

Comments sharpen focus on Soviet church-state issues

By John Thavis

Vatican City (NC) — Mid-April statements by Pope John Paul II and Soviet political and religious leaders have brought a clearer focus to church-state problems in the Soviet Union.

In back-to-back messages, the pope spoke to the two largest groups of Soviet Catholics — Lithuanians and Ukrainians — and called on the state to respect their religious rights.

Both of the pope's appeals, however, struck a cautiously hopeful note. In an April 18 talk to Lithuanian bishops, he referred approvingly to the "winds of renewal" blowing through Soviet society and said the Church expects to be included in this liberalization campaign.

In a message to Ukrainian Catholics released April 19, the pope said he hoped that their improved relations with the Orthodox Church — which is legally recognized in the Soviet Union — would help bring to the Ukrainian Catholic community an equal right to worship, "in their own rite and with their own pastors."

The situations of Catholics in Lithuania and the Ukraine are vastly different, but both are considered key to the future of Vatican-Soviet relations. The pope has said that a papal trip to the Soviet Union would have to be pastorally oriented toward both communities.

The pope's talk to six Lithuanian bishops listed a number of traditional areas of church-state dispute: government limits on the number of priestly candidates; restrictions on the Church's ability to organize publicly and to do pastoral work in civil society; limits on catechetical instruction; bans on religious orders; and a shortage of bishops.

In an interview published in the Rome newspaper *Il Messaggero* the next day, Soviet Religious Affairs Minister Konstantin Kharchev indicated that some restrictions could be loosened under new legislation now being reviewed.

Kharchev said some hospitals in Moscow would begin an experiment allowing believers to do works of charity as volunteers. More Bibles are being printed in the country, and even the pope was being allowed to send some in, he said.

The Soviet official said he doubted whether restrictions on religious instruction would change. Currently, parents or a priest can legally teach catechism on an individual basis in private homes, but not on church premises. According to some observers, however, the state has begun to unofficially allow church-sponsored catechism classes in Lithuania.

The pope appeared to have the proposed legislation in mind when he urged that "expectations not be disappointed among brothers and sisters in Lithuania, who, as in other regions, profess with sincerity their own religious faith." An estimated 2.5 million Catholics form a majority in the Baltic republic.

The theme of the pope's message to the world's Ukrainian Catholics was the 1988 millennium of Christianity in the ancient Kievan Rus, now part of the Ukraine and two other Soviet republics.

Here, the pope's call for religious freedom was blended with an ecumenical overture to the Orthodox, who have long been at odds with the Byzantine-rite Ukrainian Catholic Church.

In a reference to the estimated 3.5 million Ukrainian Catholics who practice their faith clandestinely, the pope said: "With all our heart, we express the hope that in the future you will be granted the joy of seeing misunderstandings and mutual distrust overcome, and that recognition will be given to the full right of every person to his or her own identity and profession of faith."

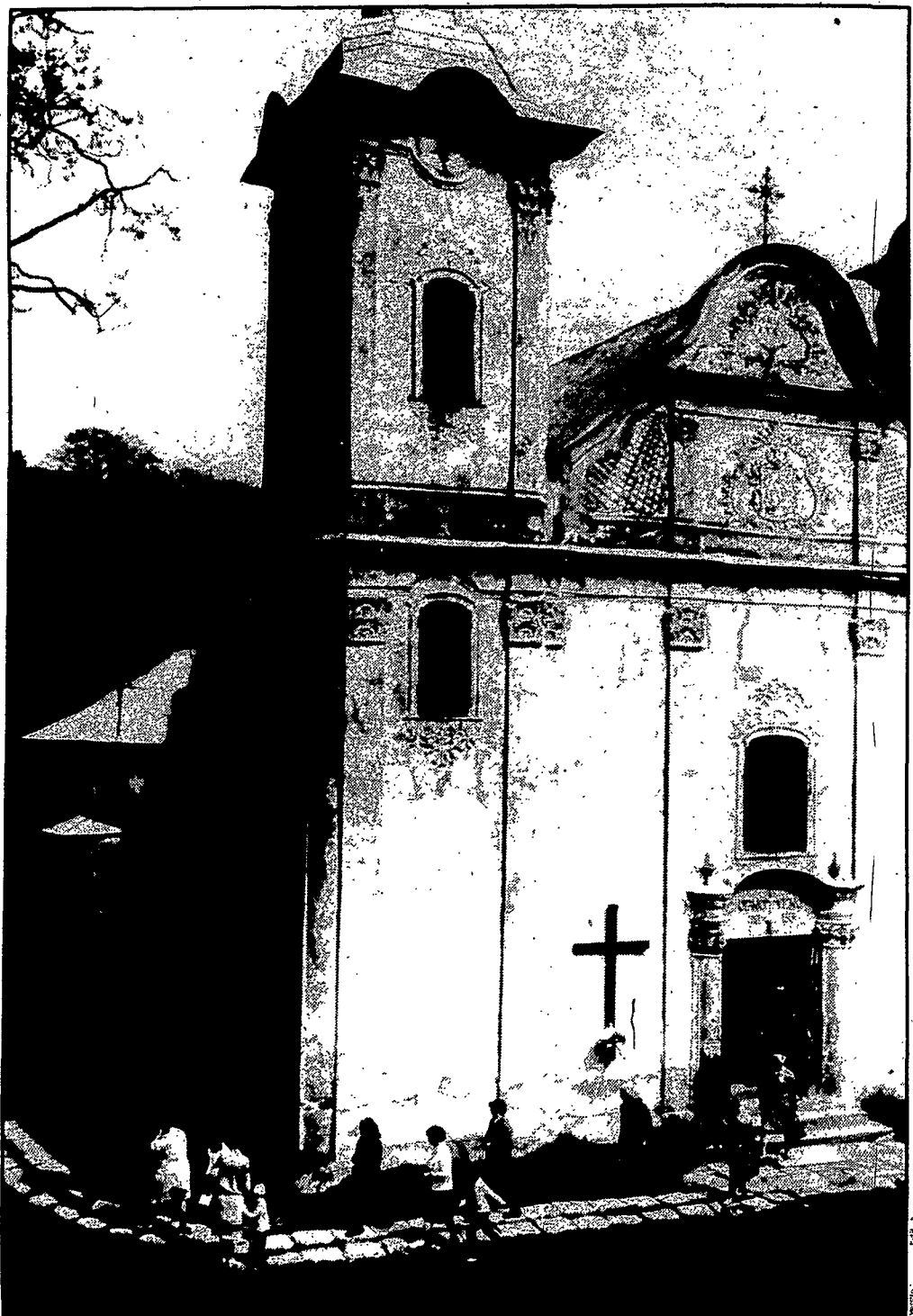
Chief among the past misunderstandings to which the pope referred was the decision by Ukrainian Catholics in 1596 to reunite with Rome. Called the "Union of Brest," it has always been considered by the Orthodox as an attempt to split the Orthodox community.

