

# MISSIONS IN EASTERN EUROPE

*by Stanisław Wypych, C.M.*

The first purpose of this article is to describe the pastoral effort of the ConfReres working in three countries which have recently gained independence as a consequence of the collapse of the former Soviet Empire. These are Belorussia, The Ukraine and Lithuania. The selection has been determined by a desire to concentrate on countries in which the congregation originally began its labours in the 17th or 18th century. In the concluding section consideration will also be given to the enormous scope for pastoral opportunity currently developing in Russia.

## I BELORUSSIA

### 1. An historical background:

Five confreres from the Polish province are currently working in Belorussia, however it is good to remember that the community's presence remained uninterrupted even during the Second World War. Fr. Michael WORONIECKI and his brother Ludovico who died only a few years ago remained all this time working in Belorussia.

Father Michael Woroniecki was born in Wilejka Mala near Vilnius in 1908. He entered the congregation in 1927 and was ordained in 1935. He ministered briefly for two years in central Poland before returning East. He first worked in Lwow(Lvov) in the Ukraine from 1937 to 1945. After the War he moved to Lyskow in Belorussia until 1949 when he was arrested and sentenced to prison for 25 years. His sentence included several years forced labour in a frozen metal ore mine in Siberia. Upon his release he returned to the faithful of Belorussia ministering in Rozana until 1990 in which year he was appointed spiritual director of the seminary at Grodno.

Belorussia which became independent in August 1991, is 207,600 square kilometers with a population of 10.2 million inhabitants, with significant numbers, from a variety of ethnic groups including a large number of Russians, 430,000 Poles, 245,000 Ukrainians and 143,000 Jews. By far the largest part of the population is either Russian Orthodox or non-believers. According to the civil statistics there are 2,000,000 Catholics, however the Church's own estimate is 1,200,000 living in three dioceses, Minsk Pinsk and Grodno.

### 2. The seminary at Grodno

St. Vincent was convinced that the renewal and future of the Church depended largely on the formation of the clergy. For the same reason Bishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, Archbishop and Administrator of Moscow in 1990 opened a seminary at Grodno. The civil authorities would only approve as members of the

seminary staff, priests who had previously worked in Belorussia. The Bishop therefore appointed Father Michael Woroniecki as spiritual director. This confrere not withstanding his considerable age was in good health and had the ability of relating well with the young. Apart from fulfilling his role as spiritual director he also taught Spiritual Theology, Salvation History, and Greek. He was in addition head of the Diocesan tribunal.

Two years later Bishop Aleksander Kaszkiewicz requested the services of a second confrere to teach Fundamental and Dogmatic theology and Fr. Taddeusz Wyszynski was appointed. While Father Taddeusz was young his family had spent six years in Siberia, during this sojourn he learnt Russian which was most useful for his teaching. He also knows German, French and Italian. His linguistic talents have been of significant service to Bishop A. Kaszkiewicz either for translating letters, or acting as an interpreter for visitors from the West and to the Apostolic Nunciature. Fr. Taddeusz not only teaches theology but also sacred music.

The Grodno seminary has over 100 students mostly from Belorussia. Bishop Alexander is truly appreciative of the contribution to the seminary of the two Vincentians. It is likely that he will ask the Community for a second spiritual director and possibly another lecturer. Divine providence seems to be giving us strong and positive signs for the future of the congregation at Grodno.

### **3. Two missionary regions:**

After independence the Belorussian regime granted permission for 50 foreign priests to enter the country. Among these were two confreres who are now working in the diocese of Pinsk where they are officially recognised as parish priests (pastors). The Polish province has thus acquired a pastoral opportunity in two adjacent regions.

The first of these is comprised of the parishes of Prozana, Kosow and Podorosk. In this region two churches managed to remain open (one served by Fr. M Woroniecki mentioned above) another church has been built at Podorsk since independence. Not far from Prozana are the remains of the church at Lyskow so dear to the confreres of our Province. From 1990-94 Fr. Jerzy Tumas was the pastor for this area he has recently been succeeded by Father Janusz Pulit assisted by a younger confrere Dariuz Blaszczyk. Their primary work is evangelisation of three differing groups. The older generation have preserved the treasure of the faith in their hearts, for them the confreres seek to reawaken or deepen this faith. The hearts of both children and young people is proving a fertile soil for the seed of the Gospel. However it has not proved easy to awaken interest in the Gospel in the hearts and minds of the middle aged section of the population who grew up in and remain deeply affected by atheistic and Marxist ideology.

