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THE TRIAL OF FATHER ZDEBSKIS

Every summer thousands of Lithuanian mothers prepare their children for their first confession and Holy Communion. This is a difficult task and a great responsibility that demands much dedication on the part of both the parents and the clergy. Soviet laws forbid priests to teach children in order that the atheists may all the more easily disseminate their ideas. A number of priests who lived through the Stalinist reign of terror do not want any conflicts with the authorities and content themselves simply with testing the children. Other priests are courageous and have resolved to obey God rather than men—risking their freedom, they teach children the fundamentals of the faith.

At the sizeable parish in Prienai, about 300 children are prepared every year for First Communion. It was the same in 1971. On July 16 the children, together with their mothers, gathered at the church in Prienai for catechization. As Father Zdebskis was teaching and testing the children, a group of officials forced their way into the church. They photographed the children, asked their names, and drew up a report. A commotion arose in the church. Scandalized by the self-will of the Soviet officials, the parents of Pri-

nai appealed to the Control Commission of the Central Committee of the USSR:

"On July 16 of this year, we, the undersigned, brought our children to church so that a priest could test their knowledge—whether they were ready to receive First Communion.

"Suddenly a group of men and women forced their way into the church. It was the chairman of the executive committee, the secretary of the Young Communist League, several teachers and police officers, and others. The uninvited guests began to take over in the church: they photographed the children and asked their names. One frightened girl even fainted.

"The mothers could not help defending their children. A sad scene was taking place in the church. When asked not to interfere, the uninvited guests answered: 'We're not causing the commotion—the women are.'

"Such behavior by representatives of the government brings dishonor upon the Soviet laws. We ask that the persecution of believers be stopped."

This petition was signed by eighty-nine parents and sent to Moscow. Unfortunately, Moscow did not reply to the Catholics of Prienai.

Interrogations of the children, their parents, and of Father Zdebskis were begun by the Prienai Procurator's Office. Interrogator A. Pakštys searched Father Zdebskis' apartment.

On August 26 the interrogator telephoned Father Zdebskis and asked him to stop by his office "for a while." It was here that the priest was arrested.

When the people found out that the priest had been arrested, they came to the Procurator's Office and demanded the release of the priest. They said: "If you are arresting the priest, then arrest us first, for we brought our children to the priest. It is his duty to teach the children and to

test them." From the Procurator's Office the believers marched off to see the Party secretary, who, however, refused to see them. A wave of indignation swept through the entire parish of Prienai and far beyond its borders. On Sunday a crowd of people could be seen waiting in line to sign a complaint addressed to several Soviet agencies:

"To: The Procurator General of the USSR

The Party Control Commission of the Central
Committee of the CPSU

The Procurator of the LSSR

A Declaration by the Believers of the Parish in Prienai

"On August 26 of this year, our parish priest, the Rev. J. Zdebskis, was arrested.

"He had conscientiously carried out his priestly duties. He did no harm to anyone. We are convinced that the arrest of our priest is due to some kind of misunderstanding, and we therefore ask that the reasons for his arrest be examined and that the order be given for his release.

"The Rev. J. Zdebskis is accused of preparing children for their first confession. If he has committed an offense by carrying out the duties pertinent to his priestly calling, why does the USSR Constitution guarantee freedom of conscience and of worship? We believe that this arrest is a brazen violation of the laws of this Soviet state.

"We parents are unable to prepare our children for their first confession. We do not have the time since we work either in factories or on collective farms. Secondly, we have neither catechisms nor religious books. During the postwar years, our public officials did not permit the publication of even one catechism.

"Bearing in mind this lamentable situation of Lithuania's believers, what can we parents do? We take our children to the priests and insist that they help us prepare

our children so that they would know at least the minimum about the faith. A priest cannot allow an unprepared child to make his first confession.

"It is a requirement of the Soviet government that priests do not teach children but only test them, and then only one at a time. But can a priest test in two months' time about 300-400 children, who come knowing almost nothing of the faith and confession? Besides, our priests have many other churchly duties, for the parish in Prienai is large, with about 8,000 Catholics.

"Our priest was arrested because of our requests and demands, and therefore we are very surprised, upset and indignant. Why disturb the regularity of work, why provoke the believers, why artificially create confusion among the people of the *rayon*?

"We think that our indignation and this protest are well-founded and will be acted upon, and that in the future similar events will not recur.

August 29, 1971"

The declaration was signed by about 350 persons. The people of Prienai themselves delivered the declaration to the Procurator's Office of the USSR. A promise was given that the matter would be investigated.

The believers also appealed to the Procurator of the LSSR and to Rugienis, the commissioner of the Council for Religious Affairs. He spoke angrily: "I know Father Zdebskis!" The parishioners answered: "We know him at least as well."

On August 30 Father Zdebskis was taken to Vilnius. Already early in the morning there was a crowd of people near police headquarters waiting for the time when the priest would be driven away. Security agents photographed the people and wanted to disperse them. "Why are you standing here? Do you want to see a miracle?" "More than a miracle!" answered the people. At 4 p.m., as the crowd of people wept, Father Zdebskis was seated inside a car and driven away.

On September 3 Father Zdebskis' apartment was searched thoroughly a second time. Someone was spreading rumors that Father Zdebskis had been arrested not for teaching children but that a radio transmitter had been found in his apartment, etc. Since even government officials were saying such things, apparently the intent was to deliberately compromise the arrested priest even more so that the believers would not dare to come to his defense.

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In the latter half of September, the believers from Prienai took another petition to Moscow, one which resounded widely throughout the entire world:

"To: The Central Committee of the CPSU

The Supreme Soviet of the USSR

The Council of Ministers of the USSR

A Petition from the Believers of the Parish in Prienai

"The newspapers and the radio try to convince us that there is religious freedom in the LSSR, but in reality this is not so.

"We are not permitted to publish religious books—we have never seen any. We do not even have any small catechisms. The last printing was in 1940.

"Often we cannot hear mass because we are forced to work on Sundays, even though Church laws forbid it.

"We lack priests. Every year about twenty priests die, but barely ten are allowed to enter the seminary. In addition, we know the difficulties those who enroll in the seminary experience from government officials.

"Our priests are being arrested for preparing children for their first confession. On August 26 our priest, the Rev. J. Zdebskis, was arrested for catechizing, and we are now awaiting his trial.

"All this compromises in our eyes the Soviet Constitution and the laws.

"We therefore ask the government of the Soviet Union: give us true freedom of religion; give our priests the freedom to perform their duties without interference and without fear; arrange to have our priest, Father J. Zdebskis, released from custody.

Prienai

September 12, 1971"

The petition was signed by 2,010 believers. This was a courageous protest by the people against religious persecution.

The government had not foreseen that the believing people were like a temporarily inactive volcano. We cannot foresee the future consequences. One thing is clear—*Lithuanian believers shall fight for their rights!*

How intensely the people reacted to Father Zdebskis' arrest can be seen from certain facts. During the religious festival of the Nativity of Mary in Šiluva, about 200 people made offerings for masses to be said for Father Zdebskis' intention. Having lost their pastor, parishioners from Santaika appealed to the General-Secretary of the CPSU asking that Father Zdebskis be released because the bishop had no one he could appoint as pastor of the parish in Santaika:

"We, the undersigned Catholics, appeal to the Central Committee requesting that attention be directed to the difficult situation of believers in Lithuania.

"Our government officials do not permit all those who wish to enter the seminary to do so, and therefore the number of priests is rapidly decreasing. The bishop already lacks enough priests to take care of all the parishes. We have heard that during this past year, the parish in Lankeliškiai has been deprived of its pastor, and just this month we too were left without a permanent pastor. A priest who has to commute from elsewhere will not be able to take proper care of our spiritual affairs. This hurts us deeply and is arousing mistrust of the government's policy.

"Hardly had Father Šeškevičius, who was convicted for the performance of his priestly duties, returned from

the prison camp in Alytus, when Father Zdebskis was once again arrested in Prienai for having, as we heard, prepared children who were brought by their parents for their first confession. If this is a crime, then how can we even think about freedom of conscience and of religion?

"We Catholics lack prayer books and pray from tattered ones. Several years ago, we received several prayer books published by the government, in jest, as it were. . . It is essential that every Catholic be able to obtain a good prayer book. We do not even have the Bible to read from.

"It is most regretful that the rights of Catholics, as though they were Negroes, are being flagrantly violated, and we ask the Central Committee to see to it that government officials would not interfere in seminary matters; that permission would be granted to our spiritual leadership for publishing annually a sufficient number of prayer books, the Gospels, and other religious books; and that Father Zdebskis would be released from custody. The bishop will then be able to appoint him or another priest as our pastor.

