

## **'Pastoral challenges during the war in Ukraine'**

Rev. Dr. Ihor Boyko

Before the large-scale invasion, we were focused on ministry in the Church, on the education and training of seminarians, on academic conferences, on teaching activities. Everything changed on 24 February 2022. The first sound of sirens, announcing air strikes, led to working with refugees, volunteering, and seeking answers to the complex questions of people whose lives have been disrupted by war.

I think we will never forget two days: the beginning of the war and its end. Of the first day I knew in the morning. In the evening when we went to bed, I had no feeling that the war would start. I just couldn't believe it until the last moment. In the morning we prayed the Liturgy. At the moment we concluded the Liturgy, we heard for the first time the wailing of the sirens... At the end of the prayer, other priests came up to me and said: 'The war has started'. We decided to suspend study and the formation process for a while. Some seminarians returned home.

From the first days of the war, we hosted refugees and those who sought asylum with us. Within 48 hours of the start of the invasion, we placed about 60 people there: mothers, children, elderly people who mainly came from the Kharkiv region, South Ukraine, Kyiv and Zhytomyr. We took care of their daily needs, providing them with everything they needed.

Italians and Germans from different organisations and monastic orders started to come to the Seminary and bring us the necessary things. The solidarity of the Italians and Germans was incredible. It was Dr Matilde Leonardi from Milan and Dr Andrea Pellosi, the dentist from Parma, who organised the 'Valentina Mission', named in honour of Dr Valentina Pushych, who was killed on 27 February 2022 by Russian invaders. At first they came with humanitarian aid and then brought six ambulances, which were transferred to the east to save the lives of our soldiers and evacuate people.

There was also a group of Italians from the north of Italy, from the city of Como, the organisation 'Frontiers of Peace'. Their chief engineer Giambattista Mosa said: 'We want to come not only to Lviv but try to go to the East, to Kharkiv. And in August 2022, we travelled this road for the first time: three minibuses, eight Italians accompanied by me. At that time Kharkiv was an empty city. The shelling was continuous. But the humanitarian trips continued. During the large-scale war, I travelled to the Kharkiv region ten times. Our itineraries covered so many other towns and villages (Izium, Synycheno, Kulynychi, Grakove, Chugujiv, Malokomyshuvask, Dergachi, Zolochiv, Prudianka, Kramatorsk, Kostiantynivka, Lyman, Virnopillia, Ivanchukivka, Studenok, Dovgen'ke, Zavody, Tsupivka, etc.), where houses and schools had been destroyed.

In one town Zavody (Kharkiv region), a family struck me. Before the war, there were about seven hundred people in the village and now, perhaps, about fifty, not more. About twenty houses remained intact. The village passed from Russian to Ukrainian hands and back again, nine times. There were terrible battles. So we got there and started distributing humanitarian aid. I noticed a woman in some distance. I said to her, 'Come on, take the humanitarian aid', but she did not move from the place. I started talking to her and between tears the woman asked: "Do you know what it is like to have everything and lose it?" I said: 'No, I don't know'. Then she cried and said that now there is nothing left in their yard. I asked if any of her family was left and learned of a daughter. She was sitting in the car and was taking lessons online. We talked and learned that the girl was eighteen years old, attending the fourth year of an educational institute, wanted to be a teacher, wrote beautiful patriotic poems and edited videos for them. But he studied from his phone because he did not have a computer. We went to see their courtyard, and it was really terrible. Before the Russians came, they had a house, ten cows, forty pigs. On their farm there were three tractors and many fields. Ukrainian land is rich in black soil and by working in the fields the local people could support their families. They were masters on their own land and suddenly the missiles fell and everything they had was destroyed by the Russians in an instant.

**Yes, there is so much misfortune around, so many people in need, and it is not possible to console everyone. But even with a little help we can change their situation.**

Last year I asked myself whether our seminarians, future pastors, are ready to work with the challenges of this war, to heal painful wounds, to understand the people who come to confession? I am a priest, and I can testify that every second confession today is made by people full of hatred towards the Russians. Are we as the Church, as pastors, able to work with this hatred, to deal with forgiveness? So many families lose their relatives and family members, material things, homes... So we took the initiative to explore the psychological aspects related to war. For example, the inclination to suicide, the depression a person falls into, the types of depression and how to help those who are depressed.

Statistics say that in Ukraine in 2022, one in two people experienced depression. That is, fear, uncertainty and not knowing what is to come. We invite theologians who talk about suffering and its meaning to participate in educational courses. So many people wonder how to go on living, what is the meaning of life if I have lost my husband/son in war? These senses should be provided by the Church, by priests and clergy, who must prepare to search together for answers on how to go on.

In the Kharkiv region, I was particularly struck by a place where Father Petro Maika serves. He had been in those parts since before the large-scale invasion and had intended to build the church there. Everything had been agreed, the land had been allocated, but war broke out. For a fortnight, Father Petro hid in the basement with other people, unable to go out, living in terrible conditions. After two weeks in a dungeon, where it was too humid and there were no means of hygiene, his shoes started to come off and then fell apart completely. Then the people told him: 'Father, you cannot stay here because the Russians will kill you'. The priest realised he had to escape. He approached the evacuation train but they told him, "We cannot take you. We only take women and children." So he said he was a priest and only then could he get on the train.

In the carriage he was sitting on the floor, with broken shoes, dirty clothes, a long beard, and then he was hungry because there wasn't even any food. A child sitting next to him saw him and approached to give him a piece of bread. Seeing the outstretched hand and the bread, Father Petro began to cry. Because all his life as a priest he had tried to serve people, to be with them, to help them and now a small child did the same and he was very moved.

After the de-occupation Father Petro had returned to Izium. Now there is no possibility of building a church there but he and his parishioners have a temporary chapel. The windows are broken, there is no light, the floor is terrible but he serves in such conditions. The people love their priest and come willingly to the communal services. For me, Father Petro is an example of a zealous priest who does his pastoral work despite everything.

I conclude. **I do not want my heart to be filled with hatred. And perhaps the greatest challenge is the question: 'How do we go on in the conditions of war? How do you continually look at those atrocities, those killings, and not allow your heart to be filled with hatred for your enemies?' Because I realise that if I hate, even if there are reasons to do so, I will lose as a human being. I often say that humanly I have no strength to forgive, this strength must come from God.**

We are definitely changing, becoming other and better. I don't remember ever in history seeing such a developed volunteer movement as we have today. I do not know if there has ever been such a readiness to defend one's country as there is today, sacrificing one's life. These are very high ideals and probably the supreme calling of life.