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People in a sitting crowd stand with a Ukrainian flag, including a Brown woman with an orang

People hold up a Ukrainian flag after Pope Francis pleads for prayers for peace there during his weekly general audience in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican Aug. 23, 2023. Ukrainian Independence Day is Aug. 24. (CNS photo/Lola Gomez)

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Acknowledging Ukraine's celebration of Independence Day Aug. 24, Pope Francis pleaded with thousands of visitors at his weekly general audience to keep praying for peace in the country.

Noting that Aug. 24 also is the feast of St. Bartholomew, the apostle, the pope entrusted to him "dear Ukraine, so harshly tried by the war."

But then departing from his prepared text and looking directly at the crowd in the Vatican audience hall, he said: "Brothers and sisters, let's pray for our Ukrainian brothers and sisters who are suffering so much. The war is cruel. So many children disappeared, so many people dead."

According to the Ukrainian government's "Children of War" website, 503 children had been killed as of Aug. 23 and more than 19,500 children have been forcibly taken to Russia.

"Please," the pope said, "pray. Do not forget tormented Ukraine."

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Russia launched its large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The country had declared its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

In his weekly video message, Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk of Kyiv-Halych, head of the Ukrainian Catholic Church, said that while Ukrainians "give thanks to the Lord God for the precious gift of freedom," in the context of war "we are gaining a deeper understanding of the meaning of freedom, of what it entails to be free individuals, and recognizing that in order to guarantee the right of existence for the Ukrainian people, it is essential to have our own state."

"The main pillars for building this state include respect for human dignity and the preservation of freedom," the archbishop said.

"Freedom is a spiritual category. Being free is not limited only to escaping oppression or foreign domination," he said. "True freedom involves being free for something. We recognize that the highest form of freedom is manifested in love, in the act of sacrificing oneself for God and neighbor."