

ECUMENICAL TENSIONS IN RUSSIA

by Patricia Lefevere

Relations between the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the Roman Catholic Church are better than they were two years ago, but still "delicate and difficult," in the opinion of Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, who Pope John Paul II named Apostolic Administrator of Moscow in 1991.

The new leader of some 300,000 Catholics oversees an area stretching four million square kilometers--from the Urals to Russia's Euro-borders. His appointment stunned the Patriarchate of the ROC coming just days after the Vatican's Christian Unity leader, Cardinal Edward Cassidy, and the ROC's external affairs chief, Archbishop Kyril, had met in Switzerland in March 1991 and agreed to consult before Rome made further inroads into the then Soviet Union. Matters worsened when the Russian media began to refer to the new Catholic leader as the "Archbishop of Moscow," a title which the ROC's Patriarch Alexis II rightfully reserves for himself. "Don't call me the Archbishop of Moscow, it's not good," Kondrusiewicz told journalists February 26 during his first visit to New York. His own title is Apostolic Administrator of Moscow for the Latin Rite Catholics.

Although Alexis used part of his Christmas homily to rile against proselytism, he did not mention Catholics by name. Ecumenical relations between the two have warmed to such a degree that Alexis invited Kondrusiewicz to attend the liturgy and has met with him three times. Kyril and Kondrusiewicz have also met often and dined together. On the eve of his US trip, Kondrusiewicz met with Orthodox, Protestant and Muslim leaders for a second time to discuss what to do about the Russian Parliament's plan to amend the religious freedom law. Should two proposed articles be passed, the state would create a commission to control church activity and would change the process of registration, making it difficult for religions whose centers are not in Russia to be registered. Such a measure could, he thought, severely limit all religious groups, save Russian Orthodoxy.

After 75 years of Communism, "Russia is a spiritual desert," Kondrusiewicz said, with sects sprouting up all over. Collaboration between Catholics and Orthodox could help the desert sprout an ecumenical "oasis," he said. Already the two churches are cooperating to distribute charitable goods and to work with the poor, the homeless, drug addicts, and alcoholics. Kondrusiewicz is also working with Orthodox Archbishop Sergei of Moscow to send children from Chernobyl and other radiation-affected zones for medical care to Italy, Germany, and Poland. The Vatican is funding an ecumenical children's hospital due to be ready in 1994. The two churches have also agreed to organize a joint program on the family to mark the UN's Year of the Family in 1994.

The establishment of a Caritas agency office in Moscow has also sparked Catholic outreach to refugees. The archbishop noted that several thousand refugees are among Moscow's nine million population. Many of these are from the Central Asian republics

and some 6,000 are former students from Latin America and Africa who were sent to Russia by their socialist or communist governments but who have been left stranded since the collapse of Soviet Communism.

The greatest problem facing the church in Russia is property, or rather the lack of it, Kondrusiewicz said. Although 38 parishes have been registered since he moved to Moscow, only five churches exist, and three of these are under restoration. The other two must serve the needs of several thousand Catholics in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

It is not uncommon for a Catholic priest in Russia to travel hundreds of miles between parishes and to see parishioners no more than once per month. Kondrusiewicz, aged 46, has journeyed thousands of miles by car, plane, train, and boat to minister to his far-flung see.

The 33 priests serving the Moscow diocese are mostly Poles, aided by a few others from Western Europe, the Baltics, and Kondrusiewicz's homeland and former diocese of Belarus. Others are expected soon from Canada, France and Italy, he said, and another 15 parishes are likely to be registered. To aid the see some 40 nuns have arrived, 20 of them Sisters of Charity of Mother Theresa.

Kondrusiewicz said that the best way the US church could aid the Russian church would be for a parish or diocese to fund construction or restoration of church buildings. While he welcomed the presence of US and European church personnel, he has found that most of them arrive with "a foreign or Western mentality" that is not always helpful.

He hoped that the Vatican's new Commission for the Church in Eastern Europe, which the archbishop only learned of upon arriving to the USA, would help to instruct and prepare non-Russian Catholics for work in Russia. He stressed that while a new generation of priests in the West has been raised on the teachings of Vatican Council II, such teachings are largely unknown to Russian Catholics who prefer to say their rosary--the prayer they used during all the decades when priests were unavailable to them. New priests who come to Russia and do not give proper attention to the rosary, especially during the month of October, are seen as defective, even "lazy," he said.

Russian Catholics also love icons just as the Orthodox do, but many of the newly arrived clergy have removed icons, much to the displeasure of Russian Catholics, he said. New converts to Catholicism--there were 500 adult baptisms in Moscow last year, 80 percent of them students--are most attracted by the fact that Catholics pray in the vernacular and have a strong social doctrine, Kondrusiewicz said.

Kondrusiewicz longs to have a complete Bible available in Russian. The Old Testament has yet to be fully translated into Russian. He is also hungry for more catechists and to this end has established St. Thomas College where 300 laity, many of them Orthodox, are studying two nights per week and all day Saturday.

He said he is ready to find sisters and to send them to Orthodox churches as catechists. "They will be fine," he said, "as long as they don't mention 'filioque' or the 'primacy of Peter.' . . . "Russia has always been and will remain an Orthodox country," he is sure, "just as Poland is and will continue to be Catholic." But, he noted, the Orthodox Church has a chance to remain and develop within Poland. "We must have a chance to exist in Russia."