About 45 kilometers from Rozana is Pruzana, with Szereszow a further 18 kilometers away. These two parishes comprise the second area entrusted to the pastoral care of the confreres. A brief comment on the historical background to these two parishes will be useful.

Szereszow has about 3,000 inhabitants, two thirds of whom are orthodox the remainder being catholic. The Parish Church was built in the 16th century. In 1948 the then Pastor was arrested and the Church closed as a place of worship. The Civil Authorities used it as a warehouse for salt, oil and alcohol. The interior was completely destroyed and the sacred vestments and vessels removed. However from 1948 until 1988 every Sunday and Holy Day the faithful gathered at 9.00 in the morning to pray before the closed doors. Their prayer was heard. In July 1988 the Civil Authorities relented and returned the keys and Fr. M. Woroniecki was able to celebrate Mass in the Church. In 1990 Fr. Tadeusz Wojtonis was appointed to serve this Church and was officially recognised as its Pastor. For health reasons he was replaced by Fr. Edward Lojek in August 1991 who is currently the Parish Priest. The Church has now been restored. The Civil Authorities have also returned possession of an extremely dilapidated parish house in which Fr. Edward now lives.

Pruzana is a larger town of about 25,000 inhabitants the majority of whom are either orthodox or non-believers. There is no accurate data at this time on the precise number of Catholics but at the first Mass celebrated since the return, about 300 faithful took part. The Parish Church of Pruzana dates back to the 16th century it was here that Kazimierz Swiatek ministered (he was in fact a Cardinal). It was here too that he was arrested and deported to Siberia where he served in the labour camps for 10 years. In 1948 the Church was designated a cultural centre and adapted to its new purpose. A stage was built in the Sanctuary, pillars were removed, the building was divided into two floors. The original flooring and the facade were totally destroyed and the sacred vestments and vessels removed. The change was so total only the external walls of the original Church remain.

In December 1991 the authorities gave permission for a Mass to be celebrated on Sunday mornings in what had become by then the ballroom. From that date until February 1993 a Confrere would celebrate Mass in the hall in the morning while in the afternoon it was used by the young people for their dances. In February 1993 the building was officially returned to the Catholic community. Now it needs complete restoration. The local community of faithful is however small and in disarray and for the most part the people are very poor. This poses an obvious problem for any projected restoration of the Church! The Civil Authorities have also granted a plot of land for the building of a parish house (the original parish house is still occupied by the family to whom it was granted). This new house could become a community house for the Confreres who work in both of these areas. In 1993 Archbishop K. Swiatek gave his permission for the opening of a house of the Congregation at Pruzana and allocating the parishes of Rozana, Kosow Szereszow and Pruzana to the care of the confreres.

At this point it must be noted that to date the Belorussian authorities have not granted recognition to either Institutes of the Consecrated Life or Societies of the Apostolic life (with the single exception of the Nazareth Sisters who are registered as a quasi parochial and religious society). The Confreres are recognised by the Civil Authorities only as Pastors of their respected parishes but the Congregation does not enjoy any juridical status as such. It is also worth noting that the Belorussian authorities more familiar with the life and customs of the Orthodox

church see no need for two or three priests in the same place. The only model with which they are familiar is of one orthodox priest who together with his family serves a single parish community.

#### **4. Comments**

1. The most urgent need is not the restoration of church buildings but the renewal of religious and spiritual life in the hearts of the faithful destroyed by years of communist indoctrination. As already mentioned the elderly tend to have preserved their faith; children and the youth are ripe for evangelisation; the middle aged remain deeply under the influence of a communist ideology and are proving very difficult to approach or evangelise.

2. Because the greater part of Catholics in this Country are of Polish origin and background, Catholicism is inevitably associated with the Polish language. The orthodox church on the other hand is associated with Russian. Language therefore poses a pastoral problem. The older people have great difficulty in accepting Belorussian as the language of the liturgy, on the other hand the younger generations don't know Polish. The introduction and use of Belorussian in the liturgy is necessary both for young and for the proper inculturation of the universal Church, a process which is going to require a change of attitude on the part of the older generation and this certainly will not happen overnight.

