

The arrival of new leadership in the USSR provides solid grounds for believing that the will of the people can and will be expressed, and that it will have some impact on policy. There is still much to do. But there can be no doubt that great progress has been made in the USSR towards reducing the limitations on individual freedoms.

We welcome the release of political prisoners in the Soviet Union. Religious tolerance is increasing and should be enshrined in the new law on religious practice which the Supreme Soviet is expected to pass this year. The effects of this law will be keenly felt in the Baltic States and will be of key interest to us in terms of its impact on the Ukrainian Uniate Church. We will continue to urge the maximum freedom of religion for all.

Already, the situation has improved beyond anything we could have expected as little as three years ago. Who could have predicted that more than 1600 new religious congregations would be registered in 1988 (as opposed to 104 the year before), that Jewish cultural centres would be formed in communities around the Soviet Union or that religious texts could be imported legally into the Soviet Union?

Emigration from the Soviet Union is higher now than at any time in the past ten years. In the first four months of this year, 57,000 exit permits were granted for emigrants. And this before the new laws on emigration have been enacted by the Supreme Soviet. We look forward to even higher figures once that legislation is approved.

Canada has no unresolved family reunification cases with the USSR. Private visits from the Soviet Union to Canada have multiplied -- from 5,000 in 1986 to 12,000 in 1988.

President Gorbachev seems determined to create a society based on law and he is drawing on the experience of Western countries. The Soviet Supreme Court visited the Supreme Court of Canada last Autumn to discuss a wide range of legal practices, particularly the role of defence counsel. A return visit is planned. Ultimately, of course, it is not the laws but how they are implemented which counts. We will watch closely how the spirit of the new laws is observed.

While the democratization process initiated by President Gorbachev is a major step forward, the results are not democratic in the sense that we would use that word. But the fact is that the Soviet people were given a choice of candidates for the newly-created Congress of People's Deputies. Where no choice existed, they were given the option to reject the single candidate. This they did.