A Precarious Co-Existence: The Russian Federation and the Roman Catholic Latin-Rite Apostolic Administration (Diocese) of Novosibirsk, Siberia, Russia
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This paper examines the tensions and fragile co-existence between Russia and the Roman Catholic Latin-Rite Apostolic Administration of Novosibirsk, Siberia. In mid-April 1991, the Vatican named Fr. Joseph Werth (S.J.) as bishop and head of the new apostolic administration. Like his co-religionists in the region after communism’s rapid fall, Bishop Werth faces various obstacles as he attempts to consolidate and rebuild Siberia’s widely scattered Roman Catholic community.

The significant issue is the tenuous status of all the region’s non-Russian Orthodox religious groups (i.e., Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Protestant, and Roman Catholic). Russian law officially guarantees religious toleration and freedom, grounded as it is in President Boris Yeltsin’s 1993 Russian Constitution, not to mention the earlier glasnost-era inspired “Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations in the USSR” of 1 October 1990 (Zakon “O svobode sovesti i religioznykh v SSSR”) and the Russian Federation’s “Law on Religious Creeds” of 20 June 1991 (“Zakon o veroispovedaniy”). In practice, however, the Russian Orthodox Church has been able to secure additional concessions from the Moscow authorities.¹ In Russia, the rule of law (i.e., its universal, consistent and just application) remains the nagging problem in all spheres of post-Soviet life and is something not simply confined to the issue of religious freedom. Old attitudes, familiar bureaucrats, and residual political structures and practices of the Soviet period persist on all federative governmental and administrative levels.

A number of related issues on this subject deserve attention: First, Bishop Werth’s biography; second, some general remarks on the special pastoral problems that his apostolic
administration encounters; third, a cursory examination of the broader geopolitical and
gleoreligious dimensions, as well as some of the various shortcomings, of the Vatican’s formal
re-establishment of Roman Catholicism in the former USSR; and, fourth, a brief consideration
of the motivations that color Russian religious policies, including the problems and
uncertainties that surround the Russian Federation’s recent legislation concerning the status of
“traditional” and “non-traditional” religions--above all, its 26 September 1997 “Law on
Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations” (“Zakon o svobode sovesti i o religioznykh
ob’edineniyakh”).

It is almost an understatement to observe that the former USSR is still reeling from the
dramatic series of transformations that began only about 15 years ago. Gorbachev and his
supporters’ reform attempts unwittingly unleashed the fears and aspirations of the long
suffering and repressed populace that had endured Communist rule. As I remark later in this
presentation, Bishop Werth’s family and personal background not only contributed to his
desire to become a Roman Catholic priest, but perhaps the Soviet legacy’s imprint on his
experiences as an ethnic and religious minority may also point to some of the reasons why
today he is occasionally hesitant and reluctant to voice his protests and concerns too loudly to
the Russian civil authorities--though, to be fair, his sense of higher purpose by seeking a
religious vocation during the Soviet era was no small act of courage and determination. In any
case, his lingering sense of caution, which I witnessed during his second North American visit in
June 1995, is perhaps partly a consequence of what I call the “revenge of the past” (a phrase I
borrow rather liberally from scholar Ronald Grigor Suny). By my definition, it is the fear of
resumed state retaliation against its critics and dissenters.
Bishop Werth’s parents were ethnic-German Catholics deported to Central Asia in 1941 from the Volga-German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic and one of the Ukraine’s ethnic-German settlements. This forced mass relocation of an entire people, totaling more than a million, occurred during the brutal Nazi invasion of the USSR. The war induced the Soviet regime to paint, with one broad brush stroke, its entire ethnic-German population as the ultimate political pariah—as “fascists,” “Hitlerites,” “fritzes,” “fifth columns,” and “enemies of the state.” During the final phase of the Soviet Union’s “Great Patriotic War” against the Nazis, Stalin also ordered the forced deportation of supposedly “unreliable” Poles, Ukrainians, Latvians, and Lithuanians, once his advancing Red Armies in 1944 had pushed the Nazis out of the Soviet borderlands. Perhaps as many as half a million or more of the various nationalities of Catholic background experienced the mass deportations to Soviet Central Asia’s “special settlement” (Spetsposlenie).