Santaika

September 26, 1971"

The petition was signed by 1,190 Catholics of Santaika.

Weeks and months raced by, but the day of Father Juozas Zdebskis' trial was constantly postponed and diligently kept secret. Late in the evening on November 11, like lightning the news flashed through the parish in Prienai: "Father Juozas will be tried tomorrow in Kaunas!"

The morrow would reveal the true nature of the Soviet government's attitude in regard to the believers.

Already early in the morning the staircase of the courthouse up to the third floor and the yard were teeming with people. Flowers could be seen in the hands of many persons. Everyone was waiting for the arrival of Father Zdebskis. Police officers were scurrying about in the vicin-

ity. As the hour of the trial approached, they started to "put things in order"—to forcibly push the people outside. They even bloodied a woman they were pushing. The Catholics were ejected, and their places in the courtroom were taken by an enormous group of security agents. Besides them, there were witnesses in the courtroom—children, their parents, together with the employees of various agencies brought over from Prienai. A theatrical performance had to be played out—a public trial was taking place... to which the security agents were admitting only atheists. Without a doubt, the authorities did not want to popularize this trial.

The arrests of the faithful were begun on the staircase. One youth was arrested because he made a remark to the policemen questioning why they were allowing only atheists inside and not the believers. The youth was punished with fifteen days in jail. One priest who had accompanied Father Zdebskis' mother was arrested in the corridor and taken away to security headquarters for interrogation.

Outside, near the courthouse, the crowd continued to grow. The police began to arrest those people who could be seen with flowers in their hands and forcibly crowd them into paddy wagons. There was a great deal of confusion and shouting. The police were given the order to disperse the crowd, which consisted of about 500-600 persons. After the crowd had been rudely dispersed, they began to arrest certain individuals. A priest who happened to be passing by was arrested and charged with organizing the demonstration. Throughout the day the policemen stood guard on Ožeškienė Street and did not allow people to assemble. "Why are you standing here like pigs!" was one of the ways the police officials knew of "greeting" the people. People were even being chased out of the nearby stores. "Chase the sanctimonious grannies out of here," shouted a policeman who had run into one shop. Most of those arrested were released in the evening. One person was taken to a psychiatric hospital and later was punished with fifteen days in jail.

On that day the people admirably demonstrated their solidarity with the priest who was on trial, whereas the mob of security agents and policemen showed how the Soviet government takes into consideration the rights of believers.

In order to keep the Jewish nation living in fear, each month King Antioch of the Syrians would kill those he felt were still faithful to the laws of God; however, many chose to die rather than betray their faith (1 Mach. 1).

Father Zdebskis' trial had the same purpose—to keep the nation under an atmosphere of fear so that no one would dare to demand more freedom.

Persecution arouses fear; however, someone's self-sacrifice, made in God's name while suffering for one's faith, rouses the people into thinking about and fighting for the greatest human values.

* * *

The People's Court of Kaunas *Rayon* consisted of presiding People's Judge V. Gumuliauskas and People's Assessors [Mrs.] Palaišienė and Vasiliauskas. [Miss] Černiauskaitė served as secretary. Procurator A. Miliukas, "Public" Prosecutor S. Ratinskas, and Defense Counselor A. Riauba participated in the trial.

The judge read the minutes of a faculty meeting of the secondary school in Prienai, which had been called to elect the "public" prosecutor. Then after announcing Father Zdebskis' biographical data (born in 1929 in Naujiena Village, Kapsukas *Rayon*) and the charges, the judge began questioning the accused. (Some excerpts are presented):

"Have you ever been convicted by a court?"

"I have been."

"On what charges?"

"For the same thing. Later the Supreme Court reversed my conviction."

"Has your right to perform priestly functions ever been revoked?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"That is something I am unable to tell the honored members of the court because in my mind it is unclear to this day why my rights were revoked."

"What have you to say about the charges against you?"

"I must state that I do not agree with the charge that I organized the teaching of the children. I did not organize it—that would have been just about impossible due to a lack of the time needed for going around to the homes or travelling to the villages. The testing of children who are preparing for their first confession goes on all year long, and whoever wants to may come. But in the summertime, during vacation, when the children have no classes, then it is most convenient for them; that's why a larger group of children formed spontaneously."

"How many children would be in the groups?"

"Sometimes one or more. . ."

"Could there have been as many as one hundred?"

"Yes," he answered joyfully, "at times there may have been as many as one hundred. To my delight there are quite a few conscientious parents who prepare their children very well. These children can be allowed to receive the sacraments as soon as they are questioned. There are also untalented children who cannot be allowed to receive the sacraments for as long as they have not learned the tenets of the faith."

"The interrogator has written down that some children came for instructions for as long as two weeks."

"That could have happened."

"Were the children registered?"

"No. I spoke with whoever came. To avoid confusion, after the examination of their knowledge, they were given a certificate, that is, a permit to receive First Communion. There were some children who could not answer the questions at first. Then I would explain things to them."

"Where did they find out that such instruction of children was taking place in the church?"

"Usually an announcement is made in the church

during the sermon that parents should taken an interest in their children and should teach them religious truths, and that during vacation is the most convenient time to bring the children, after preparing them, to have their knowledge tested.”

“Were you the only one to announce this, or did other priests announce it as well?”

“Whoever preached the sermon, he would also remind them.”

“Were you the only one who taught the children, or did other priests teach them also?”

“Since I was the youngest at the church in Prienai, I had to carry the greater work load, for the pastor has many other duties.”

Father Zdebskis was charged with being the first among the priests to catechize children.

“I was not the initiator of the practice of preparing children to receive the sacraments. That would be conferring too great an honor upon me. Other priests are also fulfilling their obligation to teach, which has been imposed upon us by Christ and the Church. I would be a slanderer if I said that they do not teach. Each one must answer to his own conscience how he fulfills this obligation.”

Afterward, the underage witnesses were questioned. After asking their name and surname, the judge would urge:

“Tell the whole truth to the court. Do you recognize him? Turn around and look!”

Some of them answered, “I recognize him”; others said, “No.” One boy who had looked for a long time at the priest standing there and smiling at him replied: “He’s changed a lot.” When the judge questioned them about what the priest had taught, some said, “Prayers,” and others said, “He didn’t teach. He only asked questions.” Still others answered, “He taught us not to break windows, pick pockets, fight, or steal, but to obey our teachers and parents.” The judge asked at what times the lessons had started and ended, and when intermissions had occurred.

Some children gave the times, others answered that they could not remember. When asked by the judge what they had studied from and where they had received the catechisms, almost everyone answered that his mother or grandmother had one. The more timid children cried or remained silent. Father Zdebskis stood up for each child, but the judge kept reminding him: "Remain seated!"

After this, they began questioning the parents.

Witness R.: "I instructed my child myself and took him to the priest to be tested."

"Did the child want to go, or did you just take him?"

"Our parents took us, and I also took my children."

The defense counselor: "Were you coerced into taking him whether you wanted to or not?"

"No. I took him in good faith."

The parents who were witnesses were questioned a great deal as to how often they had taken their children to see the priest, what the priest had talked about, how many children were in the groups, etc.

Later, representatives of the local authorities of Prienai were questioned.

The witness Kučinskas: "In early July, the executive committee received reports from the inhabitants that a priest of Prienai was teaching religion to children in the church. We went to the church and found about fifty children and several women. Father Zdebskis was expounding to them. When we arrived, he called for an intermission, and we went to the sacristy for a talk. We warned him that he was breaking the law with such actions, but he replied, "I have taught before and will continue to teach. When the laws of God and the Church conflict with those of the state, one must preferably obey God," and he paid no attention to our warnings. One week later I went there once more with the commission, and Father Zdebskis was teaching again. A report was drawn up.

"Was Father Zdebskis tactful?"

"Yes, he was tactful. He even joked at first: 'Perhaps

you've come about your children? If you wish, I am ready to help. . .'"

"And both times you drew up a report?"

"Both times."

The witness M. Naginevičius: "On July 9, 1971, I was included in the commission concerned with the teaching of children in the church. There was a group of children and mothers in the church. Father Zdebskis was expounding to them. We explained to him that the organized teaching of religion to children is a violation of the laws, and he answered that he was aware of this, but that he had been teaching the commandments of God and would continue to teach them. . ."

After a recess, the judge read aloud the documents of the case proving the "guilt" of Father Zdebskis.

