendant who ordered a paramedic to throw him out. Later this woman's name was inscribed on an honor plaque, whereas the paramedic who refused to eject him, together with the nurse who had called him, were verbally attacked and berated as "hooligans" in front of all those present by the director of the home. The nurse was subjected to a search in which she was stripped naked and was accused of being a nun. The priest was handed over to the civil authorities who mocked him: "You forgive sins, but now you must confess your misdeeds to us and receive forgiveness from us." When the priest insisted upon his own rights and the rights of the patients, the authorities replied, "This Home has its own rules." As the Reverend Babonas commented: "When I asked if the internal rules of a government institution can be in opposition to the laws of the government, the Chief of Security did not answer."⁸

In the Vilnius Psychiatric Hospital a doctor and a traffic patrol officer prefabricated evidence against Rev. Joseph Zdebskis "proving" that he was intoxicated while driving. "An unidentified doctor took his pulse, told him to walk across the room, had him breathe into a glass of reddish liquid, and recorded that he was intoxicated." Based on this "evidence" and refusing the priest's demand that an analysis of his blood be made, his license was suspended for 18 months, his car confiscated for a day and he was fined 30 rubles. The Vilnius newspaper published a slanderous article saying that Father Zdebskis "could not resist a drink." The *Chronicle* notes that his parishioners did not fall for this overt attempt to scandalize them; 212 people petitioned the newspaper to retract its statements regarding the reverend and asked that his license, vital for his work, be returned to him.⁹ None of their petitions were answered. Father Joseph Zdebskis has often been the object of official harassment ever since completing a one-year prison term for teaching catechism to children in 1973.

Persecution of Lay Catholics

At Telsiai Hospital, pediatrics supervisor Dr. Cirkova threatened widow Mockevicius with the loss of her maternal rights if she continued to allow her children to serve at Holy Mass. She was further threatened by head nurse Krupova who said she would call the Kaunas

Medical Institute to have them revoke her son's dormitory privileges. A few months later her children received "unsatisfactory" conduct grades in the high school. The principal explained, "We can by no means give an exemplary conduct grade to those who go to church." Students with unsatisfactory conduct grades are not accepted into higher education.¹⁰

At Birzai Hospital, Dr. Antanas Dauguvietis fired nurse Aldona Sukyte, who had worked there for 21 years. She used to take a 16-year-old paralytic girl to church each day. Dr. Dauguvietis told her to stop this practice, or she would lose her job. He finally asked her to resign, but she refused to do so. He then transferred her to a department where he knew the staff would be reduced a few months later. Today she is working on a collective farm.¹¹

At the Kaunas Trade School of the Lithuanian Society for the Blind, Director Bankauskas was told by the KGB to fire Inspector Algis Saltis, a man whom he had praised for his excellent work. He was not to specify the real reason: Saltis was suspected of helping to organize the famous 1972 petition of 17,000 signatures on behalf of the Catholics of Lithuania to the United Nations. Because Bankauskas knew he could not fire him due to poor job performance and because Saltis was very popular among the blind workers, Bankauskas procrastinated. Finally, without explanation, he simply told Saltis he must resign within 12 days, warning him that his work card would be so marked that he would not get work elsewhere. Saltis refused. Saltis stated he would resign only if his working papers would say he was being discharged on account of his faith. Saltis was then interrogated by higher authorities, whom he accused of religious discrimination: "Since, as a believer, I may not work as an inspector, this means that the faithful are being discriminated against in the Soviet Union."

Chairman Poznanskas answered: "The official ideology of the country is atheism. We attempted to re-educate you but we did not succeed. You are unfit for work as supervisor; you must choose a different kind of occupation. I suggest you go work on the collective farm."

Later, Saltis learned from a staff supervisor that the directive to discharge him came from "the house to which all must submit." The *Chronicle* asks: "What kind of a house could this be, which wields so much power in the Soviet Union, while at the same time being so timid? All obey its orders, therefore it is powerful; timid, because it masks itself with the likes of Bankauskas. This is the KGB."

The irresolute Bankauskas continued to procrastinate. Finally, the central committee chairman of the Lithuanian Society for the Blind called Bankauskas in and told him: "You know, if you don't fire Saltis, you will be unemployed yourself."

