Russian band punished for ‘religious hatred’

by Sophia Kishkovsky in the September 19, 2012 issue

A Moscow court has found three members of the feminist punk band Pussy Riot guilty of “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred” after a guerrilla performance in Moscow’s main cathedral in February. They were sentenced on August 17 to two years in a penal colony.

The band performed a “punk prayer” against Russian president Vladimir Putin and Russian Orthodox patriarch Kirill I.

The case has divided Russia and the Orthodox Church and drawn worldwide protests on behalf of the band and free speech. Outside the courtroom, protesters clashed with police, and well-known chess champion Garry Kasparov was arrested during the protests.

The charges against Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina and Yekaterina Samutsevich had carried up to seven years in prison, and the prosecutor had demanded at least three years for the women, who range in age from 22 to 30.

Judge Maria Syrova said she did not accept the defendants’ explanation that Christ the Savior Cathedral is not a church but a commercial enterprise because of businesses that operate there.

During the trial, which began in July, the defendants explained that they were opposed to Kirill’s support of Putin, who returned to the Kremlin after winning the March 4 presidential elections in the face of protests claiming voting irregularities. Kirill has been silent on the case for several months after leading a prayer service in April to pray for the church’s deliverance from persecution.

Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, spokesman for the Moscow Patriarchate, has said the church is ready to forgive members of Pussy Riot if they repent.

In the performance, the musicians walked into the cathedral, donned brightly colored hoods and began to gesticulate and dance in front of the altar. Their actions were filmed as a video and set to music with the lyrics “O Birthgiver of God, Get Rid of Putin” and an expletive as a refrain.

The video went viral, shocking many Russians and infuriating the Kremlin and the Orthodox hierarchy, but also setting off a debate in the church about the role of forgiveness and mercy in Orthodoxy. —RNS/ENInews