On 4 October 1952, during the final years of the “special settlement” for so-called “politically suspect” Soviet citizens, Joseph Werth was born in Karaganda, Kazakhstan. As the second oldest of eleven children, he was raised in a devout Catholic-German family, where traditional culture and religious faith were intertwined. His early interest in joining the priesthood grew when displaced priests released from the nearby labor camps secretly ministered at night to Kazakhstan’s Catholics. Among the local diaspora Catholics, the city of Karaganda soon became known as the “Vatican of the Soviet Union.” By the mid-1950s, several “underground” priests (primarily Poles) served there, perhaps five or six, even as many as a dozen. Most Westerners remain unaware that, during the Khrushchev years of the late 1950s and early 1960s, some of the harshest and most persistent Soviet persecutions were
conducted against organized religion\(^6\)--particularly against Buddhists, and, to a lesser extent, depending on which region was involved, Roman Catholics\(^7\)--even rivaling those earlier attacks waged by Lenin and Stalin.\(^8\)

After completing two years of mandatory military service in the early 1970s, Werth visited relatives in Lithuania. When he saw Lithuania’s vibrant churches and its actively-engaged clergy and laity, he pursued the priesthood, receiving additional encouragement from a Lithuanian priest. Indeed, Soviet-dominated Lithuania had long been a “hotbed” of religious fervor, local nationalism, and popular political discontent, forcing the reluctant communist regime to make limited religious concessions to the local population. In fact, Lithuania’s city of Kaunas became a center for the Soviet Union’s many diaspora Catholics to gather and study together. He studied clandestinely for his priestly vocation during the late 1970s and early 1980s, attending the seminary in Kaunas and joining the Jesuits.\(^9\)

In 1984, Werth became the first Roman Catholic priest from Soviet Central Asia and the first Volga-German to be ordained a priest since the mid-1930s. Although he readily speaks a traditional dialect of German (called Schwäbisch) that he had learned at home, he is fluent and educated in Russian, and in varying degrees, has a working knowledge of Latin and Lithuanian. From 1984 to 1988, he served as pastor of Aktyubinsk, Kazakhstan, and further in that capacity from 1988 to 1991 in Marxstadt, Saratov Province, Russia. Because of his persistent efforts in Aktyubinsk, in 1988 the local Communist authorities expelled him from the community. Two of Fr. Werth’s sisters became nuns, and in the late 1980s, both served in the Saratov Province along the Volga.\(^10\)

On 13 April 1991, Pope John Paul II appointed the thirty-eight-year-old Russian German
the titular bishop and Latin-Rite Apostolic Administrator of Novosibirsk, Siberia, Russia. This action coincided with the Pope’s creation of two additional apostolic administrations in European Russia and Kazakhstan.\textsuperscript{11} Then on 16 June 1991 in Moscow, Fr. Werth was formally ordained a bishop of this newly created unit, subsequently receiving an appointment to serve as a member of the Pontifical Council of the Dialog with Non-Believers. Bishop Werth attended President Yeltsin’s constitutional convention that drew up the new Russian constitution of 1993, functioning in a limited capacity as a Roman Catholic Church official and, to a lesser extent, as a representative of the region’s ethnic Germans and other ethnic minorities.

The Siberian bishop has found that his new apostolic administration’s sheer territorial size makes it difficult to accommodate his congregation’s more practical, day-to-day pastoral concerns. Covering about ten percent of the world’s land surface, his jurisdiction stretches across eight time zones—an area almost three and a half times the size of the United States. By the late 1990s, he could still only rely upon approximately 40 or 50 priests (along with a relatively limited number of lay assistants and nuns) to administer this incredible territorial expanse. Of those 40 or 50 priests (most of whom are from abroad),\textsuperscript{12} only about 30 have been engaged in strictly ministerial duties, as some of the others, for instance, have been assigned to various levels of Catholic educational instruction. Yet pastoral conditions had actually improved since his 1991 appointment, when just two priests assisted him across all of Siberia.

Long experienced in turning homes and apartments into make-shift churches and chapels, the Siberian bishop in recent years has also lobbied the Kremlin to reclaim or seek state compensation for churches lost during the Soviet period, as well as to help build new ones.
According to the bishop in 1995, up to that time the Russian authorities were only willing to return to him three churches from the pre-Revolutionary period—in Tomsk, Vladivostok, and Tobolsk. Ever so slowly, but with some measure of success, his apostolic administration has helped resurrect Roman Catholicism. Yet the Russian Federation’s Catholic Church, although always enjoying only a minority status in the East, remains a shadow of its former self. Before the Bolshevik takeover, 331 Catholic parishes stood in what is now Russia. By 1998, 96 parishes were operating in European Russia, and about 65 east of the Urals. In contrast, despite some resistance and delays, the Russian Orthodox Church has received buildings and property more quickly from the government than the Catholics. In 1988, the Russian Orthodox Church had about 6,800 parishes; by 1 January 1994, it dramatically rose to around 16,000 parishes. The Siberian bishop continues to lack the human and material resources necessary to carry out all his duties effectively, despite some outside aide provided by the German government and from Caritas (Catholic Charity Societies) in Freiburg, Germany, and elsewhere. For example, this kind of outside assistance has partly funded the construction in 1996 of Novosibirsk’s new church and church-run orphanage.

