
Summer camp initiative for 700 Ukrainian children in Italy. “It is our small contribution to peace”

A huge white banner bearing the words "Welcome" in Ukrainian and Italian, a large heart, and a blue and yellow flag: this is how the parish community of Tiggiano, in the diocese of Ugento-Santa Maria di Leuca, welcomed the first group of boys and girls who arrived in the oratory-hostel "Oasi del Bello" on Saturday 15 June after a long journey from the city of Nikopol, Ukraine. "It's nicer together" is the free summer camp programme for 700 children and accompanying adults from war-torn areas, hosted this year in Italy's Apulia region. The initiative, promoted by the Italian Bishops' Conference, was launched immediately after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022 and will take place from 15 June to 30 August this year to give children the opportunity to spend a holiday in Italy, at different times and in different localities. The minors will be hosted by local Caritas facilities in Cosenza, Lamezia Terme, Como, Senigallia, Iglesias, Jesi and Ugento-Santa Maria di Leuca, in both seaside and mountain resorts. The Italian Christian Workers' Associations (ACLI) also contribute to the initiative by hosting one of the groups in Piedmont. **“The group consists of boys and girls aged 10 to 16. They are just like our children, except that they cannot leave their homes all year round because of the war,” says Father Lucio Ciardo, Director of Caritas Ugento - S. Maria di Leuca.** “They arrived after a 60-hour journey. Last night was the first night they slept peacefully, without fear,” a volunteer told us. In fact, the primary “mission” of the initiative is to offer the Ukrainian boys and girls a few days of peace, away from the bombs and the worries. The Diocese of Don Tonino Bello in Puglia has offered to host 110 young people organised into two groups: the first from 15 to 29 June and the second from 11 to 29 August. They came from Nikopol, a town a few kilometres from the Zaporizhia nuclear plant. “As soon as they arrived, the educators told us that they heard two explosions as they were getting on the bus. Here in Italy they found peace and quiet, a place to play, have fun and spend time at the beach. One day we saw one of the girls crying. We asked her what was wrong, but she replied: "Mine are tears of joy". “We are the church of Don Tonino Bello,” adds Father Lucio. “This means that ours is a place of welcome. Despite the language barrier, we understood the importance of being together, playing, having fun, getting to know each other. All this contributes to community-building, and to the creation of a small haven of peace. To show the world of the powerful that peace is possible and that it starts with the children.”



This is the third year that this experience has been repeated in Lombardy. The programme has been tried and tested. It includes excursions to discover the local surroundings and the local communities, from the Alpine community groups to the volunteers. Visits to the lake and recreational and leisure activities, handicraft workshops and preparations for the concluding party complete the experience. **Besides the seven Italian dioceses involved, the Italian Workers' Associations (ACLI) have been supporting the initiative from the very start.** "We welcomed the young people two years ago in Vezza d'Oglio, then last year in Cavareno, in Trentino. This year we will host them in the village of Frabosa Soprana, in the district of Cuneo, from 29 July to 10 August," said **Andrea Villa, provincial president of the ACLI of Milan, Monza and Brianza.** The ACLI has agreed to host 90 boys and girls with their group leaders. They are all internally displaced persons from various war-torn areas and are being cared for by Caritas Ukraine and Caritas Spes. The purpose of the project is to offer them "a period of relaxation and an opportunity for interaction with young Italians." The residence will be self-managed, with some young people in charge of preparing meals and others of organising activities. The programme alternates days of excursions, visits to a theme park and swimming pool, and leisure activities and workshops. "They have been living in a psychologically difficult context for more than two years," says Villa. "Some of them are without a home. Others are afraid that they will never see again their family members who left to fight in the war a long time ago. They are also worried about the future of Ukraine. It is certainly an overwhelming situation. What these youths need is a place where they can get away from it all, if only temporarily. Over the past few years, the educators have told us that on the third/fourth day, both they and the children were able to fall asleep without waking up in the morning in fear of the war. The second most important thing is to make them feel that they are not alone, that they have not been abandoned, that there are communities here in Italy that care about them. The connections made continue even after the 'holiday' has ended. They stay in touch through online chat channels, where they exchange information and news, such as the joy of a diploma obtained or even the concern for an 18-year-old girl who has decided to join the army." "In the face of any conflict, the best thing we can do is to show closeness to the people who are suffering as a result of it, thereby making our small contribution to peace-building." **Preparations are also underway in Jesi, in the Marche region,** where 26 children and young people aged between 10 and 16, plus 4 accompanying persons, will stay from 1 to 15 July. **Marco D'Aurizio,** delegate person of Caritas Marche, has drawn up a holiday programme with the collaboration of numerous organisations and individuals. The programme includes transfers to a coastal location each day from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., which include lunch, thanks to the minivans made available by the municipal administration. Furthermore, animation is provided by the parishes, Scouts, and Catholic Action youths. There will be field trips to the Frasassi caves, the Falconara Marittima park, and the water theme park. This is not the first time that Ukrainian children have received hospitality in dioceses in the Marche region. A similar initiative was undertaken last year. "I remember a 16-year-

old girl who asked at the end of that experience, 'do I really have to go home?' We answered that yes, she had to go home but those days spent with us would not end there."

M. Chiara Biagioni