From page 3 of the proceedings: "A report by the chairman of the Prienai *Rayon* Executive Committee written to Rugienis, the commissioner of the Council for Religious Affairs, states that on July 8 of this year, the retired priest Zakaryza was found in the parish church of Prienai with a group of fifty children. After being warned, Zakaryza had declared: 'I've been teaching, and I will continue to do so. I am only doing what God has commanded.' On July 9 Father Zdebskis, after being warned, stated the same thing. Father Zdebskis was warned that he was disregarding the laws."

From page 20 of the proceedings (from Father Zdebskis' previous place of employment): "The chairman of the Lazdijai *Rayon* Executive Committee writes that in Kapčiamiestis there has been an increase in religious activities under the influence of Father Zdebskis: they go around carrying crosses and crowns, even though they have no right to do so. They are attracting the Young Pioneers and the Little Octobrists, and are enrolling them into rosary societies. Father Zdebskis has a Java motorcycle and rides around from house to house. He visited one Communist family and said that he could even baptize their child at their own home if they so desired."

All these documents—the complaints, photographs, warnings—made up the fifty-three pages of the proceedings. After they were made public, Father Zdebskis asked to be permitted to present his motives as a concluding statement.

The legal arguments began.

“Public” Prosecutor S. Ratinskas, who heads the dormitory of the secondary school in Prienai, said in his presentation that Father Zdebskis knows the laws forbidding the teaching of religion to underage children, but he ignores these laws, basing his action on the premise that he must obey a higher law. The laws are not to be abused. Zdebskis was undoing what was being taught in the schools.

The students are finding it difficult to assimilate the school’s program; they were having doubts. . . The Church was frightening the people. It has no experience in practical life. . . The religion primer is not pedagogical because it discusses disoluteness. . . The teaching of religion in the church was carried out in an organized manner because there had been an announcement about it during a sermon. . . There is a seminary for studying religion. Up to ten candidates are allowed to enroll there annually, but when that many are not to be found, three to four are accepted, and this entirely satisfies the needs of the believers, for their numbers are continually decreasing. The state is not hampering the believers. . .

The prosecutor concluded his presentation by relating some slanderous gossip about Father Zdebskis.

A summary of the procurator’s presentation follows: Parents and guardians are completely free to teach children about religious matters. Those who interfere with the performance of religious rites are punished. The Declaration on Christian Education of the Second Vatican Council states that, in addition to the parents, the state also has rights regarding children. Father Zdebskis violated the law governing the separation of Church and State. During July and August in 1971, he organized and systematically carried out the instruction of minors—a total of about 200-

300 children—and therefore, punishment must be imposed on him in accordance with the appropriate article of the law.

Afterward, the procurator tried to prove that Father Zdebskis did in fact organize and teach the children. According to the testimony of the witnesses and the words of the accused, Zdebskis, an offense had really been committed and had been fully proven. The instruction of children was also carried out by Father Zakaryza, but because of certain circumstances the Procurator's Office had halted the criminal proceedings against him. In conclusion the procurator asked the court to sentence Zdebskis to the loss of his freedom for one year in a regular-regime prison camp.

Defense Counselor Riauba argued that Father Zdebskis had not organized the instruction of the children. He had only announced publicly that parents should show some concern about their children's knowledge of religion. There had been no coercion. In the addendum to the Criminal Code, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the LSSR has indicated how the article regarding the separation of Church and State is to be applied, stressing the factors of organization and systematic execution. Execution alone is not enough. Besides, some of the children came only once. Is that systematic instruction?

The defense counselor recalled to the court Lenin's injunction against offending the believers, but the procurator had done just that, basing his action on the unfounded rumors about Father Zdebskis. As he concluded his presentation, the counselor asked the court not to apply Article 143 of the Criminal Code to Father Zdebskis but to reserve the right for the executive committee to penalize him with a fine of fifty rubles.

After this, Father Zdebskis made his final statement. His presentation was interrupted several times by the judge, who would not let the priest state his intended ideas; therefore, we are presenting here the written text of the Rev. Juozas Zdebskis' statement:

"Between two laws

"The right to live when one may not be born

I

"On August 25, 1971, I was arrested and criminal proceedings were started against me because this past summer I taught children the tenets of the faith at the church in Prienai. In one of the documents of my case it is recorded 'About seventy children and about fifty parents were found in the church. He is being charged with the violation of Article 143, section 1, of the LSSR Criminal Code, which refers to the separation of Church and State. The charge was announced during his arrest.'

"How do I justify my actions? I must repeat the same motive I stated in the church when a group of atheists who had come into the church asked me whether I knew that the teaching of children was forbidden. The answer must be given in the same words with which the first messengers from Jesus explained to the Supreme Court: "We must obey God rather than men' (Acts 5:29).

1. Thus, the answer to the question of why I taught children the tenets of the faith is essentially provided by Christ's command: 'Go therefore. . . teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you' (Matt 28:19). This command encompasses all people, both adults and children without exception. To teach—not one's own wisdom, not the way of life suggested by some philosopher, but the kind of life Christ demands of us, emphasizing especially His greatest requirement: to consider no man your enemy. Not one of those who have set themselves up as teachers of the art of living, has dared to make such a demand. Not even the Communist party.
2. The Roman Catholic Church has repeated this demand of Christ as a juridical person in three paragraphs of its code of laws (*Codex Juris Canonici*, pars. 129, 130, 131).
3. The command to teach children the tenets of the faith

and the way of life indicated by Christ is being put into practice by the children's parents, who have a natural right to do so. If the parents want their children to study music, they seek a music teacher; if mathematics, then a teacher of mathematics, and similarly.

"Thus we priests find ourselves between two laws.

"It seems that a state could have no other purpose in enacting laws other than the welfare of its citizens, which is impossible without freedom of conscience, without the right of parents to nurture their own children. The constitution of the USSR recognizes the freedom of conscience and the rights of parents regarding their children. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been signed. All this was quite comprehensively presented a year ago in equivalent proceedings against the Rev. A. Šeškevičius. Because the present case also does not concern only one individual—the accused—but concerns the Catholic Church as a juridical person in a certain geographic area, it is therefore perhaps unnecessary to repeat all this again.

"It is worth remembering the latest official explanations regarding this matter. L. Brezhnev, the General-Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU, stressed the following in a report at the Twenty-Fourth Congress: 'Violations of an individual's rights or insults to the dignity of citizens cannot be allowed. For us Communists, adherents of the most humane ideals, this is a matter of principle.' (*Pravda*, editorial, August 29, 1971).

"Rugienis, the commissioner of the Council for Religious Affairs, in an official interview with the editor of an overseas Lithuanian newspaper, *Jokūbka*, emphasized that in Lithuania there is complete freedom of religion and of conscience. No one has the right to even inquire about anyone's religious convictions. That is how *Jokūbka* depicts the religious situation in Lithuania in his book *Tėvų žemė* [Land of our Fathers], which was published earlier this year in Chicago. The same thing is also stated in the booklet *Bažnyčia Lietuvoje* [The Church in Lithu-

ania], which recently appeared in Lithuania in the Italian and the English languages. It would seem that not only the previous year's, but also this year's official explanation of this matter sounds identical—that there is total freedom of religion in Lithuania.

"Freedom, to the Catholic Church as a legal entity, should mean the ability to function. For example, if one is permitted to live, then one is also permitted to breathe, eat, etc. If there is official permission for priests to exist, then, by the same token, they are allowed to *perform their basic functions*, that is, to offer sacrifice, to forgive sins in God's name (to judge), and to teach.

"It follows that I am being tried for the performance of the duties pertinent to my calling.

"A glance at the pages of documents of this case reveals that my characterizations written by atheists from my various former places of employment also accuse me of *having carried out my duties*. It is unfortunate that I did not find there any characterization from the chancery of the Curia. Would it also have accused me of performing my duties?

II

"It is also necessary to indicate to the court the psychological circumstances which doubtless influenced the actions for which I am being tried.

"These circumstances were created by the facts of life brought about when either *the atheists themselves or certain institutions failed to observe the very same law* which refers to freedom of conscience according to which I am being tried today.

"The word 'atheists' is being used here as the most suitable in this matter, because an atheist—whether he is an operative of the security forces or whether he works in administration or in the field of education—acts the same in this regard—as one who wages a fight against God.

"The laws of the USSR solve the problem of freedom of conscience by separating the Church from the state. Unfortunately, due to some atheists, the Church perceives it-

self as being not separated from the *state but on the contrary, as subjugated to the interests of the atheists* and even that, quite often *by means of guile and deceit*.

"For the same reasons, the believers feel they are "outsiders"; *they feel themselves unequal before the law*.

"The facts which are widely known by the public cannot be unknown to the Procurator's Offices. Why do they remain silent?

