

Ukraine: a Nation Under Siege, a People of Spiritual Combat

by Stepan Bilynskyy, deacon

Originally from Ukraine, Stepan Bilynskyy has been in Canada for 22 years. A spiritual health practitioner at Grace Hospital, the permanent deacon offers his testimony on the war in Ukraine and asks everyone to pray for peace.

Interview by Daniel Bahuaud, Communications Coordinator for the Archdiocese of Saint Boniface



Stepan Bilynskyy

The war in my home country is affecting me deeply. My brother is a physician in one of the major urban centers in Western Ukraine. He lives in an apartment and has seen for himself the devastation caused by the missile strikes. Uncertainty hangs over his city, as it does over the whole country, and my nephews have been sent to live with their grandparents in the countryside.

Elsewhere in Ukraine, a Crimean Tartar family living in a town currently occupied by Russian troops, not far from the largest metropolis of Kherson, expressed their deep concern to me. These Sunni Muslims are great friends of mine, who had “adopted” me into their community when I started my career as a young doctor in the South part of Ukraine near the Crimean Peninsula. This territory has a colorful mix of cultures and languages. There are many Ukrainians, Russians, Tartars, Koreans and Jews. Actually, the whole country has many ethnicities, cultures, languages, and religions.

What these good people go through! When I spoke with the family on the phone, their stress and desperation were well disguised but so present that you could literally cut the

air with a knife. The family told me that most of the main foodstuffs had disappeared from the stores. There is no flour to make bread. Plastic debit and credit cards don't work, and most ATMs are empty. If you are lucky, you can get some cash in person from a teller at the bank.

The family described to me the atrocities against the civilian population that they had seen, heard, or learned about, especially the deliberate bombing of schools, kindergartens, and hospitals. There was the bombing of the obstetrics wing of the hospital, where several pregnant women died or were injured, which appears to have been deliberate. Ballistic missiles purposely targeted the central Freedom Square downtown of the nearby Kharkiv, second-largest city in Ukraine. Russian spies and saboteurs are everywhere, and everyone is trying to be very careful.

Curfews are in place, regulated by armed posts. There are vehicle checkpoints where armed individuals in uniforms with Russian insignia ask to show documents. They check car trunks. The country is plunged into darkness, and the only hope of the people is the success of the Ukrainian army and the help, support, and prayers of the rest of the world, which give them a reason to live one more day.

Every day, the crisis is getting worse. The damage is enormous. According to the information I have been able to gather, it is on the same level as the devastation caused during the Second World War. If the conflict ended today, it would still take years to rebuild the devastated homes, buildings, hospitals, and infrastructure. It will take a long time for the country to recover from the conflict, and a long time for the people to heal from this great wound.

Recently, Pope Francis described the situation in Ukraine as a tragedy and the fruit of the devil. It's an apt assessment. As soon as I heard about the start of the war in Ukraine, I thought of my grandmother who, just before World War II, listened to Hitler's speeches on the radio. She and her neighbors thought that his lunatic behaviour when delivering speeches was rather comical, and this would not convince anyone. "The

Germans are intelligent people. They are people of faith, wisdom, technology, science, and medicine. They will not follow this madness.”

They did.

On March 1, I talked to one of the health care aides at Grace Hospital. A Bosnian Serb. He told me how, in 1992, people in Bosnia were joking with each other that Slobodan Milošević would never start a war.

He did.

It's sobering. Just before the conflict started and this madness began, my brother in Ukraine and I talked on the phone because it was his birthday. We were discussing *The Snow Queen*, the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale where the devil makes a mirror that reflects only the inner ugliness and deformities of people. The mirror shatters and splinters pierce hearts and eyes, preventing them from loving or seeing God in their neighbor. It took me a long time to understand that if we lose God in our lives, and if we lose sight of how God sees us – his beloved ones, created in his own image and likeness (Gen 1:27) – then we see our neighbor as deformed and inhuman.



Ukrainians know the value of fighting spiritual evil. For centuries, the coat of arms of Kyiv was Archangel Michael, wielding his sword. The Archangel Michael's statue symbolically guards Independence Square downtown Kyiv, protecting Ukrainian people of all religious beliefs and walks of life.

Kyiv's famous statue of the Archangel Michael.

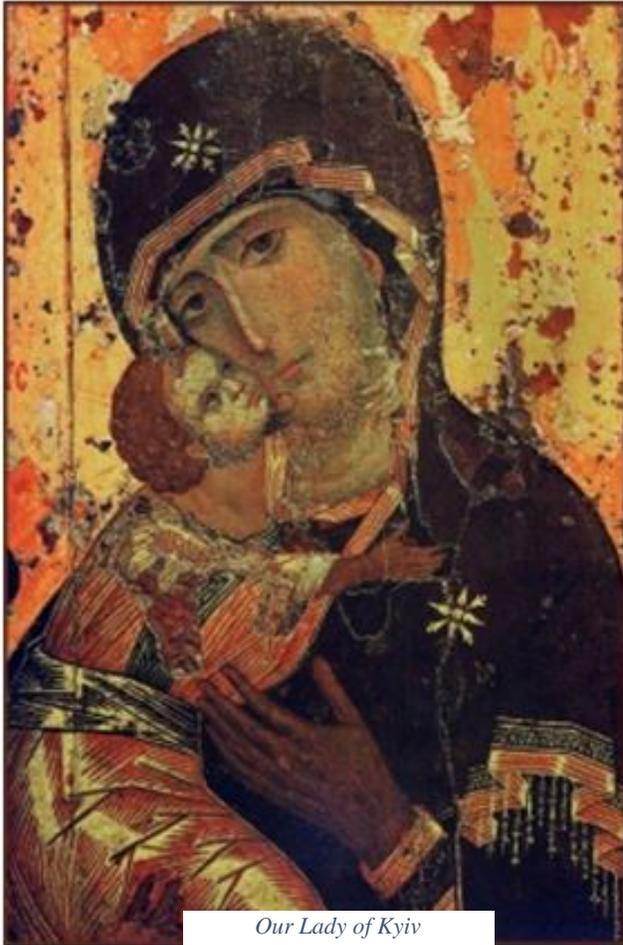
In a time of war, Ukrainians, as much as many nations, are reaching the deepest levels of their spirituality. A mystery I am barely scratching the surface of is that in the depths of fear and horror, people understand more clearly that they are not alone, and that God is with them and others. This is certainly what I feel when I talk to my family, friends and even complete strangers in Ukraine via Facebook. They have immense faith. Immense hope and strength.

