News

People in St. Peter's Square hold an image of Mary and peace flags during Pope Francis' recita

People in St. Peter's Square hold an image of Mary and peace flags during Pope Francis' recitation of the Angelus at the Vatican March 13, 2022. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)



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March 18, 2022

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WARSAW, Poland — Although Russia's Catholics hold different views about the conflict in Ukraine, a spokesman for the country's bishops said all are united in welcoming Pope Francis' plan to consecrate their country to the Immaculate Heart of Mary March 25 in a service at the Vatican.

However, a Catholic professor in the country said the pope's plan was likely to provoke a negative reaction from the Russian Orthodox Church, which could see it as infringing its "canonical territory."

"For Catholics, this gesture isn't about faith, but about people and peace between two countries — but Orthodox bishops will wonder why the pope is consecrating two predominantly Orthodox countries in this way," the professor, who asked not to be named, told Catholic News Service March 17.

Father Kirill Gorbunov, spokesman for the Russian bishops' conference, said because there had been disinformation and propaganda attacks in Russia and Ukraine, the bishops had restricted their remarks about Russian President Vladimir Putin's "special military operation" to avoid "contradiction and conflict" among Russian Catholics.

"But although everyone acts on their own understanding and we can't always agree about what's being done, we are all absolutely united in our deepest desire that the suffering of innocent people should stop immediately — and profoundly grateful for all efforts being made to stop the bloodshed," he told Catholic News Service after a March 15-16 plenary of the five-member conference at Listvyanka, near Irkutsk. The bishops called on parishes and communities to "join in fervent prayer, combined with fasting and deeds of love," for peace in the Russia-Ukraine war.

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Father Gorbunov added that many had long requested their country's consecration as "a response to the current tragedy" and said the pope's "providential decision" had reunited the church at all levels.

Father Gorbunov also said that "Catholics who hold certain political opinions have obvious reason to be careful about expressing them openly, since new legislation forbids views contrary to the official version."

The professor, a lay Catholic, said the bishops' capacity to speak out had since been curbed by new March 4 Criminal Law amendments, imposing up to 15 years' jail for spreading "fake news" and "false information."

To comply with Russian laws, peace appeals by Pope Francis, including his Angelus messages of March 6 and 13, have not been published on the church's main news website, Cathmos.Ru, which reissued a Russian Orthodox statement, rather than a Vatican communique, about the pope's March 16 video conversation with Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill of Moscow.

Father Gorbunov told CNS that Russia's bishops had not issued instructions about what should be published, but said Catholic media editors and staffers were having to "choose their formulas carefully" to avoid being penalized or closed down.

The bishops' spokesman added that Western sanctions would have "dramatic consequences" for everyone in Russia and said church leaders had urged "a rethink about which categories of faithful most needed help."

Meanwhile, the Catholic professor said the church's Caritas aid organization had been forced to suspend many charitable projects in St. Petersburg and other cities because of the cancellation of foreign aid contracts, while many parishes were now running short of liturgical objects usually imported from abroad.

He said many Catholics had resigned their jobs and were seeking to leave the country.

"As the economy declines and living conditions worsen, their earnings have now also dropped because of the plummeting exchange rate," the lay Catholic told CNS. "Many Catholics have family roots in Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine and elsewhere, and are fearful of being stranded on the wrong side if a new Iron Curtain falls."