3. The arrival of more than 50 Polish priests is seen by some, especially the Civil Authorities, as attempted Polonisation of the Church in Belorussia. The allegation, for the most part unfounded, is often made. In response, Cardinal Swiatek has frequently expressed a wish for priests of other nationalities to come and thus defuse the arguments of those making the above allegations. This would also present a better image of the truly universal nature of the Church.

4. Cardinal Swiatek hopes in the near future to open a major Seminary at Pinsk. For some time now he has been saying that he would ask our Congregation to assume administration of this Seminary. Can we refuse such a request?

## **II**

### **THE UKRAINE**

#### **1. The population and religious affiliation.**

The Ukraine declared its independence at the beginning of December 1991. It has an area of 603,700 square kilometers with a population of 51,700,000, of these 41,000,000 are Orthodox Christians, 6,000,000 are Greek Catholics and 1,000,000 are Catholics, there are 200,000 Protestants. The Catholic church is spread over three dioceses, Leopoldensis, Zydomerensis and Camenecensis. Until 1945 our confreres ministered especially in Leopoldensis and also the region of Bukowina. From the Second World War no confrere was permitted to remain in the above area. Now however the Polish province is looking again at the Bukowina region where

confreres traditionally worked and where some young confreres (for instance Fr. S. Irisik) were actually born.

Bukowina has a rich and very complex history. The present population is composed of a variety of ethnic groups: Ukrainians, Russians, Romanians, Poles, Jews and Gypsies. Northern Bukowina was originally part of the Ukraine while the south looks to Romania on its border.

## **2. The confreres in Bukowina:**

In 1991 Father Stanislaw Irisik was appointed to Bukowina and for two years he worked alongside the diocesan clergy. In 1993 the Archbishop Leopoli gave permission for the opening of a house of the Congregation at Storozyniec at the same time the Bishop entrusted a vast territory Storozyniec, Banilow Gorny, Czeresz, Cleboka, Davidney Centrum, Davidney Zrab, Piotrowce Dolne, Piotrowce Gorna, Gleboka, Klinowka, Stara Huta, and Wyznica to the pastoral care of the community. The newly established community includes three confreres Frs. Stanislaw Irisik, Franciszek Dragosz, Marek Chociej. The Daughters of Charity from Cracow also opened a foundation in 1994.

These confreres celebrate Mass in 9 different churches and in the course of a week they travel 500 kilometers in fulfilling their pastoral duties. Two churches in the region survived and stayed open in the past and are in a reasonable state of repair. All other churches were either closed, or confiscated for civil use. The church in Piotrowce Gorne, restored in 1993 had previously seen use as a cultural centre, library, and finally a cinema.

All the churches in the region are in need of restoration and the whole territory will certainly require additional churches and chapels. The confreres are initially concentrating their pastoral attention on a renewal of faith among the baptised. They are seeking out the adults to prepare them for the sacraments, and providing catechesis for the younger children (about 300 young are currently attending religious lessons). In 1994 an additional Polish confrere preached a series of Lenten Retreats to prepare people for their Easter duties. In all this work there are many difficulties, among the more serious is that to be effective in this region one needs three languages Ukrainian, Polish and Romanian.

## **3. The search for "labourers for the harvest":**

The situation of the church in Western Ukraine is better than in the East, which for many years was totally under Russian influence. The Bishop of Zytomerensis, Jan Purwinski in a letter to the major superiors in Poland wrote "... in my diocese there are 42 priests (14 of whom are local clergy and 26 from Poland) ...above all these are wetting the appetite. ...I see an urgent need for zealous priests from other countries who will labour until their sacrifice and zeal can produce further labourers for the harvest..the harvest is great but the labourers are few...to find a priest some of the faithful travel the 10's even 100's of kilometers." ... *I (the*

*author*) am certain also that there is an even greater need for priests in the diocese of Camenecensis.

Confreres from the Slovak province also are working in the Ukraine - I have no access to specific information about their work it would be good if some Slovak confrere were able to provide similar and up to date information about their ministry in the Ukraine.

