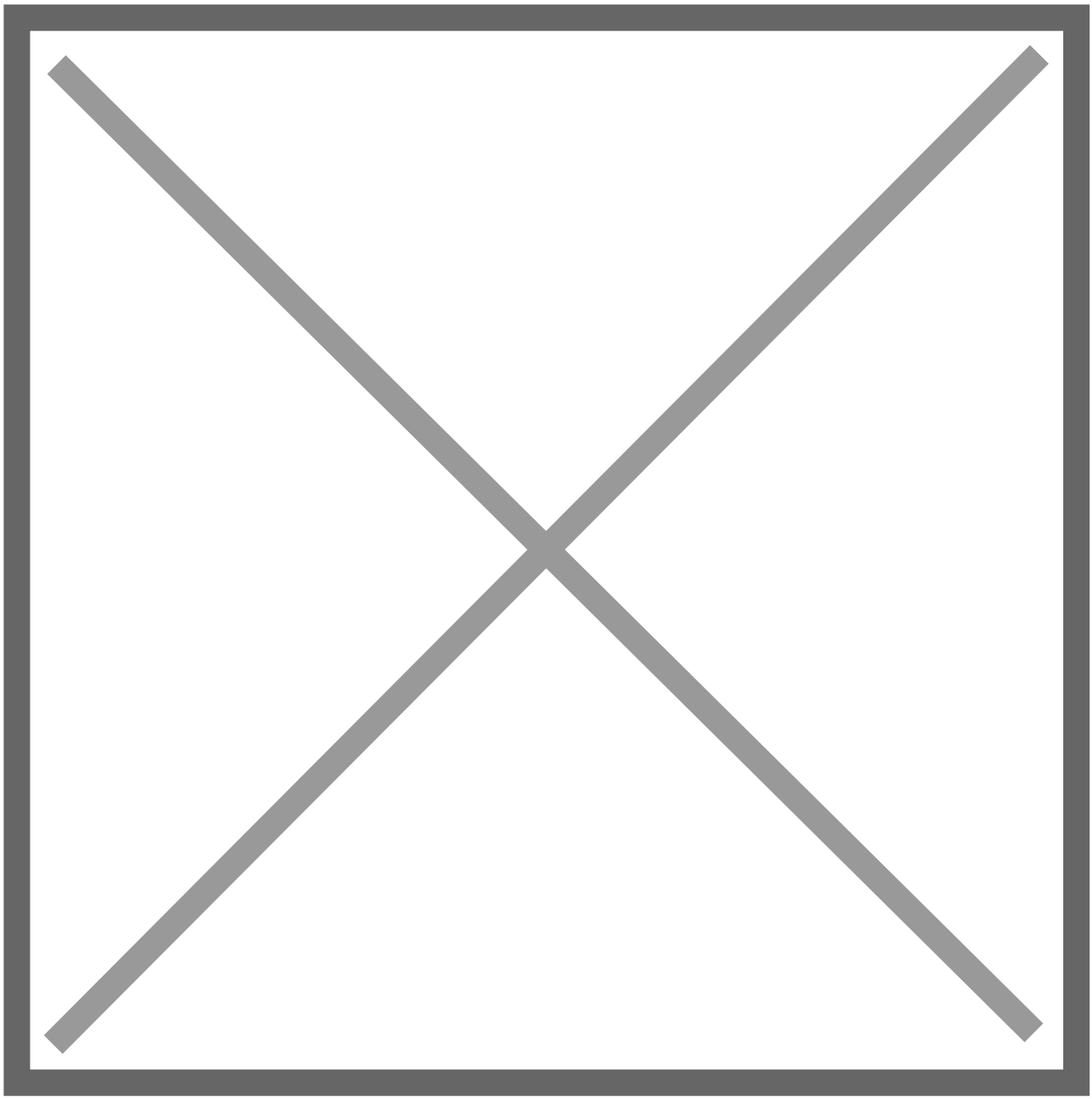
Vatican



Ukrainian nurse Iryna and Russian nursing student Albina, who are friends, hold a cross at the 13th station as Pope Francis leads the Way of the Cross outside the Colosseum in Rome April 15, 2022. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

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VATICAN CITY — More than 10,000 people gathered outside Rome's Colosseum prayed with Pope Francis for peace in the world, while a Ukrainian and a Russian woman held a cross together during the nighttime Way of the Cross April 15.

The pope had asked families to write the series of prayers and reflections for the 14 stations based on their actual experiences carrying difficult "crosses" in life, such as the loss of a family member, infertility, illness and disability as well as migration, but who also seek hope in their faith.

The 13th station — Jesus dies on cross — had reflected on the tragedy of death, loss and war with a reflection written by a Ukrainian and a Russian family.

The meditation, which was published a few days before the event, said that they see "Death everywhere" and families ask, "Where are you, Lord? ... We want our life back as before. ... What wrong did we do? ... Why did you break up our families like this?"

"We know that you love us, Lord, but we don't feel this love, and it drives us to desperation," the prewritten meditation said, ending with an appeal that God "teach us to be peacemakers, brothers and sisters, and to rebuild what bombs tried to destroy."

That meditation was changed after some controversy when the meditations were published.

Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, major archbishop of the Ukrainian Catholic Church, asked Pope Francis to scrap plans to have a Ukrainian woman and a Russian woman carry the cross together during the pope's Way of the Cross service, saying April 12 that he thought the idea "untimely, ambiguous and such that it does not take into account the context of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine."

The new meditation read April 15 called for a moment of silence: "In the face of death, silence is more eloquent than words. Let us pause in prayerful silence and each person pray in their hearts for peace in the world."

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However, the cross was still held by a Ukrainian and a Russian. The two women met and became friends while studying nursing and working at a Rome medical university campus. They had told Vatican News April 11 that such friendships were common and many families are made up of the two nationalities, living in both or either country.

The war "is a tragedy that hits both people. I am certain that neither the Ukrainian people nor the Russian people want this war. Everyone wants a normal life," said Iryna, who is from Ukraine.

The Way of the Cross, presided over by Pope Francis, returned to Rome's Colosseum after two years of restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pope offered a final prayer at the end of the service, saying, "Take us by the hand, like a father, lest we stray from you. Turn our rebellious hearts to your own heart, so that we may learn to pursue plans of peace."

"Inspire adversaries to shake hands, and taste mutual forgiveness. Disarm the hand of brother raised against brother, so that where there is hatred, concord may flourish. Grant that we never act as enemies of the cross of Christ, so that we may share in the glory of his resurrection," he said.