"Let us bring to mind one or two facts which are relevant to the case at hand.

"First of all, the inequality of believers before the law is illustrated by the fact that the atheists have their own press and schools, but the believers are not permitted this.

"If priests are being punished for preparing children for their first confession, then one is inclined to ask whether even one atheist has been brought to trial for violating the rights of believers on the basis of the supplement to Article 143 of the Criminal Code which was promulgated in 1966? After all, there have been such violations. For example, one year ago a teacher from the secondary school in Vilkaviškis was dismissed from work because she was a believer and therefore had no right to function as an educator or to even work elsewhere. Is this not a violation of the freedom of conscience? And this is not a solitary occurrence in our environment.

"Another aim of the atheists is to have the public, especially the youth, students, and office workers, stop attending mass. They probably sense intuitively that it is easiest to know God face to face; they can feel that everything we call the working of grace, and at the same time the steadfastness of one's faith are inseparably linked with the Mass. In other words, there is freedom of conscience; however, the inner culture of the people, and especially of the youth, is not to be nurtured. There have been a number of instances when teachers either did not allow students who were participating in funeral services to enter a church or made them leave it. Is this not a transgression against the freedom of conscience? These and similar facts which

are widely known by the public cannot be unknown to the Procurator's Offices. Why do they remain silent? Is it a wonder then, that believers do not feel equal before the law?

"It is particularly incomprehensible to believers why the authorities have failed to respond to any of the believers' petitions in which the existing irregularities as far as the believers are concerned were pointed out to the government. It had been announced in the newspapers, after all, that the appropriate agency must respond to petitions within one month's time. The action taken by the believers in connection with this case might serve as a fitting example. This past summer when the children were being taught the tenets of their faith and a group of atheists came into the church and began to furtively photograph the children and to ask their names, then the mothers came to the aid of their children. There was an uproar in the church—it takes so little to affect the psychology of the masses, in order that something similar to the events in Kražiai during the days of czarist oppression might recur. (One would ask whether all this increases the people's respect for the constitution?) After this occurrence, eighty-nine parents wrote a joint complaint to the Control Commission of the Central Committee of the CPSU demanding that 'the tormenting of the believers be stopped.' There was no official reply to the petition, even though a return address had been given.

"In the face of such and similar facts, the question naturally arises whether the community of believers is outside the bounds of the law? Should one be surprised if it occurs to the public that the freedom of conscience granted by the constitution and the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, etc., are only propaganda? Likewise with the 1966 addendum to Article 143 of the Criminal Code concerning the penalties for violating the religious freedom of believers; and also Rugienis' interview by Jokūbka; and the publications *Tėvų žemė* [Land of our Fathers], *Bažnyčia Lietuvoje* [The Church in Lithuania],

and others which concern the freedom of conscience.

"Why do the Procurator's Offices remain silent seeing all this? Do certain *secret laws* exist which contradict the official laws and are unknown to the public?

"Let us look further.

"In a number of instances *the actions of the atheists reek of unmistakable guile and deceit* in regard to the requirements of conscience. Why is none of this being punished? More than once, the atheists' actions in regard to believers were similar to the behavior of the fifteenth-century Duke of Gloucester depicted in the writings of Shakespeare. In attempting to attain the throne of the King of England, he secretly murdered all his competitors, but was capable of appearing in public with a prayer book in his hands.

1. Do not the atheists' guileful efforts to undermine the Church from within violate the freedom of conscience?—this in a country whose constitution guarantees the freedom of conscience—by creating the impression that the bishops are at their posts, that instructions are being issued from the bishop's chancery, even though actually the assignment of priests to their places of ministry and many other instructions are dictated by the atheists in the hope that the situation of the Catholic Church in Lithuania would begin to resemble that of the Russian Orthodox Church.
2. Do not the efforts to compromise certain priests and even bishops in the eyes of the believers and even in the Vatican reek of guile? For instance, is it the wish of believers that the energetic and healthy Bishop V. Sladkevičius be listed as '*sedē datus*' in the Vatican's register of the world's bishops?
3. Is not guile indicated by the fact that although a theological seminary exists only four or five candidates are allowed to be admitted annually, and hence, graduated, when twenty to thirty priests die every year in Lithuania? Equally indicative are the efforts being ex-

pended to keep especially talented and refined students and professors out of the seminary.

4. The same can be said about the teaching of children. Although they are permitted to receive First Communion, what is the significance of the requirement that children be questioned one at a time? (for no such juridically formulated law exists) How can children be prepared one at a time in those parishes where one is faced with several hundred little children in the summertime? The parents rightfully expect help from us priests in this matter. And what is one to do? Should the children be allowed to receive First Communion unprepared? A person cannot love what he does not know. Is it possible that a guileful attempt *to quietly wrest the children from their parents* lurks here? Then the atheists would be able to say that we have freedom of conscience—the people themselves are renouncing the faith.

“But then such freedom of religion is like *being allowed to live when one is not permitted to be born*.

“Honorable Judges, I am inclined to think that you, too, like many people of the younger generation today have come to know God from *Biblijos linksmybės* [Pleasantries from the Bible] and from similar books, rather than the God who died for us on the Cross; thus, even though you have advanced degrees in your field of specialization, it is doubtful if at this moment you could pass the kind of examination on religious matters that the children take before their First Communion.

“Upon recalling this fact alone (since, in the words of Rachmanova, you too are among the people produced by ‘the new people factory’), we must forgive you for holding this trial and pray for God’s forgiveness. On that day, as I have already mentioned, when the disturbance was created in the church, I later asked the children: ‘Children, should we hate these people?’ They answered: ‘No!’ ‘And what is the most important command Jesus gave us?’ ‘To consider no man your enemy,’ they again replied.

"Again recalling those facts, a few of which I have mentioned as examples, which are widely known by the public and which the Procurator's Offices cannot be unaware of, I would like to ask: why is all this tolerated, while I am being tried, having been charged with violating the freedom of conscience? How can a citizen be punished on the basis of laws which, as we see, are not observed in many instances even by certain state institutions? That such charges are being brought against a priest is already a violation against the freedom of conscience, exactly like the efforts to take children away from their parents. Perhaps I could have been accused of violating the freedom of conscience had I taught them without their parents' knowledge.

"Can it be that the state itself is forgetting the requirements of its own constitution by tolerating all this?

"Finally, the very article on whose basis I am being tried appears to *lack distinct contours*. As an example, we can recall an identical case in 1964 in which, also for teaching children, I was sentenced to one year in prison. Then, several months later, the order was given by the authorities to release me and to overturn the conviction. In the statement of acquittal was the following explanation: 'It has been determined that there had been no coercion of the children.' Yet the court had known this when I was being sentenced to imprisonment. Coercion of the children had not even been mentioned in court. During the trial, Article 143 had been explained in the following way: it is forbidden to organize and to teach religious truths in school (not in church). Even though I had not been charged with the above, the court nevertheless proceeded to try me. How is one to understand this? And if I was later acquitted, why am I once again being tried under the same article? This time too, the court is aware that the children were not coerced. This is also attested to by the petition sent by the parents to the USSR government regarding this matter, pointing out that the children were not being instructed in school, that they were being taught in accordance with

the wishes of their parents.

"For when the circumstances are the same, a law cannot be interpreted in one way at one time and differently on another occasion.

"I have also been unable to determine where 'the regulations designated by law' have been promulgated. Neither the interrogator, nor the juridical consultation office of Vilnius have replied to this question.

III

"What can be concluded from all this?

"Looking from a human, shortsighted viewpoint, in similar situations one is always inclined to repeat the words of Jesus: 'Father. . . remove this cup from me'; yet in truth, we priests should *thank you* for this and similar trials. These facts force our consciences to speak out. They don't let us fall asleep, they force us to make up our minds, they place us between two possibilities.

"One possibility is to choose the so-called path of '*peaceful cooperation with the atheists*': to attempt to serve two masters, to toady to the designs of the atheists—that a priest perform his duties but be innocuous to atheism; that he himself would drive away the youth from the church and not allow them to participate in the rites or in processions; that he would not let them serve mass; that when preparing children for First Communion he would be satisfied if they only know their prayers, although they lack understanding of the mystery of the Mass, the center of all Christian life; that the clergy would not stop to consider what the country's situation will be in ten or twenty years! This means that priests should not carry out the duties pertinent to their calling, that they must resolve to struggle with their conscience as they concern themselves merely with the dinner menu. The priest must try to forget that the children will nevertheless be told of God, but of *a God who really does not exist*. (I too do not believe in the God which is portrayed by our local press and radio.)