Besides the problems of securing churches, financial support, and volunteers, the bishop has had the responsibility of locating his prospective parishioners, with hundreds of thousands of persons of Catholic background dispersed across much of Eurasia. Whether substantial numbers of Siberia’s persons of Catholic background will again embrace the now normalized, formerly “underground” Church, that remains an open question; in recent decades, the old Soviet state had proved to be a fertile ground for agnosticism and atheism. In any event, Bishop Werth’s freedom to travel across the Federation without the local authorities’
interference remains highly essential to the pressing duty of reaching out to and serving his congregation. Another potential problem arises when local certain authorities deny religious minorities access to recreation halls, schools, and other state-owned buildings.  

Even under the universal banner of Roman Catholicism, the Siberian apostolic administration's ethnic diversity (as well as its obvious minority status) remains significant, because its ethnic mosaic makes this new congregation of faithful ever susceptible to the vicissitudes of the region's ethnic nationalism. As stated earlier, the 1940s mass deportations of various ethnic groups had created Siberia's scattered Catholic community. At the end of the 1980s, an estimated 700,000 to 800,000 persons of Catholic background lived in Soviet Siberia and Central Asia, of whom about 550,000 were Russian Germans. A few hundred thousand more were Poles, along with tens of thousands of Latvians, Lithuanians, and Ukrainians. The bishop and his assistants have found it preferable to recruit new clergy, nuns, and volunteers who are at least bilingual (or soon capable of becoming so), especially with one of the languages being Russian, in order to accommodate the ethnically-mixed, but also increasingly linguistically "Russified," local congregations.

Since 1989, however, a dramatic change in Siberia's ethnic-minority composition has occurred, making a profound impact on the local Catholic Church and other Christian denominations. Out of political, economic, and ethno-cultural considerations, most of the former USSR's ethnic Germans (almost two million)--whether Catholic, Protestant, or non-religious--have departed for the "historical homeland" of Germany. Bishop Werth has lamented this exodus, saying in 1995 that this rapidly disintegrating ethnic group had long helped serve as his Church's "support--that is, [as its] solid foundation." Partly resulting from
this massive population shift, the “Polonisation” of the former USSR’s Catholic Church has increased. Yet the Church’s growing “Polishness” has stemmed primarily from the leading roles provided by the recent influx of Polish clergy (notably, the archbishop of European Russia and the bishop of Kazakhstan) and the remaining Polish laity.²²

In light of Pope John Paul II’s creation in 1991 of three apostolic administrations in the former USSR, some mention of Vatican policy in the East (Ostpolitik) is in order—above all, the Pope’s long-standing geopolitical and geopolitical considerations for what he hopes will become a revived, but also a religious, Russia. Drawing from his experiences in Nazi-occupied and Communist-controlled Poland, the Slavic Pope has long considered Russia—and the entire former Soviet Bloc, for that matter—to be the crux of transformation in the realm of world political and religious affairs. Under the surface of the Pope’s hard realism and practical plans for Russia’s ultimate religious renewal actually lies a prophetic vision of something deeply grounded in Catholic eschatology.²³ Within this overarching religious world view, then, he has desired to address the pastoral concerns and needs of his Catholics in the former USSR and to carry out a careful policy of diplomatic rapprochement that can help close the ancient schism with the Russian Orthodox Church.

Thus, one significant factor related to the troubled legal status of Russia’s religious minorities today is the Vatican’s strained relations with Russian Orthodoxy. As the Pope’s most recent biographer George Weigel has stated, it appears that the Vatican’s plan to reestablish a Catholic presence in the former USSR was hasty. Rome’s so-called diplomatic “miscalculation,” as Weigel put it, stemmed from its first having to secure the Russian government’s approval, but doing so without also discussing matters early on with the
Moscow Patriarch Alexis II. The Vatican desired to normalize Russia’s Catholic life once again. For the Vatican’s Secretariate of State, it was essential to guarantee the Soviet government’s approval of allowing foreign bishops to administer Catholics within its borders, as the long-term prognosis for the Soviet “thaw” in 1990 and 1991 seemed tenuous at best. Yet the Vatican had failed to inform the Moscow Patriarchate about the three new church appointments before April 1991, adding fuel to the Moscow Patriarchate’s already determined anti-Roman position and adamant refusal to consider the Pope’s call for rapprochement. This communication breakdown resulted in the Patriarchate’s strong reaction to and denouncement of the new apostolic administrations in historically Orthodox lands, especially when erroneous reports appeared in Russia that the Pope had created new “dioceses.” Yet Moscow might have reacted similarly in any event, even if the Vatican would have made its pastoral intentions for the East any clearer or sooner. Supposedly giving proof to the Patriarchate’s claims that Rome was brazenly engaged in “proselytism,” the Holy See’s diplomats had thus jeopardized the Pope’s emerging post-Soviet era balancing act between caring for his Catholic communities and strengthening Catholic relations with the Russian “sister church.”

