Voices of Sisters
Social Justice



On April 25, 2022, the first day after Easter, a rainbow appears over the house where the Basilian sisters were sheltering about 30 refugees at the Transfiguration Monastery in Beregy in the Lviv region of Ukraine. (Courtesy of Sisters of the Order of St. Basil the Great)



by Sr. Viktoriia Estera Kozun

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Editor's note: *Today, Global Sisters Report launches a new series, Hope Amid Turmoil: Sisters in Conflict Areas, which offers a look at the lives and ministries of women religious serving in dangerous places worldwide. The news stories, columns and Q&As in this series will include sisters in Ukraine, Nigeria, Kenya, Sri Lanka, Nicaragua and more throughout 2023.*



The war continues. Even though a year has passed since the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the war has not stopped for a single day, not for a single hour. And this is felt by everyone who lives in Ukraine.

Personally, it was a pleasant surprise for me that my Ukrainian people showed themselves to be responsible and courageous, just when it was most necessary. Throughout the whole year, I did not meet a single indifferent person or someone who did not help our armed forces. Young and old people are giving their lives for the sake of others. Today, for me, Ukraine stands as a prototype of Christ, who sacrifices himself for the sake of his neighbor.

Since the war began, as paradoxical as it may sound, I hear fewer and fewer complaints in society. I believe that the trouble and suffering of our people allows each person to touch the living God directly.

On the first day of the war, I was in ministry in the city of Zaporizhzhia, in the East of Ukraine. Frankly, almost no one I knew believed there would be a full-scale war.

My religious community was just finishing the seventh All-Church Pilgrimage of Monasticism, in which I was involved as a co-organizer in Zaporizhzhia. On Feb. 23, our monastery was visited by fathers, brothers and sisters in monasticism from all corners of our country. And already on Feb. 24 the word "goodbye" began to be perceived as "goodbye forever."



Feb. 23, 2022, one day before the full-scale war started: Priests, brothers and sisters participate in the seventh All-Church Pilgrimage of Monasticism of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, held for the first time in the east of Ukraine. (Courtesy of Sisters of the Order of St. Basil the Great)

In the first weeks, we did not know if we would see our family, friends or community again. I remember that I considered each new day as the last in my life. Falling asleep, I thanked God for the life I had lived, because I did not know if I would wake up.

At that time, it was very difficult to pray; I did not feel God's presence or his care over us. The only thing that gave me strength was the trust in God built on previous experience.

For the first time, I met the great self-sacrifice of ordinary people in the evacuation train. Usually, I saw altruism and self-sacrifice among the clergy, who often try to hide their good deeds.

The light of hope for me came not only in the fathers and sisters, who did not leave their places of service for the sake of the faithful, but also in the employees of Ukrainian Railways. Amid the general panic and fear, they were the angels who took people out of overcrowded stations on crowded trains, despite the danger of being killed or injured.

The second ray of light was of Lviv, the city in the west of Ukraine which became a refugee hub in the first month of the war. The people of Lviv gave their homes, earnings, time and hands to receive everyone who suffered from the aggressor.

And then, it seemed, the whole world came to help. Humanitarian aid arrived daily. Calls with offers of help or shelter in other countries did not stop. Every conscious person wanted to help in some way. Then I realized that God did not leave us but, on the contrary, came to our land in his great power.

The community of sisters of the Order of St. Basil the Great, to which I belong, opened its monasteries to all who needed shelter. Both in the east and the west of our country, we began to accept refugees. For three months, I lived with families who left their homes and were accepted in our monastery in the west of Ukraine.

In the first six months, I visited about 10 monasteries of our order in Ukraine and abroad. And everywhere I met selfless service for the Ukrainian people. The younger sisters volunteered, and the older ones devoted a lot of time to praying for Ukraine.

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I think the war changed us all. Most people were forced to give up their plans and surrender to God's providence. We began to see our neighbor in need more clearly, and to realize that a person cannot do anything without God's help.

As a nation, we have become humbler before God. Also, having learned more deeply about ourselves, our weaknesses, fears and limitations, we have become humbler to each other. This year, I have not met a single atheist either among the laity, or especially among the military. This time was very difficult for everyone; it is extremely hard for me to even name all our losses out loud. But the merciful Lord never left me or my country.

At the time when the city of Yavoriv in the Lviv region was shelled, I knew many details about this tragedy, because previously I lived and served in Yavoriv for two years, and have been in contact with the sisters and residents of this city. I was so overwhelmed by this event that pictures from eyewitness accounts appeared in my dreams.

Fear and anxiety entered my heart; for the first time since the beginning of the war, I was afraid. I feared that a rocket was about to fall on my monastery and the mutilated bodies from my dream would become reality.

Then I took the holy Scripture in my hands and sat on the corner of my bed. The words I read filled me with a peace that continues to this day. It was a verse from the book of the Prophet Amos: "This is what the Lord says: As a shepherd rescues from the mouth of a lion two legs or a piece of an ear, so shall the children of Israel be taken out who dwell in Samaria — with the corner of a bed or a piece of a couch" (Amos 3:12). I came to a clear realization that the Lord protects not only me, but also everyone for whom I pray.

Currently, I work as a catechist and educator in a kindergarten operating at a monastery in the city of Perechyn in the Transcarpathia region. Although we are far from the war zone, war is merciless to everyone.



Basilian Sr. Viktoriia Estera Kozun with the kids of the kindergarten group "Bee" at the Perechyn mission station of Pope St. Clement, Transcarpathia region, present the exhibition "Gifts of Autumn" on Sept. 29, 2022. (Courtesy of Sisters of the Order of St. Basil the Great)

Men from this region fight in the most dangerous places and positions. Funerals take place here almost every day, many soldiers are considered missing, many are wounded. As a result, the number of orphans and young widowed women is increasing. Every day we hear about new losses.

When the air alarm is activated or the lights go out, the working and educational process stops. Despite this, life does not stop.

I feel helpless when, during an air raid, I must wake children who have just fallen asleep, get them out of a warm bed and take shelter. I understand that I personally cannot do anything to help these children have a calm, normal sleep and childhood.

Nevertheless, together with the sisters, we try to create an atmosphere of safety and joy for them. At the beginning of the day, we always pray that no more rockets will fly and that our militaries will stay alive. Our 3-year-old kids behave like responsible adults when they hear the alarm signal, and without further ado, in a few seconds, they get ready to go down to the shelter.

Ukraine will never be the same again. Our nation began to turn to God. The whole nation began to pray in earnest. Many unbaptized children are baptized; couples who lived without sacramental marriage get married. A new field for work opens for our order and the church; new challenges arise related to war losses.

In my opinion, we have become stronger, simpler and more humane. Through trials, our faith and trust in God is tested by fire. Masks came off our faces, everyone became who they really are, and grew out of their immaturities.

God's logic rarely coincides with ours; God's ways are difficult to understand. It is difficult to accept that salvation must happen through the cross. But in these difficult days, our people are on the way to the Resurrection. Because in God's design, the Resurrection itself, and not the cross, becomes the last point in history.

[This column was translated by Myroslava Mostepaniuk.]

This story appears in the **War in Ukraine** and **Hope Amid Turmoil: Sisters in Conflict Areas** feature series.