News

Mykola Medinsky, a Ukrainian Orthodox military chaplain, prays with a crucifix and prayer bea

Mykola Medinsky, a Ukrainian Orthodox military chaplain, prays with a crucifix and prayer beads at the site of a Russian military strike on a shopping center in Kyiv March 21, 2022. (CNS photo/Serhii Nuzhnenko, Reuters)



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WASHINGTON—The president of Caritas Ukraine is an American citizen — the daughter of Ukrainian refugees — and yet she has not left Ukraine, even after the U.S. government advised Americans to leave.

Tetiana Stawnychy, who also served for years as director of the U.S. bishops' subcommittee on Aid to the Church in Central and Eastern Europe, told a Zoom audience "it is so important to listen to what your heart is telling you and to follow it."

"Ukraine has held a place in my heart all my life," she said. She took her job at Caritas last August and has not even considered leaving. "You stay the course. They (Ukrainians) inspire me."

Stawnychy, who now is in Lviv, Ukraine, was one of five panelists discussing the war in Ukraine at a virtual dialogue sponsored by the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University. She joined Cardinal Michael Czerny, interim prefect of the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development; Archbishop Borys Gudziak of Philadelphia, head of the Department of External Church Relations for the Byzantine-rite Ukrainian Catholic Church; Laurie Johnston, associate professor of theology and religious studies at Emmanuel College, Boston, and executive vice president of the Sant'Egidio Foundation for Peace and Dialogue; and Gerard O'Connell, Vatican correspondent for America magazine and author of "The Election of Pope Francis: An Inside Story of the Conclave That Changed History."

Stawnychy said Caritas had set up contingency plans and, in the beginning, its welcome centers were serving people mostly just in transit.

"We've seen a change," she said. The people being helped are "more vulnerable now. The people who are coming now are the people who are under fire."

She spoke of a friend from Mariupol, who spent weeks living in his basement with his wife and two children while the city was being bombed by Russian forces. They had no power, no heat and no clean water, so each morning he would gather wood for a fire to boil water to help his family survive. After several weeks, "He got his family to safety and then he went back" and is helping evacuate others.

"We need to listen to what our hearts are telling us, and we need to act," she reiterated.

She said she has seen people displaced by the war jump in to help others. "Serving another out of love ... in an unwavering way" has the capacity to restore the person giving as well as the person receiving. "This is something we are witnessing day in

and day out."

Responding to questions by moderator John Carr, co-director of the Georgetown initiative and former director of justice and peace efforts for the USCCB, the panelists spoke of what people can do to help, the morality of war and the need to understand what is happening in Ukraine.

Cardinal Czerny and Archbishop Gudziak agreed that the most critical issue at this time was to stop the war, and the cardinal described it as "a proxy war." It is important for people to dig down deep to discover "where we're involved as citizens" and what people can do to get their leaders to stop the war, he said.

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But O'Connell said he was "struck by the inability of any force to stop this war," which he called "the most terrible thing that has happened to Europe since the Second World War."

"We need to know that this is a terrifying event," an attempt to destroy people's culture, language — and the people. He spoke of Russians targeting civilians and said the events since Feb. 24 showed what happened when people did not deal with problems.

He said there were problems in 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea, and added, "If we don't solve problems today, they will come to haunt us tomorrow."

Johnston noted it was challenging to "love our neighbor" and "love our enemies" at the same time.

She said she had seen some nonviolent modes of resistance by Ukrainians, such as disrupting radio communications and taking down street signs. But she also noted that in St. Petersburg, Russia, people were making little Play-doh protesters and leaving them around the city.

"There's always a way to try to move in the direction of peace," she said.

Cardinal Czerny urged people to stop referring to statistics and drop phrases like humanitarian crisis or refugee crisis. "Drop the statistics, it would help us to stay focused. ... Let's focus on the people."

He also noted that Pope Francis rarely speaks about war in Ukraine without speaking about other wars. "There's a dozen of them going on" right now, and they are as ignored as much as Ukraine is prominent.

"That has got to change," he said.

And although he and Archbishop Gudziak reiterated the need for people to love their neighbors, the archbishop said, "The problem is Putin ... we don't need to guess what he's planning to do." Putin wants to reconstruct the Soviet empire, the archbishop said, and 70% of the Russian population — which all agreed was not getting the whole story of what is happening — supports this war.

The end of Lent arrives at the Resurrection, "but there's a passion and a crucifixion that is happening," Archbishop Gudziak said.

"We love our neighbors ... we work hard to keep our hearts cleans. But the nature of this cancer is that" it has metastasized, he added.