The Vatican’s Eastern policy correspondingly shapes and influences the Russian Orthodox Church’s attitudes towards Russia’s present church-state laws and the region’s apparent “religious westernization.” It appears that the Slavic Pope, for all his many past endeavors against Soviet Communism, has perhaps not pursued his current policy of a Catholic revival in the East thoroughly or consistently, so as not to alarm Moscow’s political and religious authorities. Indeed, the Vatican’s early decision to designate formally the former USSR’s three new Catholic administrative structures as “apostolic administrations,” and not as “dioceses,”
indicated the Vatican’s velvet-gloved approach towards Moscow. Yet ironically, his sometimes tender approach to this admittedly difficult diplomatic maneuver may have also undercut the resolve and confidence of some Catholic officials working inside the former USSR. For example, in a June 1997 papal statement to the Kremlin concerning a newly proposed law on religious freedom, the Pope implied that the Catholics “would not fight vigorously for the religious freedom of believers other than Catholics.” Sending mixed signals to both the Russians and his Catholic communities in the East, and without taking the mantle of leadership in this matter, he called only for measures to ensure, as the new bill’s preamble stated, that the Catholic Church stood among the “traditional” religions—along with Orthodoxy, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism—that would be exempted from some of the new bill’s restrictions. In short, the Pope seemed to be satisfied with the more or less symbolic concessions in the proposed law’s preamble.

Soon following the Pope’s less than firm stand towards the Kremlin and the Moscow Patriarchate, a key number of Catholic negotiators, including Bishop Werth, “had agreed to a sign a blank check” (as one critic later put it) with Moscow on the most recent religious legislation. One of the few uncompromising Catholic leaders was the outspoken Polish archbishop of European Russia’s apostolic administration, but he was away from Moscow during the critical negotiation period due to visiting his dying sister in Belarus. The archbishop’s subsequent formal protests came too late. Moscow hurriedly pushed through this bill, without clearly explaining its proposed religious policy changes. Giving in to Kremlin pressure without having the opportunity first to see the bill’s final version or to seek written guarantees or letters of intent, the leaders of some of the religious minority communities—
including the papal nuncio Archbishop John Bukovsky and Bishop Werth--either out of a position of weakness, naïveté or misplaced good will--have “share[d] some of the blame for their own defeat.”

The Catholics’ apparent inability to refuse the Kremlin’s demands occurred despite their having the strongest negotiating position among Russia’s religious minorities. As one part of the Church Universal, they alone possessed the many resources available to apply international pressure in favor of religious freedom. Yet even a firm Catholic position taken against the proposed 1997 religious law might not have changed the political outcome, although the signing of the bill into law has been demoralizing for Russia’s Catholics. The bill’s passage only added to their troubles, but possibly their fear of more Kremlin reprisals or harassment had played a part in their acquiescence to it. Their behavior may be connected to something I described earlier as “the revenge of the past.”

In recent years, Moscow policies have indeed complicated the status of Russia’s religious minorities, particularly the new 1997 law. No outright religious repression exists in Russia today, to be sure, but it is sporadic and growing. On 26 September 1997, Yeltsin signed into law the highly publicized and controversial bill, “On Freedom of Conscience and on Religious Associations” (Zakon “O svobode sovesti i o religioznykh ob’edineniyakh”). At the time of its passing, Derek Davis noted that this new federal law extensively regulates Russia’s church-state affairs. It recognizes the special contributions to Russian culture and statehood of several of Russia’s oldest religions (in particular Russian Orthodoxy, but also including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism). Yet it also discriminates against Russia’s less “traditional” religions by requiring particular registration procedures and by restricting their ability to
practice legally a range of organized religious activities.

