

Prelate seeks papal visit to 'free' Lithuania

MILAN, Italy (CNS) — Lithuanians hope Pope John Paul II will be the guest of a "free Lithuania" in 1991, rather than visit the republic as part of a Soviet tour, a Lithuanian cardinal said.

Cardinal Vincentas Sladkevicius of Kaunas, Lithuania, said a papal visit via Moscow would imply recognition of Soviet authority over the Baltic republic — something that would undermine the strong pro-independence movement there.

"I really don't think the pope would do such a thing," he said.

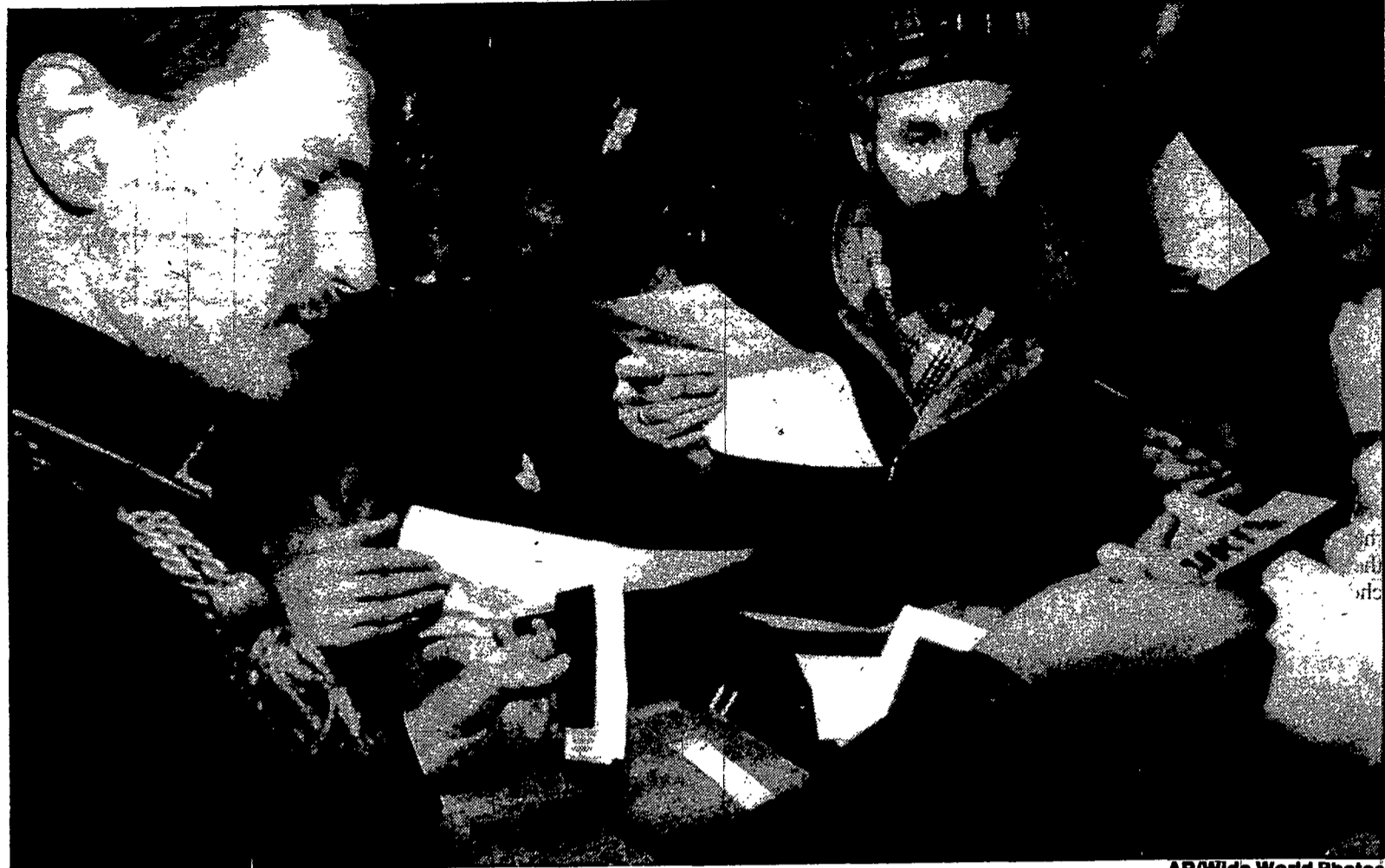
The cardinal, a strong supporter of Lithuanian autonomy, made his remarks in an interview published March 6 by the Italian Catholic newspaper, *Avvenire*.