The pope said the Union of Brest was "not directed against anyone," but acknowledged that such moves had the "unforeseen and undesired result of inflicting fresh wounds within the Christian community." Current Catholic-Orthodox dialogue, he said, follows a different path.

Less encouraging statements came from a Soviet Orthodox leader in an interview published the same day in the Italian Catholic newspaper *Avvenire*. Russian Orthodox Metropolitan Filaret of Minsk said he understood the "pastoral position" of the pope, because the Ukrainian Catholic Church exists in many countries.

But the Orthodox official said the Eastern churches in union with Rome — including the Ukrainian Catholic Church — have never been accepted by the East. Those churches, he said, "are a cover for nationalistic interests in the Ukraine."

The Vatican press office, in an unusual statement accompanying the papal message, explicitly called for legal recognition of the Ukrainian Church — based on constitutional rights and the provisions of international human-rights accords. Soviet policy since World War II has been to consider Ukrainian Byzantine-rite Catholics absorbed into the Russian Orthodox Church.



As Mass ends on an early spring morning, parishioners stream from their church, built in 1780, in a small village in Czechoslovakia. Vatican officials who recently traveled to the central European communist-run nation expressed hopes for better church-state relations and cited a breakthrough in obtaining consultations with local clergy regarding appointments of bishops.

In an April 20 Rome press conference, Anatoly Krasnykh, vice director of the official Soviet news agency Tass, dismissed reports of an underground Ukrainian Catholic Church.

"How can there be 4 million practicing clandestinely?" he asked. Krasnykh said the Ukrainian problem was one "between churches" and added, "I don't want to get into polemics on this issue in such an important moment."

Cardinal Myroslav Lubachivsky, worldwide head of Ukrainian Catholics, said in an interview published the same day in

Avvenire that so far there was little sign of Soviet liberalization in the Ukraine. But he said Ukrainian Catholics are coming out into the open more, and that a petition requesting legalization of the Ukrainian Church had gained the signatures of more than 10,000.

Cardinal Lubachivsky, who lives in Rome, also said it was sad that relations between the Ukrainian Church and the Russian Orthodox Church had not improved recently, despite an overture of reconciliation by Ukrainian Catholics. Instead, he said, the Orthodox church has "remained closed and intransigent toward us."

Panamanian bishops blast U.S. intervention; archbishop says it's too early for negotiations

Panama City, Panama (NC) — Panama's bishops have criticized U.S. economic pressure against their country as unjust and a violation of national sovereignty. In a statement issued after a special late-April meeting, the bishops also criticized local "military and paramilitary repression which violates human rights."

The U.S. government has imposed economic sanctions aimed at toppling the government dominated by military strongman Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega. The closing of banks and a general strike have added to economic woes.

The bishops said the nation's current crisis was caused by: "a capitalist economy that does not care for the primary needs of the people;" foreign intervention; official repression; and corruption.

They asked Panamanians to remain open to dialogue for settling the crisis and asked for the support of other Latin Americans.

In an interview with Vatican Radio after the statement was issued, Archbishop Marcos McGrath of Panama City said U.S. economic sanctions against Panama were

"morally unjust" and asked "that they be suspended as soon as possible."

"Equally, we reject any form of military interference" and "every armed action" on anyone's part, the archbishop said.

"We also denounce the excessive military presence in all fields of the national life" and the "grave uncertainty" it has caused, the archbishop said.

Panama has been in turmoil since June of 1987, when the former defense forces deputy commander, Col. Roberto Diaz Herrera, charged Noriega with rigging the 1984 presidential elections, then arranging the subsequent ouster of its winner, Nicolas Ardito Barletta.

U.S. courts have indicted Noriega for drug trafficking, and Panamanian President Eric Arturo Delvalle tried to fire him in February. But Noriega supporters arranged a coup and ousted Delvalle, who has remained in hiding since February 26.

Archbishop McGrath has offered to mediate the situation, but he told Vatican Radio April 23 that he did not think mediation could yet begin.



Denied their paychecks, teachers confront a soldier in the streets of Panama City March 14. The Panamanian bishops have criticized U.S. economic sanctions against the government of strongman Gen. Manuel Noriega, who has been indicted in the United States on drug charges.

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