Davis added that the law’s supporters claim that this provision will protect Russia from so-called “intrusive” and “unwanted” religions, especially in the wake of Russia’s opening up to the West and becoming vulnerable to new and unfamiliar cultural influences. Supporters have considered this law to be the means by which Russia can form the core of a new national ideology designed to fill the “ideological or spiritual vacuum” left by atheistic Marxism.33

According to its 1993 constitution and its 1997 religious law, Russia is officially a secular state. Yet political decrees and the political culture are not always one and the same; theory and practice may often be inconsistent, as old habits die hard. Although, as Derek Davis rightly concluded, “the secular state model is not an easy fit in any national model,” the Russian Federation’s population is highly unaccustomed to philosophical and religious pluralism. One needs only to look to the recent past to explain this social phenomenon. From the top-down, the tsarist imperial state clung tightly to ancient Orthodox Christianity, only to be violently replaced by the Soviet Union’s materialist gospel of Marxist-Leninist-Stalinism. In an era of rapid social change and cultural fragmentation, post-imperial and post-Soviet Russia is now struggling to replace these belief systems with a meaningful set of common values—i.e., a civic or public religion, a religion of the state, or a political theology or philosophy.34

For a number of reasons, the Russian government and the Moscow Patriarchate have viewed with apprehension the revived, albeit modest, Roman Catholic presence across the federation. Quite sensitive about its traditional position of respect and authority, the Russian Orthodox leadership has come to realize that its close Kremlin ties for many decades had helped undercut its credibility and moral standing in the region,35 especially during the final
decades of Soviet rule when the Catholic Church in parts of the old Soviet Bloc participated in the dissident movement.\textsuperscript{36} Partly reacting to its self-perceived vulnerability, the Russian Church has claimed that the Roman Catholic Church is carrying out "proselytism" in the region. For certain members of the Russian government and the Moscow Patriarchate who wish to take on alone the historic task of re-Christianizing Russia, this loaded term implies something of a so-called "foreign intrusion" into or a Roman Catholic "assault" on historically "Orthodox" Mother Russia. Moscow's view about filling Russia's current "ideological or spiritual vacuum" has sustained the centuries-old tensions and hostilities between Russian Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism, despite their shared persecution under the Soviet regime.\textsuperscript{37} To be fair, some Russian Orthodox clergy have criticized the Moscow hierarchy for the polemic against Russia's Catholics.\textsuperscript{38}

The regional expert Gerd Stricker of the Switzerland-based Institute of Religion in the Second World has observed that the Russian Orthodox Church's criticism of growing numbers of Catholics appears "extremely cynical," because much of the growth in so-called "proselytism" is probably more rife (but technically legal) among Protestant sects, especially in view of the recent influx of foreign Protestant missionaries. Although the Lutheran Church in the region, for instance, has gained more Russian converts than have the Catholics, the Russian Orthodox leaders have seldomly accused Lutherans of "proselytism." The Catholic Church's centralized, hierarchical order made it an easy target of criticism, although its formidable international standing has limited the extent of such attacks. Following Russia's 1990 liberalization of religious laws, for the first time since late 1917 the "underground" Catholic communities were now able to meet legally and quite openly. When this previously "underground" church again
became visible and organized, its activities made it appear to be converting large numbers of the local population.\textsuperscript{39}

According to Stricker, who has frequented Siberia, the growing number of Catholic parishes since the late 1980s have consisted "almost exclusively" of communities of non-Russians--ethnic Germans, Poles, Latvians, Lithuanians, and Ukrainians, although many of them have become linguistically "Russified" and have been ignorant of their ancestors' religion.\textsuperscript{40} Thus, Catholicism's ethnic diversity in Siberia has contradicted the Moscow Patriarchate's charge that Catholic "proselytism" is carried out among the Russians. Stricker also has stated that, in the few cases of Russians leaving the Orthodox Church and converting to Roman Catholicism, it was more the case that "young Russians who were disappointed by Orthodox priests flocked of their own accord around more educated Catholic priests."\textsuperscript{41} Some among the various nationalities of Catholic background, however, have rejected the Russians. And as Bishop Werth recently explained to Stricker, Russian nationalism and the general anti-Western sentiment have prompted the small number of Russians to withdraw from Catholic intellectual circles.\textsuperscript{42}

The 1997 statute's opponents, however, argue that the law denies the right to the freedom of conscience, violates international human rights to which Russia is formally committed, and can only perpetuate the old Soviet practice of religious tyranny.\textsuperscript{43} As Russia's new (and a bit ambiguous) religious law now stands, even the fledgling Roman Catholic presence in the former USSR is potentially affected for the worse. Depending on what the local officials decide to do, the law's inconsistent application only compounds the Siberian bishop's problems of administering a large area with limited resources. One commentator recently put into
perspective the 1997 religious law: "[S]uch internal contradictions--sweeping declarations on human rights and of limits on state power, accompanied by detailed provisions which crush those rights and burst those limits--were characteristic of Moscow's laws on church-state relations during the Soviet period."\(^{44}\)

