

Ukraine's churches unite behind nation, seek prayers for peace



Ukrainian religious leaders are standing together in their opposition to Russia's use of troops in Ukraine's Crimean peninsula, and ask for prayers for a peaceful end to the situation.

"Our people and Church stand together in witnessing to God, in witnessing to Christ, and in witnessing to unity, the idea that we are one body," Fr. Mark Morozowich, dean of the Catholic University of America's School of Theology and Religious Studies, and a priest of the Ukrainian Eparchy of St. Josaphat in Parma, said in a March 4 interview with CNA.

Fr. Serhiy Zakharchenko, a Ukrainian Catholic priest who is an EWTN correspondent in Ukraine, stressed that "all churches in the Ukraine are decidedly against" Russia's use of military troops in Ukraine.

Russia's parliament approved president Vladimir Putin's move to authorize the deployment of Russian troops to Crimea March 1. Russian troops took control of airports as well as the region's parliament building and communications center, citing a need to protect Russians in Ukraine.

Crimea is a southern peninsula of Ukraine where nearly 60 percent of the population are ethnic Russians, and more than 50 percent of the population speak Russian as their first language.

Military movements in Ukraine follow months of protests, which culminated in the Feb. 21 flight of president Victor Yanukovich, who was impeached the next day. On Feb. 23, Oleksander Turchynov was appointed acting president by the Ukrainian parliament.

The protests in the Ukrainian capital Kyiv began in November, when the government announced it would not sign a major economic partnership agreement with the European Union, in favor of a \$15 billion bailout agreement with Russia

U.S. and European Union officials have condemned the deployment of Russian troops in Ukraine.

Fr. Morozowich noted that the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations, which unites various Christian Churches along with Muslim and Jewish leaders, came together “to speak with a unified voice” against Russia’s deployment of troops in Crimea.

“We call the authorities of Russia to give up the military or any other interference into internal affairs of Ukraine that are not provided by the international law and bilateral agreements,” the council said in a March 1 statement. “The Russian authorities ought to realize their responsibility before God and mankind for possible irrecoverable consequences of the military conflict on the Ukrainian land ... we call all to more fervent prayers for our Motherland.”

Fr. Morozowich said that while there are still disagreements about the country’s future within the Ukrainian population, “the fact that the leadership of these churches is pulling them, is directing them, is very clear in their statements” is critical.

Many Christians, particularly Ukrainian Greek Catholics, he said, have been reminded of religion’s treatment under Ukraine’s rule by the Soviet Union.

“This has brought back memories of the Ukrainian Catholic Church being in the underground,” Fr. Morozowich said, pointing out that the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church was persecuted from its prohibition by the Soviet government from 1946 until Ukraine’s rejection of Soviet rule in 1989.

The Church, he said, “has only been legally allowed to exist for the last 25 years,” and many people

“didn’t want to have this as a repeat.”

The state of religious freedom in Russia forecasts how religion might be treated if Russia takes control of parts of Ukraine such as Crimea.

“These are the questions we should ask: what freedom do they have?” Fr. Morozowich said. "Are they free to establish their own hierarchy, are they free to use their own languages, are they free to establish their own parishes?"

“This isn't something we need to ask in the abstract,” he said, pointing to the harsh treatment of religious protestors within the country of Russia’s actions: “We need to look at the concrete and how Russia is acting within its own borders.”

While the ability to “to worship in the way that we want” is at stake, Fr. Morozowich said that the Church in Ukraine “is alive and suffering.”

The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, he said, is “a Church that has witnessed some of the greatest massacres of the 20th century,” pointing to the Catholic martyrs canonized by Bl. John Paul II.

“The Ukrainian Catholic Church is a church of modern martyrs,” Fr. Morozowich said. It “upholds the unity of the Church, a unity that unites the Byzantine tradition with the Pope of Rome.”

The Church “is struggling to teach Catholic faith and morals” to a country “still very affected by communism” and where “abortion is still de rigueur birth control.”

Despite this, he said, “there is outreach to share, there is outreach to minister, to meet people where they are.”

Fr. Zakharchenko stressed that in Ukraine, "no one wants war ... we don't want, we don't need war.”

Religious leaders are united behind the Ukrainian people and will support them in their defense of their country, he said, pointing to Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk's statements that he and the Church will "remain with its people" even on the battlefield to provide pastoral support.

Under Soviet rule, Fr. Zakharchenko said, "we didn't have the freedom to practice our faith," explaining Ukrainian religious leaders' quick move to stand "together in one voice against the invasion."

The people of Ukraine, he said, "have obligations to protect the country," adding that while he does not want there to be conflict, "I would rather go than stay at home."

However, "the main weapon is prayer" rather than force. "It's very important to pray," Fr. Zakharchenko stated, stressing that "the main source of strength in the Church is prayer."

He asked "not just Ukrainians, but all Catholics and all Christians in the United States to pray for a peaceful solution in the Crimea."

"God is almighty, and God can help us."

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