

Ukraine. Wives of Azovstal defenders to the Pope: “You are our last hope”

On Wednesday 26 June, a small delegation of wives, mothers and friends of the Azov defenders had the opportunity to personally speak with Pope Francis in Saint Peter's Square. The women have had no news of their loved ones for more than two years. Nor do they have any information about their well-being. No phone calls, no letters. But they are sure they are alive. They had a glimpse of them on Russian TV channels during the court proceedings. Unfortunately, this is precisely the crux of the problem. Due to the arbitrary rulings of Russian courts, they do not appear on the 'lists' for prisoner exchanges. “The Pope is our last hope,” says **Vialietta Shovkova**. “We do not know what else can be done to bring our loved ones home. Only an amnesty or a pardon could save them, but ultimately it is up to Putin to make that decision. And he will never do so.”



is Sergeant Oleksiy Zhernovsky. He has been sentenced to 28 years in prison. The last time she heard from him was on 11 April 2022, when she received the following message: “I am alive. Wounded but alive.” “We have asked the Pope to help us bring them home. The Russian prison system is known to be extremely harsh. Our main concern is for their safety and health”. The women showed pictures of the prisoners who had returned home. Shocking pictures. Bodies reduced to skin and bones, faces emaciated, eyes sunken. Compared to photos taken before their captivity, the faces are completely different. They are almost unrecognisable. They remind us of the pictures we know from history books or memorials to wartime atrocities.



Serhiy Mykhaylenko, an experienced soldier also serving in the Azov Brigade. He too was sentenced to life imprisonment. Tamara remembers the last time she heard from him. It was in March 2022. They could hardly speak because the tears were overwhelming. But she remembers his words. He was in Mariupol and he said to her: "Don't worry. I'm with the best of them". It did not turn out that way. The latest information is that Serhiy is in Siberia, in one of the harshest penal colonies, where Alexei Navalny was detained. Tetyana Vyshniak is the mother of Sergeant Artem Vyshniak. He has been sentenced to 22 years in prison, "in violation of the Geneva Convention", she repeats several times. Since he left for the front, she only managed to speak to him on rare occasions. Whenever they spoke, however, Artem said he was doing well, and during the assault on Mariupol he had told her: “We will resist until the end, everyone will see and know how one's homeland should be loved and defended.” “He is alive,” says Tetyana with certainty. She too has seen her son on television. Her voice is strained and her eyes well up with tears. "I am a mother who has no more information about her son. To understand how I feel, try to put yourself in my position. The Pope is our hope. He is the only one who can help us.”

M. Chiara Biagioni