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Rescuers work at a site of a clinic heavily destroyed by a Russian missile strike, amid Russia's

Rescuers work at a site of a clinic heavily destroyed by a Russian missile strike, amid Russia's attack in Dnipro, Ukraine, May 26. (OSV News/Press service of the State Emergency Service of Ukraine handout via Reuters)

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A recent video that has gained traction on social media purportedly shows a McDonald's in Kiev bustling with people, prompting some to argue that perhaps the conflict is not as grim as the media and the country's government has reported.

Even Swedish Cardinal Anders Arborelius of Stockholm, who visited Ukraine in early May with Bishop Erik Varden of Trondheim, Norway, said he was taken aback by the signs of normalcy in a war that has already lasted more than 450 days.

"We were only in Kyiv for two days. At first, I was so surprised that life seemed so normal in Kyiv; the traffic, restaurants full of people, children playing," Cardinal Arborelius told OSV News May 24.

However, Arborelius said that while things seemed normal on the surface, speaking with people there made him realize "the enormous suffering" Ukrainians have endured.

"When we saw the destruction of the former occupied outskirts of Kyiv and heard how terribly bad people were treated, we were shocked," he said.

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Arborelius and Varden visited Ukraine May 9-10 on behalf of the Nordic bishops' conference, which comprises Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark and Iceland. The purpose of the visit, Cardinal Arborelius said, was "to convey our solidarity and prayers to the faithful of Ukraine."

"There is not much we can do but we can always show compassion and love to those who suffer," he said.

After visiting Kyiv, where they also met with Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk of Kyiv-Halych, head of the Ukrainian Catholic Church, Arborelius and Varden visited Irpin and Makariv.

After Ukrainian forces liberated both cities from Russian occupation between March and April 2022, images of dead civilians lying on the streets and signs of torture and mass executions shocked the world.

Now, more than a year later, Arborelius told OSV News that despite the devastation, the efforts to rebuild and the resilience of those who survived were "a sign of hope."

"We heard that the Greek Catholic priest was evacuated thanks to Protestant groups; he was on the list of those who were to be eliminated by the occupants," the Swedish cardinal recalled. "Even if there were so many traumas, people were eager to help each other and had trust in God's providence. They try to hide their wounds and show that they are so grateful for every little help they can get from our Western countries."

Pope Francis' May 13 meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, he noted, was "very important" because it "showed to the world that the pope is full of compassion and that he is very close to the sufferings of Ukrainian people."

"Through diplomatic channels the Holy See can help prisoners of war to be liberated, and hopefully, also, to help children to be sent back. Although this (may) be very hard; the Russians want to educate them to Russian citizens," he said.



Cardinal Anders Arborelius of Stockholm is pictured in a 2017 file photo. (CNS/TT News Agency/Reuters/Johan Nilsson)

During his return flight from Hungary May 1, the pope said that "the Holy See has acted as an intermediary in some exchanges of prisoners" and expressed the Vatican's willingness to facilitate the return of children forcibly taken from the country.

The request for assistance from the Vatican in negotiating the return of children taken during the war was made by Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal during a private meeting with Pope Francis in late April.

Arborelius said the Nordic bishops' conference hopes to do its part to help the people of Ukraine; one example was their organization of a special collection in parishes across the conference's five countries on Pentecost May 28.

But above all, he said, Ukrainians "need our moral, psychological support in order to see that they are not forgotten."

"Here in Sweden we also try to help the refugees and help them to adapt to their existence in our country," Arborelius told OSV News. "We are just a small church so we cannot influence the society here but, together with other faith communities, we

try to stand up for those in need, inside Ukraine and here in our countries."

The Swedish cardinal said that despite the uncertainty of the future, as well as threats from Russia after Sweden requested to join the NATO alliance, the church in Scandinavia will continue to "hope and pray that there will be a just peace for the Ukrainian people."

"Our church tries to help, even if our resources are very limited," he said. "But our moral and human support is strong, and we hopefully that many people in our countries will give their economical help to those who suffer from this terrible war."

This story appears in the **War in Ukraine** feature series. View the full series.