Indeed, a number of astute observers have come out recently on the issue of Russia's law on religion. Among the more vocal critics of Russia's new law on religious freedom is Lawrence Uzzell, a Moscow representative of the Keston Institute, an independent research center based in Oxford, England, monitoring religious freedom in Eastern Europe and Russia. According to Uzzell, one of the new law's more troublesome provisions is Article 27, which in 1997 was widely known as the "15-Year Rule." Article 27 targets any religious association in Russia that cannot verify that it has existed continuously since 1982. It apparently makes little difference that the decades of Soviet persecutions of some long-standing religious entities would now automatically preclude them from claiming a continuous status. If a religious association cannot prove a continuous existence since 1982, then it suffers the loss of rights to engage in publishing or educational activities, or worse.\(^{45}\) Uzzell has explained that if the law is strictly enforced as written, the Russian Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate and all its parishes would pass the so-called "test," but as for the Roman Catholic Church, the law's full application "would require Russia to repress every Roman Catholic institution established or reestablished since the dawn of glasnost. No local parish, except for the two in all of Russia that were allowed to stay open during the Soviet era, would even be allowed to distribute tracts inside its own church building."\(^{46}\)

Yet Uzzell has expressed doubts about whether the Russian government would go that far,
considering that Russia would not “declare open warfare against a global organization with hundreds of millions of members, many of whom live in countries with which Moscow wants good relations.” Although the local harassment of Catholic clergy as supposed “foreign representatives” and “proselytizers” had occurred for some time before 1997, Uzzell has concluded that “Catholics will probably only find the slow, painful task of rebuilding their institutions here becoming slower and more painful. . . . The opening of Catholic parishes in cities where they are not already present will now become harder than ever, despite the fact that those cities had flourishing Catholic communities in the [tsarist] years.” Considering that most Protestant churches do not govern in centralized, hierarchical forms, they probably would suffer even more so than Russia’s Catholics.

Today, Russia’s Roman Catholic Church fears not so much that the authorities will completely shut it down, but that it will have little or no access to other Catholics. For an administrative unit as large as Bishop Werth’s covering eight time zones with only a few dozen priests and assistants, the freedom to travel unhindered remains vitally important. Yet Russia’s controversial law on religious freedom has already encroached upon the Siberian apostolic administration’s activities. By the late 1990s, the vast majority of Roman Catholic priests, monks, and nuns now working in the Russian Federation has come from abroad, and the process of applying for visas has become far more difficult than it was only several years earlier. Noting that Russia’s recent legal actions will at the very least “perpetuate a climate of intimidation,” Uzzell has emphasized that the status of Siberia’s apostolic administration is considerably worse off than in European Russia. In early 1998, shortly after law’s passage, Bishop Werth told him that conditions have steadily deteriorated, with visas being issued for
periods of only a few months, and sometimes only for one. The time that his assistants can stay in Russia depends on how the local and provincial authorities choose to interpret the new law. Often these officials administering the laws—the so-called "old-boy network"—are the same ones who in the 1970s and 1980s were arresting religious dissidents. Perhaps not surprisingly, two of Russia's national leaders responsible for designing Russia's new 1997 religious law are "alumni" of the Soviet-era Council for Religious Affairs, which Russia's 1990 law on freedom of conscience had abolished. The 1997 law, however, has repealed such prohibitions.\(^5\)

Considering that Bishop Werth is an ethnic-German native of Kazakhstan (as exotic as that may sound), he could in theory be deported back to the Central Asian republic as a non-Russian citizen, but no such drastic action has yet occurred.\(^5\)

Religious minority concerns persist in the post-Yeltsin era, with the political rise of the new acting Russian President and former KGB-officer Vladimir Putin. Putin has pledged his commitment to religious freedom and toleration, but Russia's Catholics remain cautious about Yeltsin's enigmatic successor, who faces the first round of presidential elections in late March 2000. In a recent telephone interview, Bishop Werth attached little significance to Putin's outward demonstrations of faith, including crossing himself at a televised service for Orthodox Christmas on 7 January. The bishop observed: "It is really too early to tell. It is either simply a sign of fashion or of genuine religious feeling. I can only hope that he doesn't change the government's attitude toward the Church [i.e., the official government policy of religious toleration]."\(^5\)

This presentation concludes that Bishop Werth seeks practical and well-intentioned accommodations with his neighbors in rebuilding all of Russia. He has reflected on the future
of his church and Eurasia: “We should do something together with all of the peoples to attempt to bring this country [Russia] back on its own two feet, but every person needs to understand that.”

Yet Russia’s future remains troubled and uncertain, including the present controversy surrounding religious freedom. Desiring to serve his parishioners, he has gone out of his way to placate his concerned Orthodox and Russian neighbors--and, in some more critical estimates, perhaps too much so. His apostolic administration is a microcosm of the many complications, opportunities, and problems affecting this multi-national and religiously diverse region.