"You have shown me thousands of youths behind bars. Not one of them knows the God who should be loved and who loves us. No one has spoken to them of such a God; no one has taught them to find happiness in doing good to every human being, even to an enemy. I know very well that if we priests shall not speak about this, the very stones will begin to exclaim, and God will hold us responsible for their fate.

"This is what peaceful cooperation with atheism means in our surroundings, which is something that believers living abroad cannot comprehend.

"The second possibility is to be the kind of priest that Christ had in mind by resolving to carry out the duties Christ and Church Law demand, and at the same time accepting whatever Providence wills one to experience, choosing—as is evident in this case—windows with bars, exactly like the interrogators said: 'You didn't want roast duck, so now you'll eat prison bread.'

"And yet, if we priests are not tried in court here and now, in time our nation will judge us! Eventually the Supreme Being's hour of judgement will come. May God help us priests to fear it more than these trials of yours.

"I again recall those thousands of youths behind bars. In their childhood they did not know how to obey their parents. . . This land along the banks of the Nemunas is dear to me. I know very well that it will no longer exist if its children will be incapable of obeying their parents. I spoke to them about this. I told them that this is something God demands of us.

"If this is a crime according to your conscience, then pronounce me a fanatic and judge me, but in doing so you will also be judging yourselves!

"I ask the court to consider the aforementioned psychological circumstances and not to forget that the decision of this court may force the community of believers into thinking that some paragraphs of the constitution are there simply for propaganda purposes. Can one respect the requirements forcing one to go against one's conscience?

Can there be respect for a law that punishes one for performing one's duty?

"There still remains for me to repeat the words of the first Apostles, which were already spoken to the court: 'We must obey God rather than men.'"

A two-hour recess followed the Rev. J. Zdebskis' statement. Returning after lengthy deliberations, the court handed down the following verdict in the name of the LSSR:

"Zdebskis, Juozas, the son of Vincas, born in 1929, is adjudged to have committed an offense under the provisions of Article 143, section 1 of the Criminal Code of the LSSR, and is sentenced to be deprived of his freedom for one year, which sentence is to be served in a regular-regime corrective labor colony. August 26, 1971, will be considered the onset of the sentence."

On December 9, 1971, the Collegium for Criminal Cases of the Supreme Court of the LSSR ruled that the Rev. J. Zdebskis had been justly found guilty and that his sentence was appropriate for the crime committed and suited his character.

At present (1972) the Rev. J. Zdebskis is serving his sentence in Pravieniškės.

May the self-sacrifice of those suffering for the faith rejuvenate the land of our fathers!

THE TRIAL OF THE REV. PROSPERAS BUBNYS

During the summer of 1971, the bishop was to have come to Raseiniai to administer the Sacrament of Confirmation. The clergy of the *rayon* had been directed by the bishop to test the knowledge of the faith of those about to be confirmed and to issue certificates.

The pastor of the parish in Girkalnis, Father P. Bubnys, informed the believers that the parents should bring their children to the church for the testing. The parents were doing this until one day a group of representatives of the Raseiniai *Rayon* Executive Committee forced its way into the church. Upon finding the children waiting in

church for the priest, the representatives proceeded to round them up and drag them through the town to the fire station; there, by means of intimidation and threats, they forced them to write statements claiming that Father Bubnys had taught them the tenets of their faith. The children were so terrified that they even cried, and some even became ill afterward.

On November 12, 1971, the People's Court met in session in Raseiniai. Only officials and witnesses were permitted to participate in the trial. The believers had to stand outside the doors. No one expected Father Bubnys to be convicted, for the government officials had come upon him as he was questioning but one child while the other children awaited their turn in the church. Only when the court left for deliberation and a police car drove up to the courthouse, did it become clear to everyone—Father Bubnys would indeed be convicted. The court's decision, in the name of the LSSR, was to find Father Bubnys guilty, and it handed down a one-year sentence to be served in a strict-regime prison camp. After the decision was read, Father Bubnys was seized, and as the people wept, he was driven to Lukiškis Prison.

* * *

Before the trial had begun, Father Bubnys wrote his statement of defense, which is presented below:

"Honorable members of the Court,

"I have the important duty as a citizen to state my views concerning an important existential question: am I guilty for teaching religion? The question arises whether the profession of religion (profession not to trees or stones but in the presence of other people) and its propagation thereby is an intrinsically evil and forbidden act? If it is permissible, then do I have the right and the duty to do this?

"The community of the United Nations and our country's constitution have transcended the medieval principle that whoever rules determines the people's religion by recognizing freedom of conscience and freedom of religion.

By acknowledging that religious instruction is an offense, I would be sinning against the concept of man and the spiritual progress which mankind has achieved through agelong efforts. I respect the right of parents to decide for themselves whether their children must be religious or not. They themselves brought their children to have their religious knowledge examined. No one was assigned a certain day for bringing his children. In order to save the working people's time, we accomodated ourselves to the timetable of the sole bus which services Girkalnis. I did not try to deliberately disregard the officials and their demands.

"Besides my obligations to the state, I, as a priest and pastor, have obligations to my religion and to the Church which are binding upon my conscience.

"A priest's essential duty, which Christ himself has conferred, is to preach the Gospel, to teach the nations, and to dispense God's grace by administering the sacraments. Since the Soviet government still has not ordered the seminary in which religious matters are studied and learned to be closed, then it agrees that the knowledge obtained there should be used in the teaching of religion. When he is ordained, every priest becomes obligated to God, and by means of the appointment he is given by the bishop, he receives the command, which is governed by Church regulations, to teach and bless the Nation of God. Therefore, if he is to act conscientiously, he cannot avoid propagating and teaching religion, for as the Apostle St. Paul has said: 'Woe to me, if I do not preach the Gospel!' (1 Cor. 9:16). The parents also have the right to teach religion to their children. If they are supporting a priest at their expense, then does that priest have the right to refuse to serve the parents in these matters? How absurd it would seem to have the right and the means, and yet to forbid use to be made of them? This would be like allowing a man to hold a hammer in his hand but forcing him to drive nails with his fist. Such a requirement is not in accord with the workings of a sound mind, and thus it is not surprising that, to

a majority of the people, it is entirely incomprehensible.

"If every decent person should not be indifferent to matters of truth and morals, then all the more so must a priest not remain silent, for through Christ he has been allowed to know divine truth. For no other name has been given to us under heaven through which we can be saved except the name of Jesus (cf., Acts 4:12). Christ's teaching is the foundation of mankind's culture and goodness. As a rational being is on a higher level than an irrational one, so culture of the spirit is of a higher value than material culture. The laws of men are altered by time and place, and they become contradictory to the previous ones. The laws of Christ are based on the very nature of man and will not cease to exist as long as man exists. The story of Christ did not end with His death upon the cross. He is eternal. This very day testifies to that. He comes as He has promised, without delay, with great power and majesty, as the One to whom all power in heaven and on earth has been given. To Him belong both all the believers and all the atheists, no matter how many of them there are. His winnow is in His hand, and He will separate the chaff from the grain.

"In view of this, my conscience causes me to feel somewhat apprehensive, not about my 'crime' for having taught the tenets of the faith to the children, but about my negligence in carrying out such important duties because, as calculated by my accusers, the total amount of time devoted to examining each child's knowledge of the most essential matters (for First Communion) did not even amount to ten minutes. Thus, can one speak of it as teaching?

"My sole justification is that there was not enough time available before the coming of the bishop to Raseiniai. I can attribute to myself neither merit before God nor guilt before the laws.

"If I must publicly state today whether I did teach religion, then I cannot deny this, nor do I regret it, because that would indicate a distorted conscience and the

disregard of what is due the Creator in favor of the laws of men. If the laws of men are not in harmony with the Creator's Natural Law, then it is not nature which errs, but man's understanding; and because of this, human beings are suffering and will continue to suffer until they perceive where they erred in deviating from the Creator's plan.

"At this solemn hour which has been allotted to me, a speck of dust, I cannot renounce Jesus, who loves us and who urges that the little ones would not be kept from coming to Him. I want to say: '*Praised be Jesus Christ!*'"

* * *

A month after his conviction, on December 9, 1971, the Supreme Court upheld the decision of the People's Court of Raseiniai.

The believers of Girkalnis and of the neighboring parishes, who were greatly distressed because of the injustice inflicted upon their priest and disillusioned with the local authorities, sent a petition to the President of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR and to the Procurator General of the USSR:

A Petition

"On November 12, 1971, in Raseiniai (the LSSR), the Rev. Prosperas Bubnys, who resides in the parish of Girkalnis, Raseiniai *Rayon*, was sentenced to one year in prison. On December 9, the Supreme Court of the LSSR upheld that decision.

