News

Three men wearing clerical collars sit at a table below a painting of a woman saint

Leaders of the Ukrainian Catholic bishops' synod speak at a news conference at the Pontifical Ukrainian College of St. Josaphat in Rome, Sept. 14, 2023. From the left are Fr. Andriy Soletskyy, the press officer; Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, major archbishop of Kyiv-Halych and head of the Ukrainian Catholic Church; and Archbishop Borys Gudziak, metropolitan-archbishop of the Ukrainian Catholic Archeparchy of Philadelphia. (CNS photo/Lola Gomez)



Justin McLellan

Vatican Correspondent

View Author Profile

jmclellan@ncronline.org
Follow on Twitter at @m/McLellan_Js



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Communicating Pope Francis' efforts to promote dialogue and advance peace efforts in Ukraine is a "great problem" for Catholic clergy and faithful in the country, said the head of the Ukrainian Catholic Church.

"Due to misunderstandings that we have had recently, I wouldn't know how many Ukrainians remain that declare their full confidence in the public image of the pope," Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, major archbishop of Kyiv-Halych, said Sept. 14 at a news conference to close the 10-day synod of Ukraine's Eastern Catholic bishops in Rome.

"Before the Russian invasion in Ukraine, the Holy Father was the most-respected religious leader in Ukraine," he said, noting that surveys showed more than half of all Ukrainians considered the pope to be a moral leader. But "at the end of last year, this popularity fell to very low levels, some say 6 or 3 percent."

The misunderstandings include Francis' Aug. 25 comments encouraging young Russian Catholics to be proud of their heritage as descendants of the "great, educated Russian Empire." He clarified on at least two occasions that he was referring to Russia's cultural and not imperial legacy.

Two weeks later, Mykhailo Podolyak, an adviser to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, said in an interview with Ukrainian media that the Vatican has no mediating role in the war because the pope is pro-Russian. Shevchuk said he was told by the Ukrainian ambassadors to the Holy See and to Italy that the comment was not the positions of the Ukrainian government but rather Podolyak's personal opinion.

"I am not sure that the Ukrainian government has closed all the doors" to collaborating with the Holy See in the name of peace, the archbishop said, citing the example of Cardinal Matteo Zuppi's peace mission that took him to Kyiv, Moscow, Washington and now Beijing to meet with government and church officials. The cardinal, archbishop of Bologna, went to Beijing Sept. 13-15 to support humanitarian efforts and look for ways to achieve a "just peace," the Vatican said Sept 12.

Zuppi elaborated on what a "just peace" means in his meeting Sept. 7 with the Ukrainian bishops, underscoring that such a peace must "respect certain moral principles, principles of international law," and must be designed to "endure through time," Shevchuk said.

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Now, "Cardinal Zuppi's mission to Beijing will be very important, because we know that China is a large geopolitical player that has always declared itself to be available to look for peace," the archbishop said.

"What does a Chinese peace mean? We don't know. What does a Russian peace mean? We know this well," he said.

The 45 Ukrainian bishops that participated in the synod met with Francis Sept. 6. Shevchuk said that after a bishop recounted the pain of his people, the pope told them, "You have another pain, maybe you doubt who the pope is with."

"I assure you I am with you," he said the pope told them. "It is up to us to convince our people of this message, to articulate it well and communicate well," he added, but noted that "for us bishops, it is a challenge to articulate the message that we have received from the Holy Father."

Archbishop Borys Gudziak, head of the Ukrainian Archeparchy of Philadelphia, said the 10-day synod demonstrated the link between the church in Kyiv and Rome through meetings with: Cardinals Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state; Kurt Koch, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity; Claudio Gugerotti, prefect of the Dicastery for Eastern Churches; and Zuppi.

"It's clear the pope is not an enemy of Ukraine," he said. "This time, not only what was said, but the opportunity to be together clears up that the pope is with the Ukrainians and that our church is with the successor of Peter."