In recent local elections, the pro-independence front swept to power in Lithuania, setting the stage for an expected declaration of secession sometime during the next year.

Cardinal Sladkevicius said he supports the independence movement "with all my heart." He said Western countries should do all they can to support the republic's push for autonomy.

Talk of a papal visit to the Soviet Union has increased with the recent improvement in Vatican-Soviet relations, and in December Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev publicly invited the pope to visit the U.S.S.R. Most observers have predicted that a papal visit to Lithuania, the only predominantly Catholic Soviet republic, would be the highlight of such a trip.

But Cardinal Sladkevicius said: "We



Lithuanian men in Vilnius stress their claim to independence from the Soviet Union by submitting their military service cards to be returned to Moscow. All Soviet men are required to carry the cards to show their military status. AP/Wide World Photos

hope (the pope's) visit coincides with our rediscovered independence. He would be the first and most welcome guest of a free Lithuania.

"If the pope were to go to Moscow and then come here in Lithuania, it would demonstrate that we are part of the Soviet Union," he said.

Instead, the cardinal offered this scenario: If Lithuania becomes independent next year, he said, the pope would be

able to go directly to the country from Poland, where he is scheduled to visit in mid-1991.

"This is our great hope," Cardinal Sladkevicius said.

The cardinal said the church did not directly endorse specific candidates in the recent elections, in which members of the pro-independence Sajudis movement swept to victory. But he added that "the people know how the church sees these issues.

"Things are really very simple: Either you are with Lithuania or you are with the Soviet Union," he said.

Cardinal Sladkevicius said Westerners who tell Lithuanians to move slowly toward autonomy or who warn that their movement could upset Gorbachev's reform program do not understand the Lithuanian perspective.

"It is like a prisoner who after many

Papal trip will cover Mexico, Curacao

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — Pope John Paul II plans to visit 10 Mexican cities and the Caribbean island of Curacao during a May 6-14 trip, the Vatican announced March 7.

It will be the pope's second trip to Mexico and his first to Curacao, a self-governing part of the kingdom of the Netherlands.

The pope will arrive in Mexico May 6 and stay eight days before leaving for Curacao May 13, the Vatican said.

Mexican cities listed on the papal trip are the capital of Mexico City, Veracruz,

years in prison glimpses a way out. You cannot ask him to go toward freedom at a slow pace," he said.

As for the risk of a conflict with Moscow, which has resisted the idea of Lithuanian independence, the cardinal said: "It is necessary to take some risks."

He said the church today enjoys greater freedom as a result of a loosening of Soviet restrictions on religion. But he said he could not rule out a return to persecution of the church.

"As long as our neighbor is a communist state which does not allow us to be independent, anything can happen," he said. The cardinal noted that the Lithuanian Communist Party supports independence, and he described the local Communist Party leader as "a Lithuanian in the true sense, who loves his people and wants independence for them."

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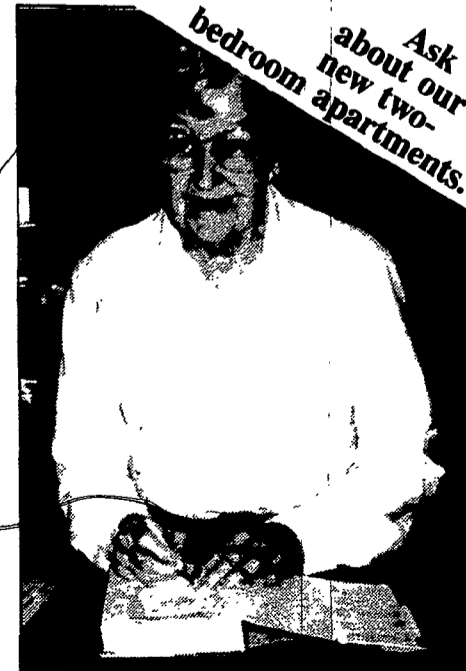
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