

Catholics

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"(The church) offered an opportunity for people to exchange views different from the state," he said, adding that such a phenomenon is common in right- and left-wing dictatorships.

In Latin America, the church has often served as a refuge for the impoverished and oppressed, especially since 1968 when the Catholic bishops began pronouncing the church's "preferential option for the poor."

But, as in communist nations, the church has paid a price in blood for harboring the suppressed hopes of people.

"Since 1968, when Latin America's Catholic Church began to question the miserable conditions in which two-thirds of the people live, over 850 priests, nuns and bishops have been arrested, tortured, murdered and expelled, and thousands of the Catholic laity have been jailed or killed," the late Penny Lernoux wrote in her 1980 book *Cry of the People*, which documents the church's modern role in Latin America.

Whether persecuted for preaching about the afterlife, battling poverty, or questioning loyalty to the state, Catholics all over the world have learned the bitter price of adhering to their faith.

Rochester is home to a Lithuanian Franciscan who experienced first-hand the terror of religious persecution — a terror that began when the Soviet Union invaded

the then-independent nation of Lithuania in June, 1940.

"The persecution of the church started at that time," recalled 81-year-old Father Justin Vaskys, pastor of St. George's Lithuanian Parish on Hudson Avenue. "All the monasteries were closed. All Catholic schools were closed, anything that was connected with the Catholic faith."

Some bishops were killed, while many priests, along with thousands of Lithuanian citizens, were arrested and sent to concentration camps, Father Vaskys remembered. His provincial asked him to attempt escape to the United States where his assignment would be to set up Lithuanian Franciscan communities in the United States.

Disguised as a farmer, the young priest escaped to German-held territory (now Poland) on the Lithuanian border. From there, using various connections within the Lithuanian and American communities in Berlin, he managed to make his way to Portugal, and then emigrated to the United States.

Once in his newly adopted country, the priest did not forget about his fellow Lithuanians suffering under Soviet occupation. Among his many achievements on behalf of the Franciscan order in the United States Father Vaskys lists the founding of a Lithuanian Catholic newspaper in Brooklyn in the 1950s. The paper often published news about the persecuted church, culling some of its stories during the 1970s from an underground journal started in 1972 in Lithuania and known as *The Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania*.

An excerpt from one of its stories in Volume 5 offers an idea of the depth and scope of repression suffered by Lithuanian Catholics before the liberalization of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s:

"On the night of July 21, 1972, (Vytautas Lazinskas) had erected a metal cross that was five-and-a-half meters high near Klaipeda Road on the outskirts of Ariogala. Government officials pulled down the cross the next day and the 'offender' was interrogated. ...

"... The court's psychiatric commission pronounced V. Lazinskas to be suffering from paranoid psychopathy since he does not admit to having committed a crime and had recounted 'systematized delirious ideas of a religious nature,' thus, he was irresponsible and in need of medical treatment in a psychiatric hospital."

Overt persecution of Christians has ended in much of the Soviet Union, with previously confiscated church property being restored to its original owners in the republics. But monitoring of church activity continues, according to such human-rights groups as Christian Rescue Effort for the Emancipation of Dissidents, based in Princeton, N.J.

According to CREED's May, 1990, newsletter, for example, the KGB — the Soviet secret police — used slander to discredit a Soviet Christian activist running for political office. The activist's office was burgled by secret agents just days before he left for the United States. A list of the activist's cohorts in a Christian Democratic Union was stolen, and slanderous letters were later sent to the

people on the list. The activist subsequently lost the election.

Such stories sound a cautionary note for Christians hoping to maintain newly won freedoms in the Soviet Union. Father Vaskys expressed concern that the recent military crackdown on the independence movement in Lithuania might set the stage for a nightmarish replay of June, 1940, the first time the Soviets invaded.

"(Gorbachev) was preaching freedom and democracy, and now he's using force to repress democracy," the pastor complained.

Meanwhile, persecution of the church has increased in the People's Republic of China, following the 1989 massacre of democracy-minded students in Beijing. The church has never fared well under the communists since their takeover in 1949, according to John Davies, president of Free the Fathers, based in Signal Mountain, Tenn.

"The Chinese still consider themselves doctrinaire ... Marxist/Leninists," he said, adding that "they try to stamp out all religions."

Free the Fathers' 18,000 members in 22 lands conduct letter-writing campaigns and lobby their native governments to pressure the Chinese into freeing imprisoned priests, Davies said. The human-rights group was one of several organizations continually calling for the release of Shanghai's Bishop Ignatius Kung, imprisoned from 1957 to 1987 and kept under house arrest for two years thereafter, according to Joseph Kung, the bishop's nephew.

