

Soviet upheaval gives church officials hope

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

ROME — A week of continuing political convulsions in the Soviet Union left church leaders optimistic about the prospects for religious and political freedom, especially in three breakaway Baltic republics.

The Vatican joined several Western nations in officially recognizing Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia Aug. 29 — a move that would have been considered risky and provocative two weeks earlier, but which made sense as the Soviet Union appeared headed toward break-up after a failed military coup.

President George Bush announced Sept. 2, that the United States was recognizing the independence of the Baltic nations and establishing diplomatic relations.

Meanwhile, with the Communist Party virtually swept aside and reform appointments being made by Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, the bishop of Moscow and others predicted even brighter days ahead for the church and its pastoral life.

The Vatican had waited patiently for some 50 years to recognize the Baltic states, which are home to an estimated 3.2 million Catholics.

A telegram sent by Secretary of State Cardinal Angelo Sodano said the Vatican "rejoices" to see the independence of the Baltics and an end to the forced annexation by the Soviet Union in 1940.

The telegram said a "normal exchange of diplomatic representatives" would follow. Most observers believed that meant a nuncio would be named soon for Lithuania and the other states. The current apostolic administrator of Vilnius, Monsignor Juozas Tunaitis, predicted a nuncio would be appointed within a month.

Lithuanian Foreign Minister Algirdas Saudargas praised the Vatican decision and thanked the pope.

"We cannot forget the great support that such a prestigious and popular authority as the pope gave to Lithuanian independence, even in the most difficult moments," Saudargas said.

While Gorbachev appeared ready to concede independence for the Baltic states, the situation in the Ukraine — another heavily Catholic Soviet republic — was much less clear. The Ukraine declared its independence in late August, subject to a referendum in December.

The declaration drew immediate support from the Ukrainian Catholic Church.

In the United States, the leader of U.S. Ukrainian Catholics, Archbishop Stephen Sulyk of Philadelphia, said Aug. 29 that he hoped the move would inspire an "unparalleled religious renaissance" in that republic. But he warned of the effects of seven decades of atheistic education on the Ukraine's young and its leaders.

The church official closest to the amazing political events in the Soviet Union, Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz of Moscow, met privately with the pope Sept. 2 to discuss the new situation in his country. No details of their meeting were made public.

In a series of interviews in Italy Aug. 28-30, Archbishop Kondrusiewicz predicted that the wave of political reform touched off by the failed coup would increase the church's pastoral and social role.

The events of August "have enormous significance for the church" as well as for the democracy movement in the country, he said.

"The sentiment of liberty is, by this point, something that people are breathing in the air, and they are by no means going to lose it. This marks a point of no return," he said.

Archbishop Kondrusiewicz gave support to Gorbachev but said Russian President Boris Yeltsin was enjoying greater popularity.

"In this moment, the most important fact is that Gorbachev has separated himself from these people (who led the coup attempt), and that he has taken certain political decisions and recognized his own errors," the archbishop said.

Gorbachev took the crucial step of resigning as head of the Communist Party, and his new Cabinet-level appointments since then have "met with favor among everyone," he said.



AP/Wide World Photos
A little girl seems to be whispering into the ear of Lenin's statue as she plays in Vilnius, Lithuania, Aug. 30. The statue was toppled in the wake of the failed coup attempt against Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev.

Former sister awaiting ordination says she never felt part of church

By Laurie Hansen
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — A former nun scheduled to be ordained a priest in the breakaway African-American Catholic Congregation Sept. 8 says she never felt a part of the Roman Catholic Church.

"I did not envision things going well for me as a black woman in the church, and I saw a need as far as my people were concerned. I knew a lot of African-Americans feeling shortchanged by the Roman Catholic Church — feeling that they were part of something that they were not really part of," Rose Vernell, 50, told Catholic News Service in an Aug. 30 telephone interview from her home in Neptune, N.J.

