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Five white men in black religious garb sit behind a long table with microphones

Members of the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religions speak at a news conference at the Vatican Jan. 26, 2023. From the right: Archbishop Mieczyslaw Mokrzycki of Lviv; Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk of Kyiv-Halych, head of the Ukrainian Catholic Church; Bishop Marcos Hovhannisyan of the Ukrainian Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church; Valerii Antoniuk, head of the All-Ukrainian Union of the Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists; and a translator. (CNS photo/Justin McLellan)



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Ukraine's religious leaders asked Pope Francis to visit Kyiv, said Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk of Kyiv-Halych, the head of the Ukrainian Catholic Church.

In a meeting with the pope Jan. 25, members of the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religions once again extended the invitation to him. Shevchuk said they did not receive a clear response on the possibility.

"We know that the Holy Father is following the developments in Ukraine and is looking for the right moment to come," he told journalists at the Vatican Jan. 26. "We wanted to show him that not only Catholics are waiting for him (to come). All Ukrainians are waiting for him."

At a separate meeting with Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, the representatives said they discussed the necessary conditions for beginning peace negotiations with Russia: "the liberation of Ukrainian territory as recognized by international law," and a commitment by Russia to pay for damages caused by the war, said Shevchuk. He also advocated for international tribunals to address war crimes.

"A peace without justice and the truth does not exist," said the archbishop. "We have so many wounds to heal."

Archbishop Mieczyslaw Mokrzycki of Lviv said that the Ukrainian people "greatly appreciate what the Holy Father and the Holy See are doing for Ukraine," but noted that "it can be difficult for Ukrainians to understand the pope's position" on the war, and that it often falls on bishops and priests to explain his rationale.

"Some words were not taken well by our people, and we tried to calm them down and show them, for example, that (the pope) going to the Russian embassy was him showing who the aggressor was, who started this war," said Mokrzycki.

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Shortly after the war broke out, Francis took the unusual step of leaving the Vatican to go to the Russian Embassy to the Holy See to plead for peace and offer the Vatican's services as a mediator. He has asked for prayers for the "martyred Ukraine" at his general audience and Angelus prayer each week since the war began

in February 2022.

Shevchuk explained that in Ukraine "the credibility of the Christian message is in play" due to the Russian Orthodox Church's role in endorsing the war.

Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill of Moscow has been a vocal advocate of Russia's war effort, and recently renewed calls for prayers and donations to support the Russian army.

"If a Christian church gives rise to an ideology of genocide, it has grave moral effects. Not only for that church, but for the entire Christian message," said Shevchuk.

The Russian Orthodox Church aims to "pin one (form of) Christianity against another," said Valerii Antoniuk, head of the All-Ukrainian Union of the Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists. He noted that Ukraine's many Christian confessions, bolstered by the Vatican, are united in their commitment peace.

"We believe that the Holy See's voice can beat this ideology," he said.