

Prayers for peace on Sunday at the Berdychiv Shrine . Father Mykhalkiv: “It's the diplomacy of dialogue”

“No alarms sounded before or after Mass, so we had the opportunity to remain in the Shrine's main church. Seeing the Cardinal's remarkable serenity was extremely important to us. It's a serenity that stems from the faith. His serene presence brought us hope, consolation and closeness. It's the serenity of someone who is aware of the circumstances but who, through faith, is able to transform the situation into one of hope.” Father **Ruslan Mykhalkiv**, Rector of the Seminary of the Diocese of Kyiv-Zhytomir, gives SIR an account of the Sunday celebration of Holy Mass by Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin at the Shrine of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Berdychiv. Cardinal Parolin arrived at the Carmelite Monastery on the third day of his visit to the country as Papal Legate. He was accompanied by the Apostolic Nuncio, Monsignor Visvaldas Kulbokas. They were received by political dignitaries and members of the diplomatic corps, pilgrims from various parts of Ukraine and foreign delegations. “The whole of Ukraine is currently experiencing ‘the dark hour of Golgotha’”, the Cardinal said. “It breaks my heart to think that while we are here, in another part of the country, cruel battles are raging with incessant bombardment.”



Cardinal Parolin's visit to Ukraine, at the request of Pope Francis, was aimed primarily at encouraging the Ukrainian people to “never lose faith and hope in God, especially today, when it seems that evil has the upper hand, when the horrors of war and the pain of so many victims and massive destruction undermine faith in divine goodness, when we feel overcome with anguish and we don't even have the strength to pray.” Parolin said in his homily. “At the end of Mass,” Father Mykhalkiv said, “His Eminence blessed the statues of St Michael the Archangel, which the Bishop of Skomarovskyj had brought from the Sanctuary of Saint Michael the Archangel on Mount Gargano, Italy, for the Ukrainian dioceses. It was a very powerful sign. It reminds us that what we are experiencing is not only a struggle for justice, but also a spiritual struggle. This shrine reminds us that the greatest battle, perhaps the most important one, is the battle that is being fought in our hearts. It is a most challenging battle because we cannot see it. **Could you describe to us the Ukraine that the Cardinal has found in the last few days?** First of all, there is a widespread feeling of loss. Grief is the worst form of loss. While other forms of loss can somehow heal with time, when people are gone, they are gone forever. Then there are the wounded. The soldiers who have returned from the front with injuries to their bodies and souls. The prospect of a normal life, the ability to look to the future, to tomorrow, is gone. It is a huge challenge. Add to this the fact that men can be sent to the battlefield at any time. You could be called up from one day to the next. Unfortunately, this possibility also applies to us priests. If we were to be called up for military service, we would have to leave. And it is not certain that we will be assigned as chaplains. **Then there are the prisoners of war, many of them civilians. This is a reality that Vatican diplomacy is deeply concerned about.** There are said to be as many as 15,000 civilian prisoners. The biggest problem is that the Russians are not saying anything. So we have no way of knowing who is alive and who is dead. Nor do we know where they might be. In the case of the two priests who were recently released, we did not know

anything either, not even if they were alive or where they had been taken. Nothing.



? I certainly do. One reason for this is that there are soldiers on the battlefields who are not in touch. And it is not known if they are alive or if they are dead. It is an overwhelming strain for those who live this situation of limbo. In the parish of our seminary, there are two members of the community who have lost their sons. At first, they thought and hoped they were still alive, but later they found out that they had both died in prison. One after two years, the other after two years and three months. One boy killed himself. The other died after much and severe pain. There are similar stories in every family. **In the last few days, have you had the opportunity to see Cardinal Parolin? What is your impression of Vatican diplomacy? What distinguishes the diplomacy of Pope Francis?** I don't consider myself an expert on the subject, and I would be unable to distinguish between the various forms of existing diplomatic approaches. However, based on my observations and understanding, I would describe it as a diplomacy of dialogue that seeks to identify potential avenues for engagement and mutual understanding. It's a very difficult thing to do, certainly in this world and at this moment. It is a time when the only people who are heard are those who speak the loudest. And this is a country that has seen soldiers enter and open fire, burn houses and kill so many people. What is there to say in these circumstances? It's difficult, I admit. It's very difficult to find a common ground to talk and to listen. That's the diplomacy of Pope Francis: always trying to initiate dialogue. A diplomacy of dialogue, that's the way I would describe it.

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