"The priest's 'guilt' consisted in the conscientious carrying out of his duties by helping parents prepare their children for First Communion and confirmation.

"We do not want to believe that this was not a mistake. After all, our constitution guarantees freedom of religion and of conscience, and Lenin has decreed the following concerning the separation of the Church from the state: 'Citizens have the right to study religion on their own initiative.' Our pastor taught on his own initiative; he did not go into a school to teach the children. Just the opposite occurred: representatives of the Raseiniai *Rayon*

Executive Committee, together with several teachers that they had invited, practically broke into the church, and, finding the children waiting for the pastor (to test their knowledge of the faith), created a disturbance. The representatives rounded up the frightened children and dragged them through the village to the fire station; there they were closeted and forced through intimidation to write statements accusing the pastor. (Some of the children even became ill from the terrorization.) The intimidated, frightened, and crying children wrote the statements without making any distinction between the words 'to teach' and 'to examine.' This was taken advantage of by the enemies of the freedom of conscience in order that they could accuse the priest of the systematic instruction of children. Then again, if the priest did teach the children not to steal and not to be naughty but to respect their parents and to love their neighbor—is that a crime? From our experience of life we can clearly see that children nurtured in the Faith grow up to be better people, people without bad habits. We naturally want to raise our children to be like that, but we have no textbooks from which we could teach the tenets of the faith to our children. (For during the years of socialism in Lithuania, neither catechisms nor other religious textbooks have ever been published.) We are left with only one solution: to ask the pastor to help us. Unfortunately, for this religious ministrations, our pastor has been sentenced to prison.

"The self-will of the atheists and of the authorities greatly insults and demeans us believers, because the existing inequality between believers and nonbelievers is being forcibly manifested. Only atheists have been granted the possibility of raising their children without constraint, that is, atheistically; but the believers have had all their rights and all the possibilities of raising their children according to their convictions taken away. Furthermore the atheists have been given the right to concern themselves with our children's upbringing more than the parents themselves. They attempt to force somebody else's children to become

atheists, they chase them out of churches, they try to frighten them, they do not let them receive First Communion. As for the priest, who 'on his own initiative' taught the children, when asked by the parents, on matters of faith and morals—they are punishing him with imprisonment.

"We ask you not to permit such arbitrariness by which the rights of us parents over our children are being violated. We ask for freedom of conscience and for equal rights, as Lenin has promised and as the Soviet Constitution proclaims.

"We ask that catechisms be published, so that we would have the means for instructing our children.

"We ask that priests be permitted to teach children the tenets of the faith in church—in keeping with Lenin's decree.

"We also ask your help so that the Rev. P. Bubnys would be released from prison.

"P.S. A total of 1,344 believers from Raseiniai *Rayon* have signed this petition, 570 of whom are from the parish in Girkalnis. Forty-three pages of signatures are being attached to this petition.

"We await a reply at this address:

The LSSR, Raseiniai *Rayon*
Girkalnis,
[Miss] Lukinskaitė, Blasė,
[Miss] Kazimierskytė, Anelė

December 11, 1971"

Although the people of Girkalnis requested that their rights be upheld and that Father Bubnys be released from prison, the voice of the people remained unheard by the Soviet government.

Meanwhile, Father Bubnys is serving his sentence at the Kapsukas strict-regime prison camp, and he does not complain about his lot. On the occasion of Christmas he wrote: "When I was faced with the prospect of imprisonment, I found myself partly longing for it and rejoicing at this opportunity to detach myself from the world, to

sink into oblivion, and to consciously take upon myself the spirit of penance and self-sacrifice. . .”

THE PERSECUTION OF THE PASTOR OF THE PARISH IN VALKININKAI

On September 28, 1970, the Administrative Penalties Commission of Varėna *Rayon* fined the pastor of the parish in Valkininkai, Father Algimantas Keina, fifty rubles for violating “the laws concerning religious cults.” Father Keina brought an accusation against the Penalties Commission before the People’s Court of Varėna, requesting that the unjust fine be nullified.

On November 3, 1970, the People’s Court of Varėna *Rayon* deliberated on the case of the Rev. A. Keina. The chairman of the court was People’s Judge J. Burokas, the defendant—the vice-chairman of the Soviet of Working People’s Deputies Executive Committee, J. Visockis.

The court rejected the claim for the following reasons:

1. “On July 4, 1970, three children were being prepared for their First Communion at the sacristy of the church in Valkininkai; they were being taught collectively by Citizen [Miss] E. Kuraitytė.”

2. “On August 30, 1970, the Rev. A. Keina publicly announced that mass would be said for the students’ intention.”

3. “On September 6, 1970, the Rev. A. Keina allowed two underage boys to serve mass.”

The other reasons were less important.

Father Keina then appealed to the chairman of the Supreme Court of the LSSR explaining why he considered the decision of the People’s Court of Varėna *Rayon* to be unjust:

1. “Citizen E. Kuraitytė was not teaching the children because she is only employed as the church’s cleaning lady. When the parents failed to find the priest within the church, they enquired of her what questions the priest

usually asks the children, and she had indicated the appropriate questions in the catechism. Is the pastor to blame for this?"

2. "In August, during high mass (on Sunday), at the request of the parents, a mass was said for their children's intention, so that they would be good, diligent, and exemplary. Since when have fines been imposed for praying in church for a worthy cause? To pray for parents and children is a priest's obligation."

3. "There is no law which would forbid minors to serve mass. The boys came voluntarily with their parents' permission. The pastor does not have the right to drive away either the parents or the children when they come to church to pray. Everyone prays wherever he wants to: near the door or at the altar."

The deputy chairman of the Supreme Court of the LSSR, Čapskis, responded: "From the additional information presented, one must conclude that the commission had the right to penalize you for violating the law concerning religious cults."

On November 5, 1971, Father Keina appealed to the Procurator's Office of the USSR, which replied that the pastor had been justly punished. The Procurator's Office ignored the fact that, in its desire to punish the pastor, the Varëna Rayon Administrative Penalties Commission had even *falsified the date*: actually, the bill regarding the "instruction" of the three children had been drafted in 1968, but the commission had dated it as 1970 because they knew that a fine cannot be imposed later than one month after the offense is committed.

* * *

On October 4, 1971, the very same commission of the Varëna Rayon Executive Committee once again fined the pastor of the parish in Valkininkai fifty rubles because he allowed minors to serve mass. During the meeting of the commission, Father Keina *was not even permitted to explain himself*.

The pastor again appealed to the People's Court, seeking the nullification of the fine. The first court session was held on November 15, 1971, in Varėna. Father Keina explained that he had not organized the children, nor had he taught them how to serve mass. The children would come voluntarily and with their parents' permission. The pastor pointed out that the decree issued on May 12, 1966, by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the LSSR does not forbid minors to serve mass, and that his penalization had been based on this very decree. According to Article 85 of the LSSR Constitution and Article 8 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, the court must heed only the laws and not some sort of instructions.

Because there was no proof in writing that the pastor had organized the children to serve mass, the court session was postponed.

The second session occurred on December 7, 1971. The court was presented with two affidavits testifying that Father Keina had organized children to assist at the altar.

The pastor showed that the *affidavit of the boy Vytas Kazlauskas was not genuine because it had been written in the handwriting of J. Visockis, and the signature had been obtained by threatening the child that his conduct grade would otherwise be lowered.* The boy himself, in tears, testified to the court that they had intimidated him, and that therefore he had signed the statement written by J. Visockis.

The other affidavit was a complaint against the pastor by the principal and two teachers from the secondary school in Valkininkai, stating that he spends time with the children and thus interferes with their atheistic nurturing. Father Keina explained that *the complaint was falsified, for one of the teachers referred to had not signed the complaint, and his signature had been forged.* The pastor also noted that the instructions on whose basis he had been penalized were not legally binding because they have not been made public anywhere, and their cover actually bears the inscription "Not for distribution to the press."

The statement of the procurator who spoke at the trial was more like an atheistic lecture with a nuance of menace. "What will happen if the parents themselves begin to teach their children?" he asked angrily, thereby stressing the parents' lack of rights in the nurturing of their children.

The court confirmed that the pastor had been justly fined. *The sole "proof" was the testimony of a coerced child which he had tearfully retracted in court.*

The courtroom was full of believers. During the trial people were crying, being unable to remain indifferent witnesses to such guile and deceit. When they heard the verdict of the court, they were all so indignant that the officials even called the police as a precautionary measure.

