

## Metropolitan Epiphanius: "We are grateful to Pope Francis. We call for a just peace"



The Ukrainian people are grateful to Pope Francis for his prayers, for providing humanitarian aid and, above all, for the many attempts made to achieve peace, including at the diplomatic level. Members of the Pan-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organisations flew to Rome where they were received by the Holy Father on Wednesday, January 25, before the general audience. His Beatitude Epiphanius, Metropolitan of Kyiv, Primate of the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Ukraine, described to SIR the prevailing "state of mind" of the religious leaders received in audience by the Pope at this critical moment for their country, almost one year ( February 24, 2022) after the outbreak of Russia's large-scale aggression. The delegation of the Pan-Ukrainian Council held several meetings with dignitaries representing Vatican dicasteries on the morning of January 24; they visited the St. Sophia Cathedral in Rome, the religious site of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic community in Rome, which became a major centre for the collection of humanitarian supplies during the past months. Later that afternoon, the delegation was received by the Ambassador of Ukraine to the Holy See, Andriy Yurash. "The Pope is a religious leader for the whole world. Hence his thoughts, his words, and more importantly his prayers are important to us," said His Beatitude Metropolitan Epiphanius, interviewed by SIR at Casa Santa Marta where he is staying. "At this very difficult time in our history, his spiritual support in prayer is especially meaningful to us," he added. "But the Pope is also not just a religious leader. He is also a Head of State. And many people all over the world listen to him. Therefore, the support of other countries is very important to the Ukrainian people."



We will meet the Pope as representatives of the Pan-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organisations. But first of all we would like to thank him for everything he has done so far, and he has done very much. Not only on a spiritual level, with his prayers, but also by providing material support, by sending humanitarian aids which we are receiving from the Catholic Church. We will ask him to continue providing this support. We likewise believe that the voice of the Pope, speaking out against this wicked force that has attacked and destroyed Ukraine, is a strong voice that will be heard. We are fighting for freedom. Not only for the freedom of Ukrainians but for the freedom of the whole of Europe. **What role can Pope Francis play and how could the Holy See act as a mediator for peace?**

What we are asking for is a just peace.

But this requires that Ukraine wins this war. It means returning to pre-war global order. The Holy See has extensive peace-building experience, it handled many cases in the last century. It is our hope that the Pope, as Head of State representing the Catholic Church, will do everything possible to achieve this just peace. **Do you think the Pope and the Holy See will be listened to by President Vladimir Putin and by the political leaders of the Russian Federation?** Also based on the experience of the last few years, we know that they are not willing to listen. We have witnessed the numerous efforts made by the Pope since February 24, personally attempting to reach out to Putin's and the Kremlin administration's hearts and minds on many occasions, with his message. But their doors remained shut to his words. Not only did Putin and Patriarch Kirill pay no heed to the Pope's voice, they also closed their hearts and minds to all world leaders. **Given these conditions of total closure, how can anyone help to build a just peace?** First and foremost by saying a special prayer from the heart, to be recited by Christians all over the world. We believe that God can change every situation, that Divine Providence is at work in the world. We believe that God can stop this war, break this evil chain of destruction and channel the outcome to what is good, thereby benefiting human beings. In this critical situation, the support of the global community is equally important for Ukraine. Our people are facing a very difficult situation caused by cold weather. As you know, our enemy is trying to destroy our infrastructure.

We therefore need support of all kinds.



We need humanitarian aid above all. But if we want this war to end and if we want to sever this evil, vicious chain, we need military aid. The sooner this war ends, the less destruction and, above all, the fewer deaths there will be. Regrettably, both Russian President Putin and the administration of the Russian Federation don't understand that dialogue is essential. They think that dialogue is a sign of weakness. All they understand is the language of force. If the Ukrainians are strong, they will become less willing to prolong this war. But should Ukrainian resistance cease, our State is doomed to disappear. And if Putin stops the bombings and the attacks, this war will end. **We are also witnessing a war among the country's Orthodox Churches. What is happening?** First of all, there is no actual war. We all believe that sooner or later Ukraine will have a single local Orthodox Church. That is, there will be Orthodox unity in the country.

We reject the instrumentalisation being made by the Moscow Patriarchate against Ukrainians in Ukraine.

Many factors are at play in this war. Russian TV channels broadcasting Russian propaganda have been banned in Ukraine, just as pro-Russian political parties have been banned in parliament. Unfortunately, Putin is also exploiting the spiritual element and the State of Ukraine is striving to ensure national security. Therefore, it is not a question of banning or outlawing Churches. Freedom of belief and religion is not at issue. This is about national security. **Is it true that numerous Orthodox parishes with ties to Moscow are asking to join your Church?** Indeed, many parishes wish to join our Church, and pursuant to Ukrainian law and the Constitution, it is permitted to change jurisdiction. The idea of an internal war between the local churches is Russian propaganda, in reality there is no conflict whatsoever. Local parishes are requesting to be allowed to change jurisdiction, and we welcome the peaceful, voluntary and tranquil nature of this process. We are absolutely not against anyone wishing to belong to the Russian Church. This is a democratic State, and as such no one can be forbidden to live in and belong to whichever Church they choose. But they must use their

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real name, which is the Russian Orthodox Church of Ukraine. **People in Italy risk forgetting about this war. Please make an appeal to the Italian population.** Do not forget this terrible war that is being fought in the heart of Europe! Every day, the people of Ukraine are paying with their lives the price of this war, including the lives of many children. If you share our suffering, it becomes less painful. The people of Ukraine are suffering. And they are suffering because we are protecting not only our future but the future of the whole of Europe. As Christians, we know that if one part of our body hurts, we hurt all over. We therefore ask for your prayers, your support and your compassion.

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