"He refused to cooperate with the Chinese communist government to sever ties with the Vatican," said Kung, who spoke with the *Catholic Courier* by phone from his home in Stamford, Conn. Kung noted that the communists wanted his uncle to join the Patriotic Catholic Association, a government-controlled church that is not tied to the Vatican.

"The communists tried to find ways to break him down," Kung said, adding that the bishop was kept in isolation throughout most of his imprisonment. "He found ways and means to keep him(self) up," Kung said, remarking that his uncle, who emigrated to the United States after his release, is 90-years-old and mentally "sharp" despite his years in prison.

Chinese Catholics, who number about 3 million, have found the "ways and means" to sustain their faith secretly. Much of this secret devotion takes place in the nation's vast rural areas where priests can operate more openly since the communists rule these regions with a lighter hand than in the cities, Davies said. In urban areas, "Catholics are reduced to praying privately," he commented.

Father Deboe said that a small number of Chinese Catholics attend services offered by the Patriotic Association, but usually do not take communion as a sign that they know it is not recognized by the Vatican.

Despite the sufferings of Catholics in the world, the persecuted faithful have been amazingly resilient in retaining their beliefs. In many countries, older family members have been the sole catechists, passing down the tenets of the faith to their offspring. Such has been the case for many Vietnamese Catholics, according to Thang Van Nguyen, president of the Vietnamese Catholic Community of Rochester.

"The Vietnamese Catholic people are very strong in their faith," said Nguyen, who fled North Vietnam in 1954 and South Vietnam in 1975, both times following the establishment of communist regimes. His years of service in the South Vietnamese navy also made him nervous about staying in South Vietnam once his former enemies had won, he added.

Nguyen pointed out Eastern Europe's communist regimes began reforming in response to the region's depressed economies. Vietnam is experiencing similar problems, he remarked, noting such a state is creating a climate for liberalization in the future — and potentially more freedom for Catholics.

War

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A similar message came from the Canadian Council of Churches, which represents 16 Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox church bodies in Canada.

In December the council urged that the crisis be resolved by a peaceful, negotiated solution. On Jan. 10 its member churches, joined by 27 Protestant denominations of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, urged all Canadian Christians to "devote Sunday Jan. 13 as a day of prayer for peace in the Middle East."

Religious leaders of many denominations in the United States, Europe and elsewhere also declared Jan. 13 a special day of prayer for peace.

The call to U.S. Catholics for such a day came from Archbishop Daniel E. Pilarczyk of Cincinnati, president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Some U.S. Catholic bishops carefully withheld moral judgment on whether a U.S.-led military offensive in January could be justified, but some said bluntly that the criteria for a "just war" have not yet been met.

The following is a sampling of recent statements on the gulf situation:

• Cardinal John J. O'Connor of New

York said Jan. 10 that he did not "pretend to have either the military or political expertise" to judge what is necessary or best, but he warned against taking "the morality of any war for granted." He also rejected any assumption "that war is inevitable. ... When we come to believe that war is inevitable and peace impossible, folly is perceived as common sense ... and the morally right thing to do."

• Cardinal Joseph L. Bernardin of Chicago joined more than 30 leaders of Chicago-area churches and synagogues in a Jan. 9 declaration stating, "At this critical time, we call for commitment to a negotiated political solution without resorting to war."

• In a television appearance to lead area Catholics in praying the rosary Jan. 11, Cardinal Bernard F. Law of Boston asked whether a war would be worth the human price or justified in terms of the "extremely negative consequences" it would bring.

• In a Jan. 7 letter to Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D.-Mass., Bishop Michael H. Kenny of Juneau, Alaska, warned that once war started, a "rally around the flag" mentality would make serious moral criticism of the war "very difficult" because it would be branded as unpatriotic.

A common element in responses of all religious leaders to the threat of war was a plea for prayer.

Catholic Courier (USPS 135-580)

Vol. 103 No. 2 January 17, 1991

Published weekly except week after July 4.

Subscription rates: single copy, 50¢; one-year subscription in U.S., \$15; Canada and foreign \$15 plus postage.

Offices: 1150 Buffalo Road, Rochester, N.Y. 14624, 716/328-4340.

Second-class postage paid at Rochester, N.Y.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Catholic Courier, 1150 Buffalo Road, Rochester, N.Y. 14624.

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