News

Five people, some wearing brightly embroidered sweaters and shirts, hold candles

Family members, some wearing traditional Ukrainian dress, participate an ecumenical prayer service for peace in Ukraine in the Crypt Church of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington March 7, 2023. (OSV News photo/Mihoko Owada, Catholic Standard)

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Marking the first anniversary of the Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and praying that God will "have mercy and save us" and "convert those who foster aggression and war," Washington Cardinal Wilton Gregory and Metropolitan Archbishop Borys Gudziak, the Ukrainian Catholic Archbishop of Philadelphia, led a March 7 ecumenical prayer service for peace at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington.

"As one human family, we gather this evening to pray as we mark the sorrowful occasion of one year of war in the country of Ukraine and Ukraine's courageous resistance to the Russian invasion," Gregory said. "We pray this evening and each day for comfort and wisdom as well as for the continued strength to endure. Our

prayers are for all war and conflict to cease in every part of the world -- that we may experience God's healing and live in peace."

The prayer service was held 11 days after the first anniversary of the start of the war. On Feb. 24, 2022 Russian forces invaded Ukraine after a massive military buildup at the border. Russia's invasion of Ukraine last year is actually a continuation of hostilities that began in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea and supported pro-Russian separatists who seized the Donbas region in southeastern Ukraine.

"For these 12 months of devastation and destruction, we have joined in prayer with Pope Francis to reiterate our desire that everything possible be done to foster dialogue and a pathway to cooperation and peace," Gregory said, adding that "we remain committed to work for justice and the wellbeing of all God's people in every circumstance and country."

Among the churchmen joining Gregory and Gudziak at the service were Archbishop Christophe Pierre, apostolic nuncio to the U.S.; Archbishop Timothy Broglio of the Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA, and president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops; and Cardinal Donald Wuerl, the archbishop emeritus of the Archdiocese of Washington. Orthodox clergy members also participated in the prayer service.

More than 150 lay and religious attended the service in the basilica's Crypt Church. The ecumenical prayer service for peace in Ukraine was chanted in both English and Ukrainian. Those gathered prayed that God would "grant victory to your faithful people over their enemies" and grant "the people of Ukraine the grace of faith and endurance amid the devastating trials of war."

In addition, prayers were offered for the soldiers who defend Ukraine, those "wounded and traumatized" by the hostilities, civilians in the battle zones, those who have died in the war and those who mourn them, those who have been displaced by the war and for those assisting the people of Ukraine.

"O Lord, in this time of war, we beseech you: Sustain the people of Ukraine and teach them to be devoted to justice and peace," Gudziak led the faithful in praying. "Grant them prudence, strength and perseverance to defend their land from foreign attacks."

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, or UNHCR, as of March 5 more than 8,100 Ukrainian civilians have been killed and more than 13,600 injured since the start of the war.

"In this tragic year, the world has witnessed the faith and resilience of the Ukrainian people as they have defended their God-given dignity and freedom," Gregory said. "We stand in solidarity with all who suffer and with those who defend the innocent."

The UNHCR also estimates that about 8.1 million Ukrainians, approximately 20% of the population, have been displaced from their homes. At one point, nearly 20 million Ukrainians were displaced, but nearly 11 million have since returned. The U.N. has declared the exodus the largest refugee crisis in Europe since the end of World War II.

"We understand the lasting effects of the trauma and horror of war that are affecting many," Gregory said at the March 7 prayer service. "We see in the news stories and social media the heartache and suffering that move us to be responsive in all the ways we can to call for peace and an end to war."

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Gudziak, who recently returned from a visit to Ukraine, said, "Catholics along with people of other faiths and children and grandmothers and students and others have asked me to thank you for your prayers, your advocacy and your help."

"Thank you for the solidarity you have shown. The people of Ukraine are incredibly grateful," he said. "It is important for people (around the world) to understand how grateful the people of Ukraine are."

He said one product of the war is that "Ukrainians are turning to the Lord and relying on the Lord."

"With the grace of God, many are digging deep -- and not just in the earth to dig trenches, but to the very depths of their souls," the archbishop said. "We pray for peace. We pray for justice."

Gudziak also pointed out that because of the Internet and social media, "we can see almost minute by minute what is going on" as the war wages.

"Everybody who is on the front lines is doing what they are supposed to do," the archbishop said. "And, they appeal to all people of goodwill to pray, to advocate and to do what you can to help. May God reward you a hundredfold for your generosity."

Gregory also said he was "extremely grateful" for the ways "our American hearts, hands and homes have been opened wide to embrace the Ukrainian people in countless ways," including welcoming displaced Ukrainians "as they navigate their new reality as refugees."

"Serving our brothers and sisters in their time of need is our demonstration of love in our modern society that has minimized -- and in the case of war, completely disregarded -- the value of life and the importance of family," Gregory said.

Among those at the prayer service were parishioners of the Ukrainian Catholic National Shrine of the Holy Family, which is near the basilica. Fr. Robert Hitchens, pastor of the Ukrainian Catholic National Shrine, told Catholic Standard, the Archdiocese of Washington newspaper, that his parishioners "are more intensified in our prayers in the face of these ongoing barbaric attacks."

"With our prayers, we are bearing witness and encourage our neighbors to keep up support for Ukraine, especially with prayers for peace," he said.

Olga, a native of the Crimean region of Ukraine who asked that her last name not be used, told Catholic Standard she attended the prayer service because "with God's help, there will be a victorious end for Ukraine to this war."

"Ukrainian resilience is remarkable, but would not be possible without help from the West -- militarily, financially and, of course, prayer," she said. "We cannot forget to pray."