Voices of Sisters

Religious Life

Emergency personnel treat a wounded resident of an apartment building in Kharkiv, Ukraine, that was heavily damaged in a Russian missile attack on Jan. 23. Feb. 24 marks two years since Russia invaded Ukraine. (OSV News/Reuters/Sofiia Gatilova)

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February 22, 2024

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"In You, O Lord, I will rest, my heart will rest. … " I am listening to a Christian hymn a friend from Ukraine shared with me. This hymn was sung by underground evangelical Christians during the communist repression. I am listening to it and thinking how common the fate of Christian denominations in Ukraine was: both Protestants and Greek Catholics were banned and persecuted during the 70 years of the Soviet regime.

"I know that in You there is eternal joy and unchanging love …" These lines of the same hymn bring tears to my eyes when I remember the conditions in which these words were uttered several decades ago, in the midst of uncertainty, fear and anxiety for one's own life and that of one's loved ones. Sadly, this history continues today in the Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine. Just as the world was learning of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny's death, the Russians kidnapped and tortured to death a priest of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in the Kherson region.

Related: As 2 years of war in Ukraine take a toll, sisters remain a steady, welcome presence

During these two years, Ukrainians have gone through a difficult path. The shock at the sight of Russian missiles over Ukraine was replaced by the determination to defend our country. Yes, we walked this path side by side with you, with our friends from the world community — those who prayed for us, sent aid, volunteered, and defended Ukraine on the diplomatic stage. We have come a long way; but unfortunately, in the second year of full-scale Russian aggression, the situation in Ukraine is more than uncertain. Missile attacks in different parts of the country every week claim the lives of military personnel and civilians and destroy industrial and residential buildings, schools, kindergartens and hospitals. Modern technology allows missiles to fly long distances, and no one in Ukraine feels safe. It is a kind of hellish lottery, a kind of death race, where the whole nation is under the crosshairs, and it is not known on whom the fatal lot will fall today.

In the last two years, our Order of the Sisters of St. Basil the Great has tried to respond to new challenges. We felt the advantages of being an international order because, thanks to our sisters from the United States, Australia, Romania and other countries, the sisters in Ukraine were able to direct the help of good people from these countries to the needy in Ukraine. As our Sr. Lukiya Murashko, who serves in

Zaporizhzhia, said, "We couldn't do anything here if people didn't support us. But because there are people who want to help, we serve. We are hands for those who have a good heart, who are far away and cannot personally convey their help, and it is a great honor for us to be these hands for such people."

During the past two years, the sisters from Ukraine have participated in the common meetings of our order. In addition to the first touching online meetings in 2022, when we prayed and cried together while listening to the testimonies of sisters from Ukraine, we also met in person, especially at the Enlarged Council of 2022 in Slovakia and the formation courses of 2023 in Romania.

Every time I looked at the participating sisters from Ukraine, I thought about their experience. Now they are talking about formation; but in a few days, they will return to Ukraine, where air raid sirens sound every day, where so many mentally and physically wounded need support and help, where it is sometimes difficult to see the presence of God behind the despair and infinity of war. Now they may joke, but their thoughts are with relatives and friends in Ukraine, worried about their lives. Now they share their thoughts about the future of the order, while their own future is in danger. Therefore, these formation meetings with the participation of the sisters from Ukraine were for me an eloquent testimony of how to build a life in the midst of death, how to plan, to create and to live on in spite of airstrikes and shelling. But you can imagine how much energy it takes to live constantly on the edge, to run ahead of death.

Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, sprinkles worshippers with water during the blessing of water on the Dnipro River after he celebrated a Divine Liturgy Jan. 6 at the Patriarchal Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ in Kyiv amid ongoing Russian aggression in Ukraine. (OSV News/Courtesy Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church)

The first time I heard an air raid siren in Ukraine was in the summer of 2022, when I was visiting relatives. By chance, it happened during the morning liturgy in the convent when the sisters were praying, I believe. As I listened to my feelings, I felt a blatant injustice: Why, why today in the 21st century is a nation of 40 million people a target for murder just because they want to go their own way, the way of freedom and democracy, just because they want to be masters of their own land, in their own state?

The war since 2022 has caused irreparable losses for the people of Ukraine. Social media feeds repeatedly show the faces of the dead, young and old men and women, and sadly, children, businessmen, scientists, writers, fathers, mothers, sons and

daughters. Sometimes whole families die at once in their own apartment. The ecology of Ukraine has suffered terrible losses with global impacts. During the last two years while traveling, I have met a lot of Ukrainian women with children, including small babies, in European airports, railway stations and streets. Like the biblical holy family, they were trying to save the lives of their children.

Another friend, who recently became a mother, hid with her one-day-old daughter in the bomb shelter of the maternity hospital in Kyiv during another rocket attack on Feb. 7. "What do the Russians want?" an African student asked me last year during an Italian language class. "They want us to disappear," I replied. Ukrainian novelist Victoria Amelia, who died in 2023 after being injured in a Russian missile attack, wrote: "There is a real threat that Russians will successfully execute another generation of Ukrainian culture – this time by missiles and bombs."

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Ukrainians continue to run, to run from death. In the midst of war, Ukrainians are trying to live, to build, to raise their children without knowing what the next day will bring. It resembles a race with death: We invest in life, not knowing whether we will have time to protect it. Ukrainians continue to fight because we want our children to study history and not propaganda. Ukrainians continue to fight because we want to have the right to democratically elect our government and freely express our opinions. Ukrainians continue to fight so that our scientists, artists, priests and religious can freely create and enrich the global community without being imprisoned and killed like it has been the last 300 years under the Russian imperial and Russian communist regime.

Today Ukrainians are running from death. Over the past two years, we have received much help and support from people around the world who have helped us to persevere, and we will never forget that. Now, because of exhaustion and depletion of resources and with so many wounds and uncertainties, this hard race gets harder with each new day of war. And without you, without your continuous help, Ukrainians will not be able to outrun death in this race.

This story appears in the **War in Ukraine** feature series. View the full series.