Bishop George Augustus Stallings, leader of the breakaway church, was excommunicated from the Catholic Church after forming his denomination. He announced Aug. 28 that he would ordain Vernell, a former Oblate Sister of Providence, and Carlos Harvin, a former Catholic seminarian from Richmond, Va., at his Imani Temple in Washington Sept. 8.

Vernell would be the first woman ordained a priest by Bishop Stallings.

"This is not about hand clapping (during the liturgy). It's about the empowering of a people so they can achieve full participation in the mainstream of life in America," Vernell said.

Vernell, her two sisters, four brothers and their mother had been among the families that founded St. Peter Claver Parish in Asbury Park, N.J., in 1942. She said her decision to join Bishop Stallings' church was not celebrated at the parish. "It went over like a lead balloon," she said.

Divine Word Missionary Father John Wadson, pastor of St. Peter Claver, told CNS Aug. 30 that the prominent parishioner's departure actually had a positive effect on the small, predominantly black parish of 115 families. "It bound the rest of the church together," he said.

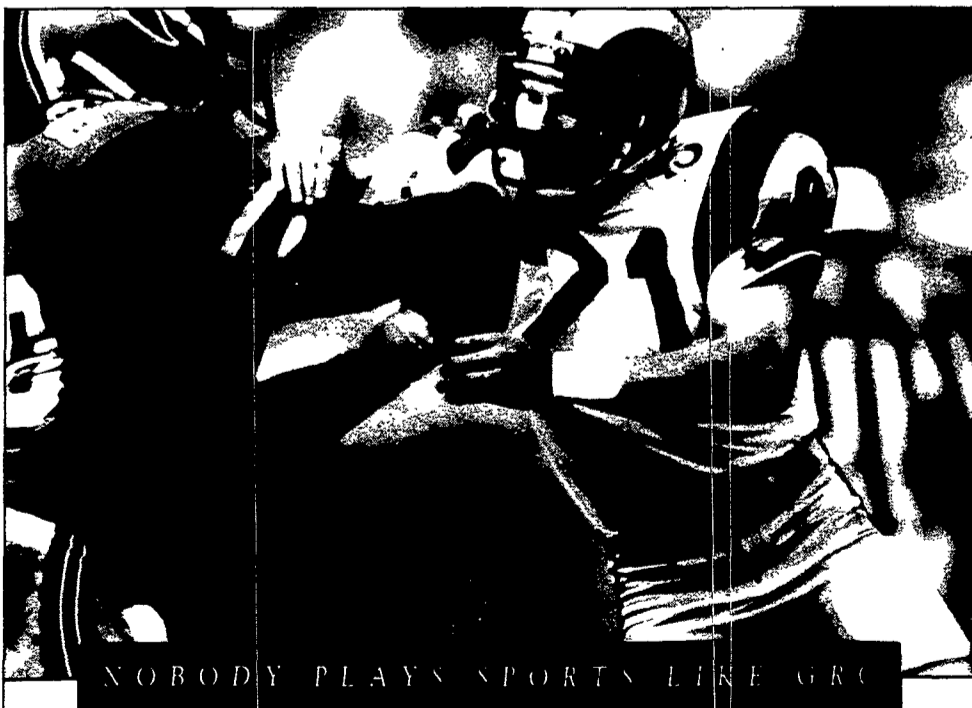
A New Jersey congregation would be the sixth house of worship in the country organized under the auspices of the African-American Catholic Congregation. The others are in Washington, Baltimore, Richmond, Philadelphia and New Orleans.

Correction

Last week's story concerning public officials and their religious affiliation contained an error.

The Democratic Party did not deny its presidential nomination to then New York Gov. Alfred E. Smith in 1928. Smith ran on the Democratic ticket in 1928, when he was defeated by Herbert Hoover.

We regret the error.



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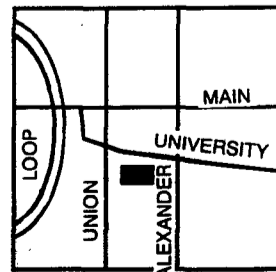
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