

Pope Francis calls for our generosity for victims of war in Ukraine

Two weeks ago, on the Sunday of Divine Mercy, at the heart of the Jubilee Year of Mercy, Pope Francis summoned all Catholics in Europe to recognize and respond to the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, where millions of Europeans endure a undeclared hybrid war dragging on for two years. The war has claimed almost 10,000 lives. Tens of thousands are injured, hundreds of thousands traumatized.

Despite an official ceasefire agreement signed in Minsk, the war continues. The number of casualties and refugees has only increased. Take a moment to think about it: after two years of war, there are 1.7 million internally displaced people and a million refugees in neighboring countries. Half a million do not have basic food and hundreds of thousands do not have access to safe drinking water. Nearly two million remain in areas where Ukrainian and international agencies cannot freely conduct humanitarian activity. We can only guess what they are actually experiencing. These numbers are not mere statistics. Behind each figure is the tragedy of a person or an entire family.

Ukraine is emerging from a legacy of foreign totalitarian rule. During the horrific twentieth century Ukrainian Churches were outlawed, peasants killed by artificial famines, and the political, cultural, and social life of the people was devastated by genocidal and colonial policies. The country was a main theater for world wars waged by foreign powers. As a result up to 15 million people were killed.

To heal such historical trauma is extremely difficult. Terrorized for three generations, Ukrainians had fear in their DNA. Corrupt post-Soviet governments manipulated a fearful population. The pilgrimage from fear to dignity—God-given dignity—is a long, winding one. Step by step, Ukrainians have moved forward making great sacrifices for the values at the foundation of European civilization. During the Revolution of Dignity (2013-14) millions of citizens and all of the country's Churches and religions, Orthodox, Greek and Roman Catholic, Protestants, Jews and Muslims, were together, peacefully defending the dignity of the human being, democracy, and Ukraine's association with Europe.

In a futile attempt to stop history an authoritarian regime killed a hundred peaceful protesters on the Maidan, Kyiv's main square. The disgraced president fled the country. Solidarity prevailed. For this the citizens of Ukraine have been violently punished: Crimea was annexed and a hybrid war was instigated in the east of Ukraine, consisting of military action, massive international propaganda and disinformation, crippling of the economy, destruction of the industrial infrastructure, and political destabilization not only of Ukraine. This destabilization campaign is aimed at a united Europe as well.

And yet the spirit, the hope, and the faith of the ordinary people remain strong. As the Apostle Paul wrote, "We give thanks to God always for you all, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thes 1:2-3). Despite their suffering, Ukrainians believe that God has not forsaken them. Indeed, He has not forgotten them. But in this world the Lord works with human hands. Pope Francis, who for two years has repeatedly spoken about the injustices in Ukraine calling for peace, dialogue, and respect for international law, summons us to concrete solidarity.

To this end, the Holy Father has asked us to conduct a special humanitarian collection for Ukraine on 24 April in all Catholic churches in Europe encouraging all Catholics and people of good will to donate generously. For Pope Francis this gesture of charity, alleviates material suffering and manifests moral solidarity of the entire Catholic Church in Europe with the people of Ukraine.

Three things are most needed: to pray for peace and justice in Ukraine, to stay informed regarding the true situation in this ancient European land, and to show your solidarity. See the suffering of others. Open your hearts! Become the hands of the Lord!

St. Paul speaks to us: "Now as you excel in everything -- in faith, in utterance, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in your love for us -- see that you excel in this gracious work as well" (2 Cor 8:7).

+Borys Gudziak,

*Eparch in Paris for France, Belgium, Netherlands, Luxemburg, and Switzerland
Head of the Department of External Church Relations of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church*