

## Voices from the Donbas. Fr Oleh (Salesian): "An unprecedented massacre." "The international community must stop the war now"



"There is nothing left behind them. The ground is a desert of rubble, dust and fire. First they drop bombs. Then they advance with armoured vehicles and ultimately destroy everything. A massacre is under way. An unprecedented massacre. Never had I seen such horror." Father Oleh Ladnyuk, a Salesian priest from Dnipro, reports to SIR on the situation in Donbas, the region where fighting escalated in the last few days and where it is feared that Severodonetsk could become a new Mariupol. Mayor Oleksandr Struk said that most residential buildings in Severodonetsk - "60 per cent" - have been destroyed by Russian shelling, while 80-90 per cent are heavily damaged and in need of major re-construction." Over 1,500 people were killed in this city alone since the outbreak of war. Father Oleh continues travelling back and forth from the small towns in the region to the small Salesian home in Dnipro. He is driving as he speaks to us. He drives back and forth every day to bring food, medicine, humanitarian aid, and to bring to a safer place those still remaining who decided to flee. He could still enter Severodonetsk until a week ago, but "unfortunately bombs are being dropped on the road and I can no longer to travel to where they live," says the priest. "I recall asking a mother to allow me to bring her two children to safety. I assured her that I would bring them to a safe place but she refused. I wonder how they will survive. The bridge connecting Severodontesk and Lysy?ansk has been destroyed by the Russians and Lysy?ansk is no longer accessible either."



Up until a week ago Father Oleh succeeded in bringing medicines for the elderly with a group of volunteers. That is almost impossible now. "The soldiers try to do the best they can, but there is not much they can do because they are engaged in fighting and have no time for civilians. Every now and then I succeed in directing the soldiers to critical situations such as diabetic patients or the elderly." Communication is also a problem. "There are no mobile phone connections. Only the military have access to the Internet thanks to the Starlink Internet network provided by Elon Musk. But we have no more news of the people we had been in touch with and that's a terrible thing. These people remained because they didn't want to leave. Circumstances vary. Some have elderly or unwell family members to look after. Others told me they had no money and nowhere to go. One grandmother, for example, would not leave her home so as not to abandon her pets." Those who remain are living in dramatic

[conditions, the priest said. "They cook the food outdoors on fires using the wood from the houses' furniture."](#)



["Our faith is a way of life. I simply feel that what I am doing responds to my vocation. Those who see me tell me: "with your closeness to us, you show us that God has not abandoned us." I therefore feel an obligation not to abandon these people, showing them that even in this land ravaged by war, where there is nothing left but death and destruction, God is present and leaves no one behind. It isn't a simple thing to do. But I do it and in so doing I realise that God has sent me to this place, at this time of life, precisely for this purpose." \*\*A most shocking fact is that now people are saying they are not afraid of dying but of suffering disabilities.\*\* "That's what most soldiers and civilians I talk to have been telling me" says Fr Oleh. "The population is ready to die at any time now, which is terrifying. I have also noticed that very few break into tears. Only once did I see a father cry when I brought his daughters to a safe place, away from the combat zone. However, only the father was crying. When the girls arrived at our Salesian home in Dnipro and felt they were safe, only then did they burst into tears." While Father Oleh is driving and chronicling the war in the heart of the Donbas, his thoughts go to Europe and to the "world that allowed all this to happen". "A peace plan is proposed that involves ceding Ukraine's occupied territories to Russia. It's like asking Italy to cede the Veneto region to Austria," he remarked. "This is a non-feasible option. I fear that this conflict will escalate further. I hope the world understands that the only way forward here and now is for everything to stop or we will have many more years of war and death."](#)

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