

Pope encourages dialogue on Lithuanian autonomy

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — In messages delivered on Easter and Holy Saturday, Pope John Paul II declared himself "closer than ever" to the goals of the Lithuanian people and called for a "respectful and comprehensive dialogue" to resolve the republic's crisis with the Soviet Union.

In the separate messages, given April 14 and 15, the pope offered strong moral support to Lithuania, but did not explicitly mention its month-old, self-proclaimed independence. Lithuanian leaders have urged the pope and the Vatican to grant diplomatic recognition to a "free Lithuania."

Meanwhile, the pope met at the Vatican April 14 with a Soviet envoy for talks believed to include the conflict over Lithuanian autonomy.

The developments coincided with a new warning from Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, who told Lithuanian leaders they would face economic sanctions unless they began to annul laws connected with their quest for independence.

Speaking in Lithuanian from the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica April 15, the pope prayed for peace for "the beloved Lithuanian nation," and said, "We hope their aspirations may be confirmed through a respectful and comprehensive dialogue."

The day before, in a telegram to Lithuanian Cardinal Vincentas Sladkevicius of Kaunas, the pope said he was concerned for "the entire noble population" of Lithuania.

"I am closer than ever to their aspira-



Lithuanians gathered in the capital city of Vilnius Monday, April 2, to demonstrate for freedom.

tions, especially during these Easter festivities," he said.

"In these hours of fear and hope, I am particularly close to the Lithuanian church, which throughout the centuries and generations has wholly preserved the faith of its baptism," he said.

The pope noted that the Lithuanian church has always "shared the difficulties of its people," and he stressed the Christian roots of Lithuania, the only predominantly Catholic republic in the Soviet Union.

The two talks marked the second time the pope has spoken publicly on the Lithuanian question since a war of nerves began in March between the republic's leaders and the Kremlin. On both occasions, the pope has stressed the need for dialogue and has avoided direct mention of the independence issue.

In an appeal addressed to the pope and presented to Cardinal Sladkevicius March 30, Lithuanian President Vytautas Landsbergis implored the pope to take steps to recognize an independent Lithuania and

name an apostolic nuncio or ambassador to the republic. By mid-April, no state had given diplomatic recognition to a "free" Lithuania, and church officials have said it is unlikely the Vatican would do so before some settlement is worked out between Lithuanian leaders and Moscow.

Moscow and Lithuania had been unable by mid-April to agree on a framework for talks on the independence issue, and neither side appeared willing to make the concessions necessary for negotiations to begin.

The Vatican's new diplomatic representative to the Soviet Union, Archbishop Francesco Colasuonno, recently said the Holy See would be willing to act as an intermediary to help promote a solution to the Lithuanian issue.

On April 14, the pope met with one of Gorbachev's top advisers, Vadim Zagladin, to discuss "problems concerning the life of the church in the Soviet Union, and those connected with international collaboration," the Vatican said.

The Soviet news agency Tass, monitored by Italian news agencies, reported that Zagladin gave the pope a message from Gorbachev, in which the Soviet leader said he was satisfied with the recent improvement in church-state relations and hoped for further cooperation on international issues.

According to the Tass report, the pope told Gorbachev that ethnic and other problems in Eastern Europe should be solved using legal means, tolerance and negotiations.



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