Notes


3. In June 1995, Bishop Werth expressed the issue of religious faith and perseverance under Soviet Communism: “All the power of Communism stood opposed to us, and that always gave [the Church] strength. We could not rely on people or human effort. One could only rely on God alone. That always greatly strengthened our faith.” In Joseph Werth, The Church and the Russian Germans in the Siberian Homeland Today: A Personal Interview with His Excellency, the Most. Rev. Joseph Werth, Bishop of Siberia, interview and trans. by Eric J. Schmaltz (Fargo, ND: Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, NDSU Libraries, 1996) 7.


8. In 1995, Bishop Werth recalled his Catholic childhood in Karaganda: “As an infant, I had received an ‘emergency’ baptism by my parents. When many labor camps opened up after Stalin’s death and in Kazakhstan even several priests worked, we persons of ‘emergency baptism’ received once again the baptism. To this day, I can remember how Fr. Vladislav Bukovinski [a Pole from the “underground” Church] baptized me. At the end of Khrushchev’s ‘Thaw,’ the Church again had to descend into the catacombs. I can still vividly recall a church-gathering on Good Friday (1959), in which my mother, my eight-year-old sister and I (a six-year-old lad) participated. It was nighttime; we could hardly speak. Everything was as with a death watch. As far as I know, I saw the church persecutions under Khrushchev never as an evil—that belonged simply to life itself, to a Christian existence. One time the female [Soviet] director came to our school and ordered that all who go to church were supposed to come to her office. When she came to her office, it was filled over with students. So she had to change her tactics. We were proud of our church. If we went home after the Mass, for a short time we crowded the narrow street. Although in the ’sixties and ’seventies the persecutions were also still harsh, we regularly gathered together after the Mass—twenty to thirty youths. Aunt Valentina [a nun of the Tertiari Order], the sister of our long-standing guide Gertrude Dötzel [a nun of the same order], led the home church service, if no priest was present.” My translation of the quotation in Stricker, ed., “Deutsches Kirchenwesen,” 411.


11. In mid-1991, at the age of forty-five, Bishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, a Pole and the former Apostolic Administrator of Minsk, was made Apostolic Administrator of European Russia, with his residence set up in Moscow. At this time, he was also named archbishop. Fr. Jan Lenga, the forty-one-year-old Ukrainian born of Polish parents, was named Apostolic Administrator of Karaganda in Kazakhstan. George Weigel, Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II (New York: Harper-Collins, 1999) 628, 638-41, 924n, 925n. Cf. Diedrich, Stricker and Tschoerner, eds., 69-74.


16. Werth, *The Church and the Russian Germans in the Siberian Homeland Today*, ix, xi, xiv, 3-5, 7-8, 16-20. On two occasions, in 1993 and 1995, the bishop traveled to North America, making various personal appeals for support from the local Catholic populations. Claiming distant relatives in Kansas and seeking various Russian-German contacts across the Midwest, he has pursued in North America financial support, technical expertise (for cost-effective architectural designs for new churches) as well as Catholic volunteers. At other times, he has also journeyed to Rome and Germany to garner additional moral and financial support.


18. Stricker, "Fear of Proselytism," 161. According to the 1989 Soviet census, approximately 2.1 million ethnic Germans lived in the USSR, most of them located in Siberia and Central Asia. By the late 1980s, Soviet Central Asia also held about 1.4 million Russian Germans of Protestant origin (primarily Lutherans, and some Mennonites, Reformed, and Baptists). Much like their ethnic-German Catholic counterparts, in the 1990s the vast majority of the former USSR's German Protestants emigrated to Germany. Incredibly, almost 2 million of the former USSR's ethnic Germans have now migrated to the West. As Fr. Bruce Hyman (S.J.) concluded during his travels through Siberia in the early 1990s: "All the German Catholics I met in Siberia had one dream to fulfill before they die--to emigrate to Germany. Most are now free to make it a reality. The only thing that keeps them from doing so is Siberia itself. Traveling from Germany is now so expensive that most, if not all, will have to sell everything they have to make the move. Even the lucky ones who have already accomplished this dream face another hardship: Once exiled by the Russians for being German, they do not find acceptance in Germany because they are Russians." In Bruce Hyman, "On the Road in Siberia," *America* (31 Dec. 1994): 20. The number of emigres from the other Catholic ethnic groups leaving Siberia remains unknown.