Today, many media reports show images of Ukrainians praying, or celebrating Mass in underground shelters. I am not the least bit surprised. During the First and Second World Wars, Ukrainian soldiers were known to burn crosses – on the trees or depict them on the walls – while celebrating Mass in the forest, or in the trenches. Or anywhere they were. I had one of these crosses cut out from the tree when I was still living in Ukraine. I donated the artifact to the local museum before my departure. It was a source of inspiration, especially since I grew up under the communist regime, which had taken away the right to pray in public. I know that time well. Bishops and priests were ordained in secret. We listened to Vatican Radio to celebrate Mass, but without the Eucharist. We had spiritual communion for years, which Canadian Catholics have only recently experienced during the pandemic. We struggled and lived with these conditions for a very long time, some generations for their entire lives. We knew the value of our faith. Even today, the spirit of resilience and faith is still evident.

Some anecdotes highlighting the courage and faith of Ukrainians are circulating and beginning to be known outside the country. I have already mentioned that Ukrainians are not of single ethnicity or even some unique religious faith. Being Ukrainian is a spirit, an idea. This family I know and love is Muslim. There are many Jewish Ukrainians, including President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. All of them have a very strong attachment and identification with Ukraine in their hearts.

Ukraine has been under immense pressure from other countries, especially from neighboring Russia, for many generations. This is a well-known piece of our history. Ukraine has experienced over 700 years of incredible and constant wars, oppression,

continuous attempts to take away its identity. Ukrainians have never given up. Why? They have faith. We know who we are, and if we give up on ourselves, we will cease to exist.



Our Lady of Kyiv

One incident I shared on Facebook was the tragic death of a Ukrainian Orthodox military chaplain, murdered by advancing Russian soldiers. He bore witness to his faith, when his life was taken away. Remember that in Greek, *witness* is *martyr*. So even today, there are witnesses of God, who give everything for their neighbors.

In the face of evil, Ukrainians do not give up. Our current experience as a people is an opportunity for *all* of us, not just Ukrainians, to invite God into our hearts. We know that many of our people have become saints simply by being who we are. We keep this faith.

And even while defending themselves against an invader, they refuse to see them as monsters. I must say that I often think of those many Russians who are demonstrating against the war. They are immensely brave. There is no hatred in my heart. I feel a deep sadness for what they are going through. They are going through a real catastrophe now.

I can't help but think of those Russian soldiers who, far too young, give up their lives because of the ideas of one mad man. They are not war statistics. They are somebody's sons and daughters. We should pray for their mothers, who are in need of peace at this time. In addition to Michael the Archangel, I pray a lot to Mary, the Holy Mother of God. The image of Mary is in every Ukrainian home. She has been a symbol of hope for us for many generations. The Rosary is my weapon to fight evil. I invite you to keep Mary in your hearts.

This conflict is an opportunity for all of us to invite God, radical love of neighbor, and peace into our hearts. The war in Ukraine concerns us all. Please be generous in your assistance to the refugees and your donations to the many charitable and international organizations supporting Ukrainians. Canada is doing an incredible job. The Canadian government is to be thanked for its support, understanding and efforts. The local politicians have been amazing. The ethnic Ukrainian Manitobans have been amazing, not to mention all Manitobans. There is a lot of empathy, compassion, and support out there. And a lot of generosity.

Above all, pray for Ukraine. Pray for the Russians under a dictator. Pray for world peace because this aggression is not only against Ukraine. It could very easily turn into an aggression against the whole world. Pray. Pray for peace!

Prayers for Ukraine

Prayers of the Faithful – The Synod of Bishops of Ukraine ask that the following petitions be made during our eucharistic celebrations – [Click here](#)

Prayer for Ukraine – This prayer is written from a Ukrainian perspective. You will discover that the text therefore refers to “our ancestral land”. We ask that you consider this as referring not only to the beleaguered nation, but to all people everywhere affected by the conflict – [Click here](#)

A Prayer for Ukraine – by Chaya Kaplan-Lester, a Jerusalem-based spiritual teacher, guide and psychotherapist, and co-director of the Shalev Center for Jewish Personal Growth. – [Click here](#)

Donate

To help the people of Ukraine survive the war, visit the Canadian Near-East Welfare Association's website. This organization was founded by Pope Pius XI in 1926 and is under the guidance of Pope Francis. [Click here](#)

Or give through Development and Peace - Learn more as to how you can support by making a donation to Caritas Ukraine by clicking here: [Solidarity, prayers and support for Ukraine: Development and Peace joins relief efforts.](#)