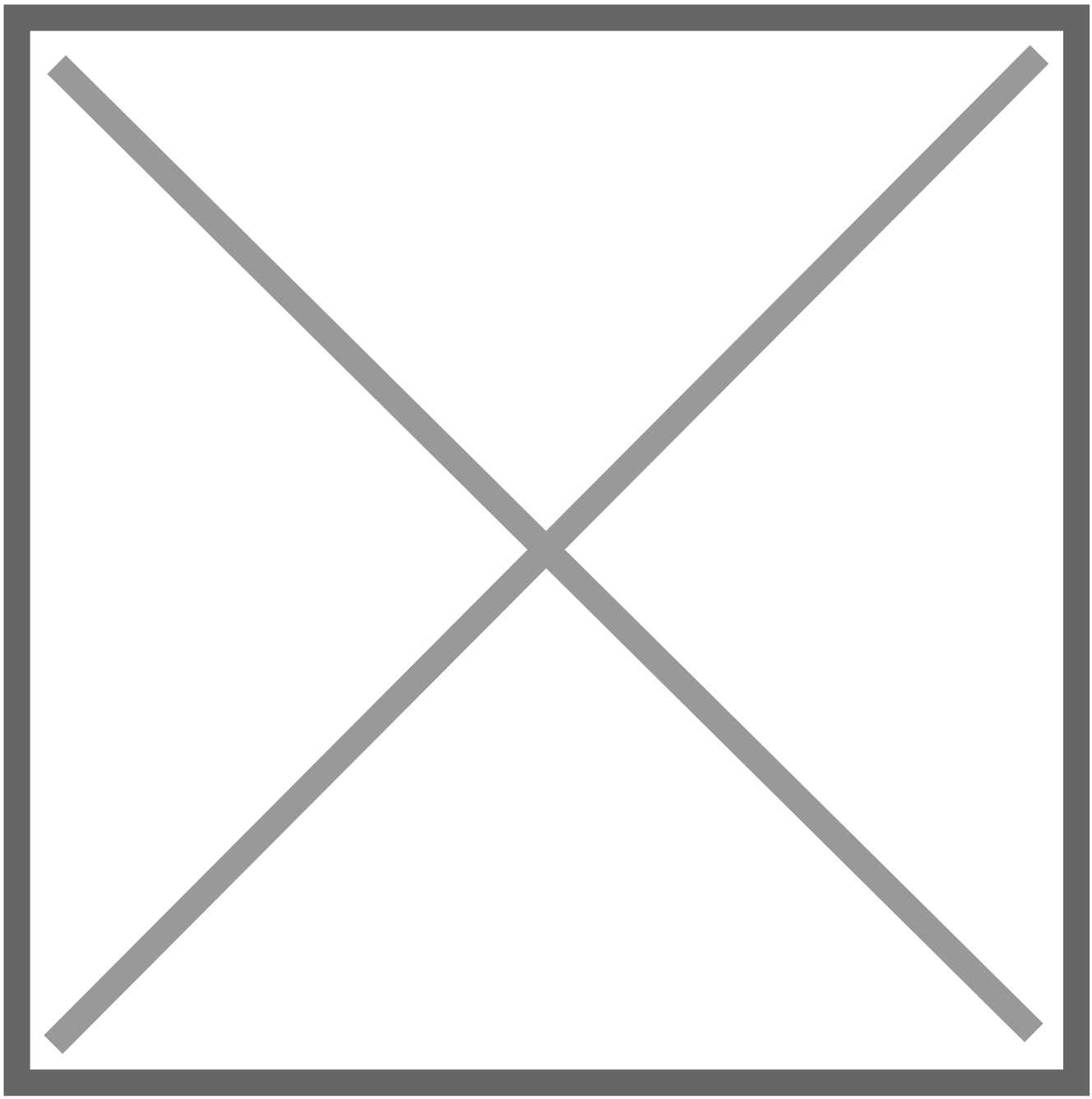
News



Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz of Minsk, Belarus, is pictured in a file photo. The apostolic nuncio to Belarus announced that the archbishop, who had been banned from re-entering the country, will be allowed by the government to return for Christmas. (CNS/Bob Roller)

Cindy Wooden

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Banned from entering Belarus since late August, Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz of Minsk, president of the country's bishops' conference, can return to the country to celebrate Christmas with his people, the country's nuncio said.

Archbishop Ante Jozic, the nuncio, announced Dec. 22 that the government informed him that "Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz has no obstacles to return to the territory of the Republic of Belarus."

"The apostolic nunciature expresses its gratitude to the state authorities of Belarus for responding positively to Pope Francis' request to return Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz to celebrate the Nativity of the Lord with the faithful of which he is pastor," said the statement in English.

The news came five days after Pope Francis had sent Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti, nuncio to Great Britain and former nuncio to Belarus, to the East European nation to meet with embattled President Alexander Lukashenko. The Vatican press office had said Dec. 17 that Gugerotti was sent "to express the Holy Father's solicitude and concern for the present situation in the country."

Lukashenko, who has been in power since 1994, was declared the winner of a new election Aug. 9; the government said he won more than 80% of votes, a claim that triggered allegations of fraud, set off widespread demonstrations that continue and a police crackdown that led many opposition leaders to flee the country.

Kondrusiewicz, who had gone to Poland for celebrations of Our Lady of Czestochowa, was blocked from reentering Belarus Aug. 31; two weeks later, the Belarusian Interior Ministry confirmed the archbishop's passport had been canceled to prevent its "unjustified use," but said his Belarusian citizenship remained valid.

The country's foreign affairs minister, Vladimir Makei, told reporters Dec. 22 that Gugerotti had brought a letter from the pope to Lukashenko specifically requesting that Kondrusiewicz be allowed to return.

"Out of deepest respect for the pope and because of [their] good personal relations, the Belarusian head of state considered it possible to meet the pope's request and gave an instruction to find a solution to the issue, taking into account all available legal mechanisms," Makei said, according to the Belarusian government news agency, BelTA.

"The upcoming great holiday of Christmas and festive events were an additional reason to take this decision" to allow the return of Kondrusiewicz "despite a number of negative things about this person," Makei said, according to BelTA's English-language service.

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