20. Like all the former Soviet peoples, Bishop Werth and his congregation have encountered additional problems with respect to the region's general socio-economic decline and simmering ethnic tensions. Moreover, unexpected cultural developments have arisen after communism, including the problem of Western-educated priests and post-Vatican II reforms and practices introduced to a region where tenacious remnants of more traditional Catholic practices had survived the Soviet persecutions. Gerd Stricker concludes that, much like the region's conservative Lutheran "Brotherhood," the Soviet Union's Catholics kept up a very conservative (i.e., traditional, Tridentine, or pre-Vatican II) church. This vibrant conservatism originated in the "underground" church's need to survive the "anti-Polish/anti-Catholic" persecutions and to concentrate on the essentials of religious life, as no time was left for theological speculation and pastoral reform. Thus, Vatican II had little effect on the Soviet Union's "underground" Catholic Church. See Schätzler, 102-19; Stricker, ed., "Deutsches Kirchenwesen," 411-13; Stricker, "Die Rolle der Kirchen beim Entstehen eines nationalen Bewußtsteins unter den Rußlanddeutschen," 39-72.


23. Even the most critical scholar must at least consider the Pope’s *Ostpolitik* within a religious context, otherwise one misses the finer underlying points of his diplomacy. For discussions on the Pope’s “Fatima framework of events,” please consult an intriguing study by the respected and best-selling author Malachi Martin, in *The Keys of This Blood: The Struggle for World Dominion between Pope John Paul II, Mikhail Gorbachev, and the Capitalist West* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991 [1990]). A noted theologian and Vatican insider for many years, the late Fr. Martin served as an advisor to three popes between 1958 and 1964.


28. For another example, note that the Pope released the 25 May 1995 encyclical *Ut unum sint*, stating that the Catholic clergy working in Russia must proceed carefully in their assigned areas. According to Gerd Stricker, the Catholic clergy now “must not provoke Orthodox clergy but must involve them in as many decision-making processes as possible; they must always avoid giving the impression of proselytizing when dealing with Russians.” A number of Russia’s frustrated Catholic priests have criticized the Vatican’s seeming over-emphasis on dialogue and cooperation with the Orthodox clergy. They believe that this recent encyclical restricts their freedom of activities and makes them ever susceptible to Orthodox complaints. In Siberia and Kazakhstan, wary Catholic priests have now refused to baptize Russians on principle in order to prevent further disruptions with the Orthodox Church. Consult Stricker, “Fear of Proselytism,” 164. In June 1995, Bishop remarked: “Often in the West I am almost being accused of the fact that the Catholic Church is carrying on proselytism in Siberia and so forth. That is not really happening. My task is so clear to me. [His emphasis]. We come in order to serve these thousands of persons of Catholic descent.” In Werth, *The Church and the Russian Germans in the Siberian Homeland Today*, 15. It is unclear which critics “in the West” are making this charge of proselytism, or whether he is only generally referring to such unfounded criticism.


33. Davis, 645.
34. Davis, 646, 649, 651-53.

35. Schafly, 691ff.; Stricker, “Fear of Proselytism,” 164. Commenting on Russia’s lack of a legally effective church-state separation, despite the existing laws, Bishop Werth said in 1995: “For example, two years ago in Novosibirsk, the city’s one hundredth anniversary was celebrated. At this celebration, the city coated two [Orthodox] church [onion] domes with gold. Imagine how much money there had to be only in order to gild these domes! And even many Russians were very unhappy because today, where the people are so poor, the domes do not need to be gilded by the Orthodox Churches. That can happen after ten or twenty years.” In Werth, The Church and the Russian Germans in the Siberian Homeland Today, 13-14.

36. Weigel, 924-25n.


38. Stricker, “Fear of Proselytism,” 164. In 1998, Stricker also stated that “[w]hile German Bishop Joseph Werth in Siberia is seriously concerned about maintaining a good relationship with Orthodox bishops in his area (and seems to be making gradual progress), and his priests and parishes show respect for the Russian national church, Polish Bishop Jan Lenga of Karaganda annoys his Orthodox fellow-bishops by carrying out massive Polonisation of the entire Catholic Church in Kazakhstan, where many of his parishes are regarded as a piece of ‘little Poland’ (although a large proportion, if not the majority, of parishioners are of German origin). . . . On the other hand, Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz cannot be blamed when he occasionally expresses his anger over the skullduggery of the authorities and the Moscow Patriarchate” (p. 164).


41. Stricker, “Fear of Proselytism,” 162.

42. Stricker, “Fear of Proselytism,” 162.

43. Davis, 645.

44. Lawrence A. Uzzell quoted by Davis, 649.


52. Bishop Werth related this concern to his listeners during his June 1995 visit to Fargo, ND.


Selected Bibliography


Kondrusiewicz, Tadeusz [Roman Catholic Archbishop of Moscow, Russia]. Audio-cassette recording of speech/discussion in English given at the Catholic bishops’ conference, Colorado Springs, CO. 10 June 1995. Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, NDSU Libraries, Fargo, ND.


