

# Estonian Catholics shaken after repeated riots

WARSAW, Poland – Catholics in Estonia remain “shaken and afraid” by repeated riots in the capital, Tallinn, after a government decision to dismantle a Soviet war memorial sparked angry reactions from ethnic Russians.

“People aren’t accustomed to such violence here,” said Father Alfonso Di Giovanni, the Italian rector of Tallinn’s Sts. Peter and Paul Parish.

“They’re badly shaken and fearful, and many have had windows broken and their homes damaged. We’ve held prayers every night, asking God to touch people’s hearts, and tried to stay close to those affected,” he said.

Rioting by ethnic Russians in Tallinn and other towns in late April left one dead and more than 150 injured and was matched by violent anti-Estonian protests in Moscow.

Father Guy Barbier de Courtois, a French priest in Tallinn, said the war memorial was viewed by Russians as symbolizing “the end of the war and Nazi regime,” but by Estonians as “the start of the Soviet era and mass deportations to Siberia.”

“It’s hard to believe people have such strong feelings about distant issues like this – the violence has clearly been fueled by propaganda,” he told Catholic News Service in a telephone interview May 1.

“Estonia’s Russian citizens aren’t interested in rejoining Russia, since they’re much better off here. The Russian government should observe international law and stop claiming these are Russian problems,” he added.

Trouble flared April 27 when the Estonian government began relocating the bronze war memorial from downtown to Tallinn’s military cemetery, where an unveiling ceremony was scheduled for May 8. More than a thousand demonstrators, including several dozen Russian citizens, were arrested in the violence, which by April 29 had spread to towns near the Russian border.

Protesters from a Kremlin-backed Russian youth movement broke into Moscow's Estonian Embassy May 1, smashing windows and trampling a flag, after threatening to demolish the building unless the Tallinn memorial was rebuilt. Estonia said May 2 it was closing the embassy in Moscow, and Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves described the Moscow incidents as "psychological terror."

The Catholic Church in Estonia accounts for less than 1 percent of its 1.37 million inhabitants, compared to 14 percent of the population that belongs to the Lutheran Church and 4 percent to Orthodox denominations.