Because even after the second decision of the court the pastor failed to banish the children from the altar, a note was sent from the *rayon* office to the chairman of the executive committee of the parish in Valkininkai threatening with the possible closure of the church in Valkininkai if Father Keina continued to violate the laws concerning religious cults.

Neither threats, nor trials, nor any other kind of persecution can break the spirit of those who are determined to obey God rather than men.

THE PERSECUTION OF FATHER ŠEŠKEVIČIUS

For teaching religion to children, Father A. Šeškevičius was sentenced on September 9, 1970, by the People's Court of Molėtai *Rayon* to one year in a strict-regime prison camp. Having completed his sentence on September 9, 1971, he appealed to the ecclesiastical administrator of the Diocese of Kaišiadorys requesting that he be appointed to a parish. The commissioner of the Council for Religious Affairs refused to issue him a registration certificate and ordered him to find work in some other occupation, supposedly because he had failed to obey the Soviet laws. Then

Father Šeškevičius appealed to the chairman of the Council of Ministers of the LSSR:

"If I have supposedly violated Soviet laws, then I have served my sentence and have even received a good characterization. In addition, when I was released my rights were not curtailed, thus why am I being punished once again and even lifelong without any trial? Even the worst tyrants, when punishing people, specify the article of the violated law, the duration of the sentence, and the agency for appeals. I alone am denied this knowledge. Is there any state in this world which would permit such treatment of its subjects? How can this be reconciled with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which has been signed by the Soviet Union?

"By preventing me from carrying out my priestly duties, you are forcing me into transgression, for I have not ceased being a priest and I shall have to perform at least some of my priestly functions; but the state will consider this to be illegal work, and prison will again await me."

Father Šeškevičius did not receive a reply to his appeal. He then appealed to the Procurator's Office of the LSSR, but from this agency too no answer was forthcoming. Having almost lost hope, Father Šeškevičius appealed to the Procurator General of the USSR and to Academician Sakharov's Human Rights Committee. Twice he personally met with the Council for Religious Affairs and spoke with its dignitaries. Eventually he was promised a position in the Diocese of Telšiai.

In this way, even after having completed his undeserved sentence, Father Šeškevičius was a victim of discrimination for another half year. The Soviet authorities were trying to crush the spirit of the priest and thus to intimidate the others so that in their fear they would obey the authorities rather than God.

To the joy of Lithuania's believers, there are still many spiritual leaders who are faithful to their calling, who are determined to make any necessary sacrifice for the

good of men's souls and the propagation of the Kingdom of Christ.

EVENTS IN MARGININKAI

On December 3, 1971, the pastor of the parish in Margininkai, the Rev. Petras Orlickas, was penalized for violating Article 143 of the LSSR Criminal Code—*he played volleyball with a group of children!*

The decision of the administrative commission of Kaunas *Rayon* stated that Father Orlickas had worked with children (he had participated in sports, played volleyball), showed cartoons, and so forth.

For a long time it was as if the atheists and Party workers never saw the children playing rowdily and cursing near the collective farm office. The pastor noticed this and set up a volleyball court. Even the most mischievous youngsters did not swear here.

What caused the administration of the Kaunas *Rayon*, the Party workers, and certain teachers to become uneasy? At the funeral services of a student it was noticed that many students were in the church. The teachers even attempted to take them by the hand and lead them out of the church. In addition, it was known that several boys used to serve mass. The principal did not succeed, though she tried her utmost, in dissuading these children. Then, as usually happens, the officials of the *rayon* authorities came to the aid of the Soviet school. Either official security policemen or covert security operatives—we are not certain which—photographed the children at the altar so that they would not think of denying their "misdeed." Government officials came to the school and started an interrogation. The students were grilled for a long time. Some mothers who had waited in vain for their children to return home from school came looking for them. Disgusted by such terrorization of their children they took them home.

The pastor was warned by the government representatives not to associate with the children, but he knew very

well Christ's command: "Suffer the little children to come unto me," and for them he was determined to sacrifice whatever was necessary.

On December 3, 1971, Father P. Orlickas was summoned to a session of the Administrative Penalties Commission of Kaunas *Rayon*. Here he was accused of causing harm to Soviet youth, and a fine of fifty rubles was imposed. To the pastor's explanation that even his doctors had advised him to participate in sports, S. Jančiauskas, chairman of the commission, retorted: "You can play with the housekeeper." Throughout the entire session the chairman was tactless and coarse.

As was to be expected, Father Orlickas was immediately transferred from the parish in Margininkai. This was done on the initiative of the commissioner of the Council for Religious Affairs—an active priest is removed from his parish so that the atheists could all the more readily undermine the faith of the students.

Through fines, interrogations, even prison, the atheistic government seeks to win over the youth of Lithuania. No doubt these are extreme measures, but they are not rare. Their purpose is to intimidate the clergy, so that they would abandon their duties, and to frighten the children away from the church. Sometimes they succeed.

Lately, the opposite phenomenon is being noted—the persecutions are steeling not only the priests but also the parents and the students. More and more priests are appearing who willingly risk even their freedom rather than make compromises with their conscience; more and more parents are beginning to understand that their children must be defended from coercers of every sort who attempt to forcibly wrest the faith from the believers and who put their careers before humaneness and the rights of parents. More and more students are daring to proclaim their convictions publicly in the classroom or to criticize the atheists' contentions.

Religious persecution is undermining the government's authority more and more, for it is becoming clear to everyone that it is being conducted not on the initiative of individual atheists but through pressure from the Party and the Soviet authorities.

Hasn't the time come to put an end to the discrimination of the believers in order to narrow at least partly the abyss between the Communist party and the believing public?

A PETITION FROM 134 RESIDENTS OF PANEVĖŽYS

As 1971 was ending, the clergy of the Diocese of Panevėžys appealed to A. Kosygin, the chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers, and to the LSSR Council of Ministers. Their petition stated that, since 1961, the Diocese of Panevėžys has been deprived of its bishop, who, by order of the LSSR government, was exiled to Žagarė, which is in Joniškis *Rayon*. The priests asked that Bishop Julijonas Steponavičius be permitted to perform his duties in the Diocese of Panevėžys, for the LSSR Constitution and the laws do not provide for such curtailment of the rights of those citizens who have not been convicted in court. Also noted in the petition was that the absence of a bishop from his diocese is a great irregularity because in the absence of a bishop Church law permits an ecclesiastical administrator to oversee a diocese for only a short period of time.

The Soviet government did not reply to the petition. The commissioner of the Council for Religious Affairs upbraided some of the priests reminding them that it is senseless to write such petitions because they will be ignored.

The Soviet government considers H.E. Bishop Steponavičius disloyal to the government because he had carried out his duties as the shepherd of the diocese without making any compromises.

A PETITION FROM THE CLERGY OF THE
VILNIUS ARCHDIOCESE

"To: The General-Secretary of the Central Committee
of the CPSU
The Chairman of the USSR Council
of Ministers

"Copies to:

The Chairman of the LSSR Council of Ministers
The LSSR Commissioner of the Council
for Religious Affairs

A Petition from the Clergy of the Vilnius Archdiocese

"Believers constitute the greater part of the inhabitants of our Republic. They would participate much more actively in the social and political life of our country if conditions were more favorable to them. The Constitution, the Criminal Code, and various international agreements theoretically guarantee that the rights of the believers are equal to those of other citizens. Radio broadcasts to foreign countries, the press, and Lenin's postrevolutionary decrees also speak of this; but in reality very often it is otherwise.

"The number of priests in Lithuania is constantly decreasing. This is occurring not through some fault of the believers but because of the administrative obstacles created by the government. The field of action of the sole seminary in Lithuania, the theological seminary in Kaunas, is extremely restricted. The authorities strictly limit the number of those who study there; thus many who wish to enter are not accepted. Those who wish to study there are interrogated by various officials and terrorized at their place of employment. Conditions being thus, some candidates are studying theology and becoming priests outside the bounds of the seminary; however, the commissioner of the Council for Religious Affairs, which is attached to the USSR Council of Ministers, does not permit such priests to carry out their duties (this happened to the Rev. Vytautas Merkys and the Rev. Petras Našlėnas).

"Is this normal? Yet J. Rimaitis asserts in *Religion in Lithuania* (Vilnius: Gintaras, 1971), an informational booklet intended for foreign readers, that 'the government does not hamper the training of new priests' (p. 21).

