News

A three-story building is visible without windows and a clearly damaged roof and balconies

A destroyed residential building is seen in Orikhiv in Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia region Sept. 13, 2023, following a Russian airstrike. The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church announced Dec. 7 it had just discovered that in an order dated Dec. 26, 2022, an official in the Russian-occupied regions of Zaporizhzhia banned all activities of the church, as well as the Knights of Columbus, Caritas and other Catholic ministries in the occupied area. (OSV News photo/Oleksandr Ratushniak, Reuters)

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Russian occupation authorities have banned the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and other Catholic ministries in occupied areas of Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia region, according to the church's main communications office in Kyiv.

The UGCC announced on its website Dec. 7 that it had obtained a copy of an order signed by Yevgeny Balitsky, the Kremlin-installed head of the area's military-civil administration, declaring that the UGCC had been banned and its property was to be transferred to his administration.

Also banned by the order were the Knights of Columbus and Caritas, the official humanitarian arm of the universal Catholic Church.

The UGCC said in its statement the document, written in Russian and dated Dec. 26, 2022, had only now come to its attention. An image of the order, which the UGCC said had been published on Balitsky's official website, was included in the UGCC's online statement.

The order declared that the UGCC's activities were in "violation of legislation on religious and public organizations of the Russian Federation."

According to the document, UGCC leaders work "in the interests of foreign intelligence services," while UGCC parishioners had participated "in riots and anti-Russian rallies in March-April 2022."

The order also claimed that UGCC churches and buildings stored "explosive devices and firearms weapons" and distributed "literature calling for the violation of the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation."

The order accused UGCC communities of "active participation … in the Zaporizhzhia area in activities [of] extremist organizations and propaganda of neo-Nazi ideas."

The document said that the Knights of Columbus were "associated with the intelligence services of the United States and the Vatican."

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Knights of Columbus have aided over 1.4 million Ukrainians, providing more than 7.3 million pounds of humanitarian supplies as well as 250,000 care packages and 400 wheelchairs.

The order did not provide an explanation for its action against Caritas, but listed several specific entities in the Caritas network that were banned: Caritas Canada; "Caritas USA," an apparent reference to Catholic Charities USA, the entity's actual name; Caritas Polska; Caritas Czech Republic; and two Caritas agencies in Ukraine, Caritas Donetsk and Caritas Melitopol.

Researcher Felix Corley of Forum 18 -- an Oslo, Norway-based news service that covers religious and intellectual freedom violations in several countries -- told OSV News Dec. 7 that the language of the document, the origin and timeline of which he is investigating, is consistent with previous accusations by Russia against the UGCC.

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"It does seem to reflect the things they were saying about the [Ukrainian] Greek Catholic Church -- the allegations that they were storing explosive substances and weapons, and that the church was hostile to the Russian administration … [and] having concerns about foreign organizations" such as Caritas and the Knights of Columbus, Corley said. "The phraseology is completely in line with the sort of things that [Russia] was doing and saying, that [the UGCC] was distributing literature calling for the violation of the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation" and promoting "neo-Nazi goals."

"It has all the kind of classic accusations they're making against the [Ukrainian] Greek Catholic Church," said Corley.

He added there has been no update on the fate of two Redemptorist priests, Fr. Ivan Levitsky and Fr. Bohdan Geleta, who were seized in November 2022 from the Church of the Nativity of the Most Holy Theotokos in Berdyansk located in the Zaporizhzhia region. Geleta is known to suffer from an acute form of diabetes.

Both priests had refused to leave their parishioners following Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, which continued attacks launched in 2014 against Ukraine. Two joint reports from the New Lines Institute and the Raoul Wallenberg Center for Human Rights have determined Russia's invasion constitutes genocide, with Ukraine reporting some 114,885 war crimes committed by Russia in Ukraine since February 2022.

Russian media reported the priests had been detained for "subversive" and "partisan" activities against Russian forces, who claimed to have discovered explosives, weapons and "prohibited literature" in the church. According to Russian media, the two Redemptorists had rallied area residents to resist Russian forces, and had organized prayer services in support of Ukraine.

The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church's Archiepiscopal Exarchate of Donetsk said the arrests were in retaliation for the Ukrainian government's search of the Pechersk Lavra, a Kyiv monastery also known as the Monastery of the Caves, which is under the authority of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate.

Shortly after the priests were captured, Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, said he had received "the sad news that our priests are being tortured without mercy."

In October, Balitsky told Russian state-owned media outlet RIA Novosti that Russia should restore its historical empire by invading and occupying the Baltic States.

He said that without Russia, the Baltics have "been made into a herd of wordless, trembling creatures."

Balitsky said Russia "will correct this by the power of Russian weapons … to return our people, our subjects" so that "the whole world does not turn into the Sodom and Gomorrah that is happening in Europe now."

OSV News was awaiting a response to its request for comment from both the Knights of Columbus and Caritas officials in Ukraine.