The *Chronicle* comments: "For two straight years an individual is terrorized at work, whose only crime is — he believes in God. To break

him morally and physically, the KGB organizes a mass of lackeys, from presidents of societies down to Communist youth members, and forces them to maul one another like beasts in the jungle, fighting for their contemptible existence. . . ." The *Chronicle* notes that the persecution of Saltis began when he was still in high school. For explaining religious truths to students, Saltis was expelled from school, and then sentenced to one year in prison for teaching catechism to children. Ironically enough, when Saltis attempted to enroll in the Kaunas Seminary, his application was blocked by the deputy for religious affairs because of his past prison record.¹²

The Saltis case illustrates several important points concerning the faith in Soviet society: first, the harassment of believers is not a spontaneous manifestation of personal prejudice on the part of non-believers, but is a planned and systematically pursued program of the secret police. Second, atheist officials, many of them former Catholics, who show themselves so bold in the harassment of believers have been personally intimidated and spiritually broken down by the KGB. The KGB uses them as instruments to further atheism. Third, the secret police blocks vocations to the priesthood; it seeks collaborators among those it permits to enter the seminary. Fourth, the KGB tries to neutralize lay Catholic influence in society by outright job discrimination. It attempts to ensure that believers are employed only at the most menial jobs and that there should not be any intellectuals among the believers, so that the government could scoff: "Only the uneducated and ignorant believe in God."¹³

If the atheist government is slowly choking the Church in society at large — all the while pretending the Church is dying a natural death — the incidents from the *Chronicles* show that in Soviet hospitals there is an outright heavy-handed stranglehold on the Faith. It is a fact that in this day and age, with regard to pastoral care, Catholics in Soviet hospitals suffer worse conditions than did World War II concentration camp inmates. Hospitalized Soviet Catholics are totally isolated from priests; W.W. II concentration camp inmates were often able to attend Mass and to receive the sacraments. War prisoners were only physically imprisoned; the Soviet government unceasingly works to "reeducate" patients, using psychological pressures, propaganda, etc. The first thing one usually sees in entering a Soviet hospital is an atheist propaganda display, featuring pictures of monks torturing prisoners, performing exorcisms and the like.

Atheist Physician Propagandists

Another reason atheism holds the upper hand in Soviet hospitals is, unfortunately, the physicians themselves. Pious believers are early on excluded from higher education; thus faithful Catholics rarely get into medical school. Medical students are assigned duties in atheistic propa-

ganda. In Soviet society physicians are the "scientific" counterpart to "unscientific ministers of the cult," i.e., priests who must "help to influence the formation of a materialistic point of view." They must show how irreconcilable is religion with the science of medicine and thereby "unmask the falsity of non-scientific beliefs."¹⁴

In his book *Man and the Superstitions of Religion*, Dr. Vaiciuvenas argues that a person who accepts disease as God-sent punishment weakens his powers of resistance and impedes recovery. The battle against "religious superstitions" has led to studies such as bacteriological tests at the Kaunas Cathedral which set out to prove that religious practices of kissing the crucifix and dipping fingers in holy water are unhygienic and cause a whole list of diseases from angina pectoris to abscesses. If nothing else, this atheist propaganda has succeeded in intimidating the people. Atheist surgeons boast that whereas people used to make the sign of the cross before surgery, now the practice is rarely seen.¹⁵

It is now well known that the Soviet secret police make use of atheist physicians to torture political prisoners in psychiatric hospitals. The *Chronicle* writes of Mindaugas Tamonis, a young man who, because he refused to repair a monument to the Red Army, was confined to a psychiatric hospital and given injections of insulin and other drugs, which led to his death.¹⁶

It is important to note that Catholic priests are reluctant to seek any kind of official medical care, for fear the KGB might use the opportunity to create an "accident." Recently a middle-aged priest, in good health, died after a tooth extraction. Physicians, on the other hand, are afraid to treat religious for fear of being accused by colleagues of being believers.

Pope John Paul II — the Hope of the Sick

The hope of all Lithuanian believers, especially the sick, is now Pope John Paul II, who is well familiar with the present situation in Soviet society, and who has declared that "half of my heart is in Lithuania."¹⁷ On the subject of human rights he wrote, in *Redemptor Hominis*:

If human rights are violated in times of peace, this is particularly painful and from the point of view of progress it represents an incomprehensible manifestation of activity directed against man, which can in no way be reconciled with any program which describes itself as "humanistic." . . . It is difficult, even from a purely human point of view, to accept a position that gives only atheism the right of citizenship in public and social life while believers are, as though by principle, barely tolerated or are treated as second class citizens or are even — and this has already happened — entirely deprived of the rights of citizenship.¹⁸

Nurse Sadunaite's Court Statement

The publishers of the *Chronicle* are risking imprisonment and torture in their fight for the people's rights. Nigole Sadunaite, a nurse and a nun, was sentenced to three years of hard labor in a Siberian prison, followed by three years of exile from Lithuania for possession of *Chronicle* No. 10, found in her typewriter. This was her concluding statement in court before sentence was passed on June 17, 1975:

This is the happiest day of my life. I am being tried for the *Chronicle*, which is a protest against the physical and spiritual tyranny to which my people are being subjected. This means that I am being tried because I love the people and want the truth. . . . I am privileged, my fate is an honorable one; not only have I fought for human rights and for justice, but I am punished for doing so. My sentence will be my triumph! I am sorry only for one thing — that I have not been able to do as much as I wish for the people. . . .¹⁹

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(English translations of the *Chronicle* may be obtained at .50 a copy from: Rev. K. Pugevicius, Franciscan Fathers Press, 341 Highland Blvd., Brooklyn, N. Y. 11207).