"The Soviet government proclaims to the whole world that 'the Church is free to make use of all the means of religious propaganda' (ibid., p. 30). But in reality this is not so. The believers in Lithuania do not have their own press. They cannot make use of the services of radio and television. They do not even have the simplest textbooks on religious truths. 'Every citizen can purchase prayer books, the Bible, and other religious literature,' writes J. Rimaitis further (p. 24). But in fact, the Bible has never been published, just as the religious books needed by the average believer have not been published; the prayer books which were published in very small editions long ago have been unavailable for a long time now, yet we need more than half a million of them.

"The Soviet press claims that the canonical activity of the Church here is unrestricted, and yet Bishop Julijonas Steponavičius and Bishop Vincentas Sladkevičius have not been allowed to perform the duties pertinent to their position for more than ten years now. Priests who have served their sentences (even those whose convictions have been overturned) must sometimes wait a number of years before the commissioner of the Council for Religious Affairs deigns to permit them to carry out their priestly functions.

"Lenin's decree issued on January 23, 1918, allows children to be instructed privately in religious matters. In the press, the priests and the parents are given to understand that Lenin's decree is in force even now, yet more than one priest and layman (Father A. Šeškevičius, Father Juozas Zdebskis, Father Prosperas Bubnys, [Miss] Ona Paškevičiūtė) have been sentenced to forced labor solely for the performance of canonical duties—the preparation of children for their First Communion inside a church.

"According to the international agreement signed by the USSR on November 15, 1961, parents must be guar-

anted the feasibility of raising their children religiously and morally in accordance with their convictions; nevertheless, government organs in our country sometimes forbid children (boys as well as girls) to take even passive part in the services, even though their parents demand or desire this. In our country's schools, the children are sometimes forced to fill out various questionnaires which are contradictory to the freedom of conscience or to publicly declare their religious convictions; the activities of the Catholic Church are being explained to them in a distorted way; antichurch literature is being foisted upon them; they are being mocked and even punished for attending church; through moral compulsion they are enrolled in antireligious groups.

"Adult believers often suffer for their religious convictions, too; they are not permitted to hold responsible positions. Those who are suspected of being believers are threatened with dismissal and are even dismissed from work under cover of various other reasons. For example, [Mrs.] O. Brilienė, a teacher at the secondary school in Vilkaviškis, was not allowed to work even as a cleaning lady in that city even after the Supreme Court of the LSSR handed down the verdict that she must be reinstated (because she had been dismissed from work solely for church attendance). In general, the practices of the People's Courts in deciding the cases of believers are often shocking: the courts (and similar agencies) often base their decision on some sort of secret instructions (which are unknown even to Soviet jurists), for whose nonobservance they hand down sentences (for example, the cases of Father Šeškevičius in Molėtai, of Father Zdebskis in Kaunas, of Father Keina in Varėna). In Soviet courts children are being questioned, are being forced to act as witnesses even against their will and that of their parents; and sometimes they are even being forced to commit perjury (viz., at the People's Court of Varėna on December 7, 1971, in the case of Father Keina).

"We therefore ask you:

1. To permit the theological seminary in Kaunas to function freely and to accept all candidates which are suitable to the Church.
2. To put into practice the freedom of a religious press guaranteed by the USSR Constitution, i.e., to permit the publishing of prayer books, catechisms, hymnals, the Bible, and other religious books, which the people lack and which they demand.
3. To permit bishops Julijonas Steponavičius and Vincentas Sladkevičius to perform their duties as bishops and to permit all priests living in our country (among them also the Ukrainians) to freely and openly perform their priestly functions.
4. To repeal the explanatory text of Article 143 of the LSSR Criminal Code—"The organization of religious instruction activities for minors in violation of regulations established by law"—which is not in accord with the international agreement of November 15, 1961, or with the constitution of the Soviet Union, and which is being abused by our country's People's Courts.
5. To abolish all of the secret instructions which are unknown to us and which concern our religious life.
6. To review the cases of individuals convicted because of their faith and to acquit them.

"We request that the matters set forth in this petition be decided in Moscow because previous petitions from the believers, which were forwarded from Moscow to Vilnius, were not examined objectively but only brought new unpleasantness for the believers.

"These complaints of ours are based on numerous grievances, more of which could be presented if necessary.

December 24, 1971

[Signatures]: Rev. R. Blažys, Rev. B. Budreckis, Rev. A. Merkys, Rev. D. Valiukonis, Rev. Č. Taraškevičius, Rev. A. Ulickas, Rev. J. Kardelis, Rev. J. Jakutis, Rev. J. Gri-gaitis, Rev. K. Žemėnas, Rev. A. Čiūras, Rev. K. Garuckas, Rev. V. Miškinis, Rev. A. Petronis, Rev. A. Simonaitis,

Rev. B. Laurinavičius, Rev. M. Žemaitis, Rev. J. Kukta, Rev. K. Vaičionis, Rev. J. Baltušis, Rev. B. Jaura, Rev. K. Pukėnas, Rev. J. Vaitonis, Rev. A. Dzekan, Rev. D. Akstinas, Rev. L. Ivančyk, Rev. I. Karukievič, Rev. P. Jankus, Rev. A. Lakovič, Rev. K. Molis, Rev. P. Valičko, Rev. S. Valiukėnas, Rev. V. Merkys, Rev. P. Daunoras, Rev. V. Černiauskas, Rev. A. Tamulaitis, Rev. V. Zavadzkiš, Rev. A. Keina, Rev. A. Jašmantas, Rev. N. Jaura, Rev. J. Budrevičius, Rev. S. Tunaitis, Rev. M. Petravičius, Rev. N. Pakalka, Rev. K. Vasiliauskas, Rev. J. Lauriūnas, Rev. A. Andriuškevičius.

"Please send your reply to the following addresses:

1. The Rev. B. Laurinavičius, Adučiškis Post Office, Švenčionys *Rayon*, the LSSR
2. The Rev. K. Pukėnas, Nemenčinė Post Office, Vilnius *Rayon*, the LSSR
3. The Rev. R. Blažys, Tilžė Post Office, Zarasai *Rayon*, the LSSR"

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The commissioner of the Council for Religious Affairs regards the priests' efforts to attain greater freedom of conscience and religion as impudence.

THE TRIAL OF KLEOPA BIČIUŠAITĖ

On January 13, 1972, in Naujoji Akmenė, the People's Court heard the case of a seventy-year-old resident of Žagarė, [Miss] Kleopa Bičiušaitė. She had violated the Soviet laws by preparing children for First Communion. To confirm her guilt, twenty-seven witnesses were summoned, mostly children between the ages of seven and fourteen. When Bičiušaitė herself admitted that, over a period of six days in July, 1971, she had taught prayers to children, these witnesses were no longer necessary—they only interfered with the smooth functioning of the trial because of their contradictory testimony. Seeing that some of the children were denying what others had affirmed, the judge

began examining the children's political awareness— how many of them were members of the Young Pioneers. Only four stated that they belonged to the Pioneers.

In his statement the procurator recalled that the constitution permits all citizens to freely profess whatever religion they choose, or to be atheists. No one restricts this freedom or uses any coercion. But the Soviet form of government strives against religion and hoodwinkery because it cannot tolerate the use of religion to hoodwink its citizens. According to the constitution, the Church is separate from the state and the school from the Church. The accused, Bičiūšaitė, however, had taught children in an organized manner such prayers as the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Apostles' Creed, the Angelus, and the Ten Commandments. This the Soviet system cannot allow. It cannot allow anyone to teach children differently from the way they are taught in school.

The procurator accused the school's teachers of negligence, claiming that because of it, many children have not been enrolled into the Pioneers. He criticized and censured the Party element for their lack of political awareness, because their children also had gone to learn the tenets of the faith.

In concluding his presentation, the procurator recommended that Bičiūšaitė be sentenced to one year in prison.

In her concluding statement Kleopa Bičiūšaitė explained that she had taught the children at their parents' request, and that it is permissible for those parents who cannot teach their children themselves to request help from another person. She had provided such assistance to the parents. And besides, she had taught the children only what was good: that they should not steal or lie but should obey their parents, etc.

The verdict of the court was that Bičiūšaitė be deprived of her freedom for one year.

After the announcement of the verdict, the police immediately arrested the elderly lady and drove her to their headquarters so that she would no longer be able to teach

the children of the people what the people wanted them to be taught.

THE REV. P. LYGNUGARIS IS PENALIZED

On December 9, 1971, the Rev. Petras Lygnugaris from the parish in Akmenė visited a seriously ill patient at the hospital in Akmenė. Noticing this, the chief physician halted the administering of the last sacraments, and after berating the priest, made him leave the hospital. On December 28 Father Lygnugaris was summoned by the Akmenė *Rayon* Executive Committee and fined fifty rubles for visiting the patient in the hospital.