News
Vatican
A woman prays at the Catholic Church of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul in Lviv, Ukraine, M

A woman prays at the Catholic Church of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul in Lviv, Ukraine, March 20, 2022, during Russia's invasion of Ukraine. (CNS photo/Zohra Bensemra, Reuters)

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VATICAN CITY — Pope Francis again condemned Russia's war on Ukraine, calling it a "senseless massacre" and "sacrilegious" attack on human life.

"Sadly, the violent aggression against Ukraine does not stop, a senseless massacre where each day slaughter and atrocities are repeated," the pope said March 20 after reciting the midday Angelus prayer with visitors in St. Peter's Square.

"There is no justification for this!" he told an estimated 30,000 people who had come to the square to pray with him.

Pope Francis once again urged international leaders to work together to put an end "to this repugnant war."

Since Russia invaded Ukraine Feb. 24, missiles and bombs have continued to fall "on civilians, the elderly, children and pregnant mothers," he said.

"I went to see the wounded children here in Rome. One of them is missing an arm, the other has a head wound," he said. That happened to "innocent children."

The pope had gone March 19 to the Vatican-owned Bambino Gesù Children's Hospital where some 50 Ukrainian children had been cared for since the war began. Initially, the Vatican said, most of the young Ukrainian patients were brought to Rome for treatment for cancer, neurological or other diseases.

More recently, it said, the hospital has been providing care for those injured in the war.

Pope Francis also drew attention to the almost 3.4 million people who have fled Ukraine, according to the U.N. Refugee Agency.

"And I feel great sorrow for those who don't even have the chance to escape," he said.

"So many grandparents, sick and poor, are separated from their families," the pope said; "so many children and fragile people are left to die under the bombs without receiving help and without finding safety even in air-raid shelters," some of which have been bombed.

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"All this is inhuman," he said. "Indeed, it is even sacrilegious, because it goes against the sanctity of human life, especially against defenseless human life, which must be respected and protected, not eliminated, and which comes before any strategy!"

"Do not forget," the pope said, "it is cruel, inhuman and sacrilegious!"

Pope Francis also expressed his gratitude for the bishops, priests and religious who have stayed with their people, living "under the bombs." They are "living the Gospel of charity and fraternity."

"Thank you, dear brothers and sisters, for this witness and for the concrete support you are courageously offering to so many desperate people," the pope said.

He specifically mentioned Archbishop Visvaldas Kulbokas, the Lithuania-born nuncio to Ukraine, "who since the beginning of the war has remained in Kyiv" and is a sign of the pope's closeness "to the tormented Ukrainian people."

Pope Francis urged everyone to continue to pray for peace, to pray for the people of Ukraine and to offer concrete assistance to them.

"And, please, let's not get used to war and violence," he said. "Let's not tire of welcoming them (the refugees) with generosity, as we are doing."

The assistance will need to continue for "weeks and months to come," especially for the women and children forced to flee without their husbands and fathers and without work, which makes them targets of human traffickers, whom the pope called "vultures."

Finally, the pope asked "every community and every believer to join me on Friday, March 25, the feast of the Annunciation, in making a solemn act of consecration of humanity, especially of Russia and Ukraine, to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, so that she, the Queen of Peace, may obtain peace for the world."