

## **This is an "Inside the Vatican" Newsflash**

### **Last Train to Minsk**

"And Sister Lucy Told Me..."

A conversation with Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, the Catholic archbishop in Moscow for the past 16 years, on the eve of his departure for Belorussia

- by Dr. Robert Moynihan

MOSCOW, Russia, October 29, 2007 -- Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz drummed his powerful fingers nervously against the arms of the chair.

"Yes, I did speak with Sister Lucy," he told me. "Three times."

(He was referring to Sister Lucy of Fatima, one of the three Portuguese shepherd children who had visions of Mary on six occasions in 1917, 90 years ago. Sister Lucy died at the age of 98 in 2005, just six weeks before Pope John Paul II died on April 2 of that year.)

"You went to Portugal to see her?" I asked. (We spoke in English, which the archbishop speaks fluently.)

"Yes, three times," said Kondrusiewicz. He held up three fingers. (The archbishop, who came to Russia on May 28, 1991, had agreed to sit down with me for a brief chat before his departure for his difficult new assignment in Minsk, Belorussia; he will leave on Wednesday, October 30, exactly 16 years, five months and two days after his arrival in Moscow.)

"And you spoke to her personally?" I asked. "One on one?"

"Yes," he replied, continuing to drum the fingers of his right hand into the arm of the armchair. (We were sitting in a simple room on the third floor of the impressive, 100-room curia Kondrusiewicz has just finished building next to the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in Moscow. He was able to build the multi-million dollar structure over the past decade thanks to the support of many Catholics in the West, but, he tells me, also with considerable cooperation from the city government of Moscow, which he says "could have thrown up endless administrative roadblocks," but did not.) "Yes, three times..."

He paused.

"And what did she say to you?" I asked.

As he seemed to hesitate, I added: "It must have been a bit dramatic, since you were the Catholic bishop in Moscow, and part of the message of Fatima is: 'in the end, Russia shall be converted, and a period of peace will be granted to the world'..."

Still Kondrusiewicz was silent.

"Or perhaps you cannot speak about it?" I added.

He looked intently at me.

"Well, she did say many things to me," he said. "I did ask her about the conversion of Russia, since I felt my mission might be directly connected, despite my own limitations, with this mystery.

"And Sister Lucy said that I should think of conversion as a long process, not as something immediate and dramatic, something that happens overnight or instantaneously.

"She said I should consider that the essential thing is the salvation of souls, and the conversion of sinners. In this sense, she said, I needed to think of the word 'Russia' as in some way standing for the entire world, and the reference to the 'conversion' as a reference to the conversion of sinners."

The archbishop told me he was somewhat concerned about the legal status in Russia of his successor, Archbishop Paolo Pezzi, who was installed as the new Catholic archbishop of Moscow on October 27.

"It is really not the fault of the Russian government," he said. "In this case, I will defend the Russian government. It is because of a European Union policy on visas, which requires that foreigners with 1-year visas spend only 90 days in a row in a country, and only 180 days out of a year. And Russia last month agreed to reciprocate this European Union policy. This means that now Catholic priests and nuns in Russia on a visitor's visa can only stay for 90 days before leaving the country, and only for 180 days out of a year. And Archbishop Pezzi, who is an Italian citizen, and is here on a 1-year visa, faces this problem.

"Each time a religious group in Russia changes its leader, the change must be reported to the Russian government," Kondrusiewicz continued. "The report must be made within three days of the change. So it will be made either tomorrow or Wednesday.

"But then the government must accept the report," he continued. "And the current legislation requires that only a citizen of Russia, or a permanent resident, can be the leader of a religious group in Russia. This suggests that, under the current legislation, the report of the change in our leadership will not be accepted.

"Fortunately, I've just signed all the papers the diocese must file each quarter, so Archbishop Pezzi will not have to sign any important papers until the end of December," Kondrusiewicz said. "Hopefully, even if the problem is not resolved immediately, it will be resolved before then."

I was startled.

"Are you telling me that Archbishop Pezzi may not be able to be confirmed officially this week by the Russian government as the leader of the Catholic Church in Russia?" I asked.

"I don't know," Kondrusiewicz said. "Perhaps the nuncio, Archbishop (Antonio) Mennini, has already worked this problem out with the authorities. His role is to handle this type of diplomatic matter."

"But have you had a conversation about this problem with Archbishop Mennini?"

"I raised the entire matter as soon as I was informed of the Pope's decision to replace me," Kondrusiewicz said. "That was just four weeks ago. It has all happened so fast."

"But Archbishop Mennini has not advised you that this matter will not be a problem, that he has already worked out something with the Russian government?"

"No," Kondrusiewicz said.

Our conversation continued for more than an hour.

The archbishop told me that John Paul II always kept in close touch with him, and asked him to come to the Apostolic Palace often to report on developments in Russia.

"John Paul was profoundly interested in everything related to our Church in Russia," Kondrusiewicz said. "I would visit Rome two or three times a year, and almost always he would invite me to come talk with him."

"I just read your email report about me yesterday," he said. "And I have to ask you to change one word."

"What word?" I asked.

"You wrote that I said I was 'sad' to be leaving Moscow," Kondrusiewicz said. "That's not quite true. I am not sad."

"Then what word would you like me to use," I asked. "I can make a correction."

"Just don't say I am sad," he said. "That's not the right word. I am not sad. I am a soldier. The Holy Father has given me a new task, and I obey. I am obedient."

"Well, in Italian there is the word 'commosso,' which in English would be moved, deeply moved," I said. "Would that be right?"

"Perfect," he said. "That's the perfect word. Not sad. I am not sad. But deeply moved, yes."

In numerous conversations over the past several days, Catholics and Russian Orthodox in Rome, Vienna and Moscow have expressed varying opinions about the affect of the change in Catholic leadership in Moscow on the future of the Catholic Church in Russia, and on the course of Catholic-Orthodox relations in general.

The conversations have revealed some deep fissures within Russian Orthodoxy itself, some divisions between the Russian Orthodox and other Orthodox Churches, and even some differing emphases within the Roman Catholic Church herself.

At the same time, they have made clear that there is, at the highest levels of all these Churches, a profound desire to find ways to work together effectively to bear witness to a shared Christian faith and hope, in the saving grace of Jesus Christ, despite nearly 1,000 years of schism, in the face of an increasingly secularized western culture, and of a resurgent Islam.

In reports in coming days, I will discuss these and other issues in other letters from Russia.

As I left Kondrusiewicz, I asked him one last question.

"One last question," I said. "After growing up in the Soviet Union, after being bishop in Moscow for 16 sometimes difficult and lonely years, now, on the eve of your departure, what is your most inward feeling about whether the Russian Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches will ever be in full communion?"

He was silent for a moment, then raised both his hands to shoulder height and said, "Certainly, it must be so," he said. "That day will come. It is the will of Christ himself. 'Ut unum sint' ('that they may be one'). That was Christ's final prayer, and it shall be so."

### **A Very Special "Russian Christmas" in Washington, D.C.**

On December 17, a week before Christmas, the Moscow Boys' Choir and a leading Russian orchestra will travel to America to perform an exceptional "world premiere" concert of Russian Christmas music at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington....