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Contact:

(Ukrainian, German, Polish, Italian & Russian)

Most Rev. Bishop Bohdan Dziourach ([+380 95 147 14 69](tel:+380951471469)) bohband@gmx.net
Kyiv, Secretary of the Synod of the UGCC

(English, French, & Italian)

Most Rev. Borys Gudziak ([+33 650 18 27 61](tel:+33650182761)) gudziak@gmail.com
UGCC Bishop Paris & Head of the Department of External Church Relations

(English – North America)

Most Rev. Ken Nowakowski ([+1 604 812 9694](tel:+16048129694))
Bishop of New Westminster (British Columbia, Canada)

As Pastors We Speak Out on Behalf of Our People Before the Holy Father and Before the World “The Holy Father Heard Us.”

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War is unbridled evil, a radical violation of the will of God. It brings physical destruction and social mayhem, comprehensive moral degradation and untold human suffering. To us pastors and to all Christians and all people of good will, our Lord reminds us that “Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.”(Matthew:25:45).

For the past two years Ukrainians have endured a new type of onslaught – a hybrid war directed at their sovereignty, economic viability, historical memory, and international standing. A European nation has been invaded, its land annexed, its industrial infrastructure destroyed, and its economy crippled. The freedom, self-determination, justice, and welfare of the people are under attack. The very identity of Ukrainians is systematically denigrated through relentless and sophisticated international propaganda at a level not witnessed in Europe since the time of Nazi and Soviet totalitarianism.

Why? The answer is simple. Because the people of Ukraine are claiming their God-given human dignity. They are determined to break with a Soviet past—genocidal, colonial and imperialistic, ferociously atheistic and profoundly corrupt. During the past century, dominated by red and brown totalitarianisms, Ukraine became what historians call a “bloodland.” Some 15 million people were killed on its territory: in both World Wars, through campaigns of national and religious repression, genocides, particularly the Holodomor (killing by starvation) and the Holocaust, war-induced famine, and ethnic cleansing. Millions more spent years or even decades in prisons, labor camps, and Siberian exile.

Godless dictators sought to uproot faith and values and to destroy the culture and social fabric of the people in order to dominate, control, and exploit the nation. The state sought to control family life. Abortion became part of state policy. Alcoholism became rampant. All Churches and religions that stood with the persecuted population were prime targets of repression. For three generations terror was promoted as explicit state policy. Fear was driven into the nation’s heart. And yet, faithful Christians survived the persecution, sustained by the words of our Lord: "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

After the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, peacefully, providentially, its constituent republics, now independent, experienced newfound freedoms, as they sought to establish democratic government institutions and free economies, while respecting the sovereignty and international borders of neighboring states. In many post-Soviet states, however, democracy did not take hold and corruption became a way of life. For some the fall of the Soviet Union was viewed as the

“greatest tragedy of the 20th century” and efforts to revive the past were undertaken. This led to repressive policies and authoritative, kleptocratic regimes in many post-Soviet countries, including Ukraine. The suffering of the people continued and the UGCC remained in solidarity with them systematically proposing to society the social doctrine of the Catholic Church.

God spoke to the conscience of the citizens of Ukraine and the Holy Spirit guided hundreds of thousands of men and women, the young and the elderly, to stand together on the Maidan in prayer for the nation. “Enough! Let us end the corruption and systemic injustice!” While affirming human dignity the nation experienced authentic ecumenism in action: a desire for full and visible Christian unity. A new unity, a new solidarity, a new responsibility for a renewed country. “This very day I appoint you over nations and empires, to dig up and pull down, to destroy and demolish, to build and plant” (Jer 1:10).

Two years ago, by means of peaceful protest of millions throughout the country, accompanied by the prayer of Ukraine’s religious communities—Orthodox, Greek and Roman Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim—the people said: “Enough! We will be free. We want to live without fear and corruption, to live with justice. We have dignity.” People came to realize that their dignity is not only a function of constitutional rights but that it is indeed sacred, God’s own holy plan. The hourly prayers on the Maidan helped the protesters understand the fundamental scriptural tenet: We are created in the image and likeness of God (see Gen 1:26), and while the image cannot be destroyed, the likeness requires effort, virtue, and a determination to order society according to divine law. This manifestation of solidarity and sacrifice fascinated the world.

Not all, however, were thrilled. The new sense of freedom, dignity, and civic responsibility and prospects of association with European peoples and nations needed to be stopped: it could spread to Ukraine’s neighbors. Thus, for the last two years, the entire Ukrainian nation is being punished by its northern neighbor nostalgic for the Soviet legacy of imperial grandeur. Such hegemony can be maintained only through fear, intimidation, and control of the media. It requires a disregard for human rights and freedom of conscience. The punishment meted out to Ukrainians for their audacity to be free is brutal, cynical, and manipulative. The agenda of abuse seeks international legitimization and cultivates enmity towards and rejection of the will of the people of Ukraine. It seeks to stop the development of civil society and the establishment of true rule of law.

The Head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and the members of the Permanent Synod came to Rome to meet His Holiness Pope Francis to share a message from their flock and the entire Ukrainian nation. This message needs to be fully understood by the global Christian family and the international community: We are under violent foreign invasion and we need your moral leadership and charitable help.

Officially nearly 10,000 persons have been killed; unofficially many more. Tens of thousands have been maimed and injured. There are 5 million people directly affected by the war, of which almost half have become refugees. Nearly 2 million are internally displaced, including almost 300,000 children. Up to half a million people have been forced out of the country in the last two years. For any person of faith or good will these people are not a mere statistic—each is a father or mother, brother or sister, neighbor, child or friend.

Ukraine is enduring a mounting humanitarian crisis, the greatest in Europe since the end of the World War II. The effects of two years of hybrid war have put hundreds of thousands into post-traumatic shock from which it will take decades to recover. Virtually the entire population has been impoverished. The currency of the country has been reduced to one-third of the value it held two years ago. The necessary economic reforms—conditions for international financial assistance—include a 350% increase in heating costs for most citizens. It is important not to forget: Ukraine has a cold climate...

...but the people of Ukraine have a warm and welcoming heart. They have welcomed some two million war refugees. In this regard the witness of millions of Ukrainians is inspiring. The generosity of volunteers has been astounding. Across the country they care for the injured, traumatized, and homeless, the widows and orphans. And yet, the ongoing invasion adds to the human misery. The killing goes on.

Today Europe is challenged at its very heart. For whom is there room in the heart of Europe? How much room is there? The continent is seeing that it is not easy to harbor refugees. Up until now Europe has been large hearted, generous and hospitable. Middle Eastern exiles are, in fact, going mostly to and finding reception in European and other countries where Christian tradition and social doctrine have served as the foundation for the modern respect of human freedoms and human rights. Yet supporting more than one million new refugees is proving to be a great challenge for the European Union. It is a challenge despite the fact that the EU has an annual budget 400 times greater than that of Ukraine. And yet, without great international clamor and commotion Ukraine in the last two years has absorbed 2 million refugees-internally displaced persons. The Christian heritage of Europe is being tested. What is our response during the “Year of Mercy” announced by Pope Francis?

During our visit to Rome we explained the realities on the ground in Ukraine, denounced the invasion and hybrid war and decried the suffering of millions of innocent men, women and children. The Church condemns the atrocities, the kidnappings, imprisonment and torture of citizens of Ukraine in the Donbas and Crimea—especially abuses directed at religious communities and ethnic groups, especially Muslim Tatars, as well as broad violations of civic rights and the human dignity of millions.

As Christians we are ready to forgive and seek peace. We announce and actively promote peace and forgiveness. But real peace is unattainable until the invasion ceases and the war is stopped.

We have been in Rome on the eve of the 70th anniversary of what historians call the “Pseudo-synod of Lviv.” Orchestrated 8-10 March 1946 by Stalin’s regime to liquidate the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) this “synod” was held without any Greek Catholic bishops, since all had been imprisoned. Despite being beaten, tortured, and threatened with long prison sentences and even death, they had all refused to deny communion with the Pope. As a result the UGCC became the largest completely outlawed Church in the world. Its property was transferred to the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate or confiscated and used for secular purposes. Stalin wanted to cut the ties of Ukrainian Greek Catholics with the Bishop of Rome. Many of the bishops died in prison or in the Gulag. Hundreds of clergy and religious and tens of thousands of laity met a similar fate.

However, our hope and "our help is in the name of the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth" (Ps 124:8). Today the Soviet Union is gone, and the once powerful persecutors are consigned to history and divine judgment. Meanwhile, the martyrs are being canonized, and their spiritual children grow in spirit and number. “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.” (Rom 8:28). The Lord has blessed the suffering and sacrifice in order to fulfill his purpose. At the beginning of twentieth century—the century of sacrifice—the UGCC had three western-Ukrainian eparchies (dioceses) with three bishops. Today it has thirty-three eparchies and exarchates with 53 bishops on four continents. If in 1989, at the end of the catacomb period, only 300 aged priests remained of the 3000 pre-war clergy, today there are again 3000 priests with an average age of 38. The Church in Ukraine is vibrant and dynamic. We came to Rome to reaffirm communion of the revived UGCC with the Holy Father and to bear witness to our unity with the Universal Catholic Church.

The UGCC has demonstrated with its very blood its solidarity with the Bishop of Rome and the

worldwide Catholic communion. Now, during the Year of Mercy, is the time for the Catholic Church to bring the healing balm of mercy to their suffering brothers and sisters in Ukraine in reciprocal solidarity. The Ukrainian people are proving their commitment to European values of human dignity and the rule of law. Now is the time for Europe to understand that if it does not stand up for these same values in Ukraine, they become endangered throughout the continent. This is a time to confirm what the nations of Europe and its religious communities hold most dear; a time to see whether the blessings of freedom and prosperity that Western powers and societies enjoy might be shared more fully with a long-suffering people.

The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church ceaselessly prays for and promotes peace, and in Rome its leadership appealed to the Holy Father and to the world to help stop the war and stem the humanitarian crisis caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. For Ukrainians who belong to different Churches and religious organizations and even secular citizens, the Holy Father is a global moral authority who speaks the truth. This voice of truth is particularly important for the suffering people of Ukraine. If the people do not hear or understand this voice they become confused, anxious and feel forgotten.

“The people are suffering, Holy Father, and they await your embrace, the active support of the Catholic communion and all people of good will” was our word. His Holiness made it clear that he would act. It was most important that on the eve of the sad anniversary of the Pseudo-synod of Lviv Pope Francis wholeheartedly acknowledged the faithfulness and heroic witness of generations of Greek Catholics. He prepared a warm pastoral statement calling the events of March 1946 by their proper name. The Holy Father emphasized that one cannot solve ecumenical problems at the expense of an Eastern Catholic Church.

We hope that His Holiness will initiate and support new steps to help relieve the dire hardships endured by millions of Ukrainians, that he will speak out on their behalf and encourage international aid. The UGCC stands ready to facilitate responsible, transparent, ecumenically sound administration of international assistance, serving the Ukrainian population without regard to ethnicity, political or linguistic preferences or religious affiliation. We are ready to cooperate in a well-coordinated plan that includes governmental and non-governmental bodies in order to lift the suffering out of their need, meeting both short-term and enduring needs of those affected by the humanitarian crisis caused by the invasion of Ukraine. Enough of this suffering! It can be prevented. It can be healed. Let us make the “Year of Mercy” a reality for the people of Ukraine.

+Svitoslav (Shevchuk)
Major Archbishop of Kyiv and Halych
Head and Father of the UGCC
+Volodymyr (Vijtyshyn)
Metropolitan and archbishop of Ivano-Frankivsk
+Yaroslav (Pryriz)
Bishop of Drohobych
+Ken (Nowakowski)
Bishop of New Westminster
+Borys (Gudziak)
Bishop of St. Volodymyr the Great in Paris
+Bohdan (Dziourach)
Secretary of the Synod of the UGCC