### **III LITHUANIA**

#### **1. The history of the congregation in Lithuania**

Lithuania one of the three Baltic nations has 3,000,000 inhabitants of whom 89% are Catholic. It counts also amongst its population an ethnic minority of about 300,000 Poles. The congregation has a long and rich association with Lithuania. The community house in Vilnius first opened (the original foundation in Vilnius dates from 1665). Toward the end of the 17th century the first church was built and dedicated to the Transfiguration of our Lord on the Mount. Subsequently in 1725 the internal **seminar was** opened also in Vilnius. The province of Lithuania flourished from 1786 to 1844. In 1840 there were 87 priests, 20 students and 24 seminarists.

After the First World War the Vincentians were able to return to Vilnius where they ministered until 1941 in which year they were again forced to leave, leaving behind 1 confrere Fr. Adolf Trusewicz.

#### **2. Fr. Trusewicz a link between the past and the present**

Fr. Adolf Trusewicz was born in 1919 near Vilnius at Stare Troki. He was ordained in Vilnius in 1949 and after his ordination stayed on serving the local Catholic community. He ministered in the community church of the transfiguration at Vilnius until its closure in 1949. After this event and according to the wishes of the local church authorities he served a variety of communities Turmonty (1949-53) Olany (53-56), and from then until the present day at Suderva.

Suderva is a village 15 kilometers from Vilnius. The population of the parish is 1,500 almost all of whom are Polish. Since 1956 Fr. Adolf has ministered faithfully to this community as pastor, in the last two years he has had the assistance of a young confrere Dariusz Gorski.

#### **3. The hopes for the future:**

The Polish province maintains a special interest in, and hope for, the original church of The Transfiguration which is still closed. It is known that in the church are gathered many items from other churches also closed by the communist regime, these include statues, paintings, furniture, benches etc. The adjoining building, once the internal seminaire is now a hospital. It is however perhaps significant that some rooms near the church have recently been returned to the congregation. The

Archbishop Audrys Jouzas Backis sincerely hopes that some day soon Communities of the Consecrated and Apostolic life will again flourish in Lithuania. Currently there is a grave shortage of priests in the region which renders the pastoral reorganisation and service of all the Christian communities extremely difficult. The Archbishop sees the Congregation as potentially capable of providing Chaplains for hospitals and prisons. Given the current political and social situation the best option for the congregation might be the provision of an international community, directly responsible to the International Curia, which in turn might be a fertile seed bed for a future Lithuanian province.

The Archbishop would also willingly and gratefully welcome the Daughters of Charity to the diocese.

#### **IV RUSSIA**

I would also like to emphasise the importance of Russia as a potential mission territory. It helps comprehend the physical size just to realise it takes nine hours to travel from one end to other by air. The Archbishop Kondrusciewicz of Moscow who has responsibility for the European part of Russia has already said he is prepared to entrust a number of parishes to the care of the Congregation. It would seem particularly fitting if the Vincentian family were to present the Russian people with an experience of the church as charity (care and service) precisely because the Orthodox church does not offer such an experience. The work of the Sisters of Mother Theresa is currently a source of deep fascination and wonder. These sisters coming from distant foreign countries, opening houses for disabled children, homes for the elderly; visiting the sick and the isolated in their homes are making the people sit up and ask who are they, and why do they want to come and do such things in Russia? Such an apostolic approach could be extremely effective in preparing the populace for subsequent effective evangelisation.

The Jesuits are already officially recognised and registered by the Russian government. There would seem to be a special opportunity for our Congregation to be recognised and hence registered as a charitable organisation. The spiritual and material needs of Russia are truly numerous and constantly increasing.

#### ***Conclusions:***

1. Already some institutions of the Consecrated Life (Jesuits, Salesians, Dominicans) have set up Russian Regions directly responsible to their general curiae this procedure facilitates their apostolic ministry.
2. In all the countries under discussion many members of the older generation have kept their faith and religious zeal alive, these people with their faith and zeal can provide a springboard for the process of evangelising of the younger generations.

3. The people in all these countries have a true hunger for religion, however too often they have no valid criteria for assessing the value of the messages that are being proclaimed to them. They tend to accept the message of the first couriers to arrive. For this very reason these countries provide an easy target for the prozelytisation by new movements or religious sects. These countries and their peoples - and of this I am deeply convinced-can also be a fertile territory for evangelization by the Vincentian community.