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Metropolitan Archbishop Borys A. Gudziak of the Ukrainian Catholic Archeparchy of Philadelph

Metropolitan Archbishop Borys Gudziak of the Ukrainian Catholic Archeparchy of Philadelphia speaks at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City Nov. 18, 2023, during a prayer service marking the 90th anniversary of the Holodomor, a famine engineered by Soviet dictator Josef Stalin that led to the deaths of millions of Ukrainians. (OSV News/Gregory Shemitz)



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A prominent U.S. Ukrainian Catholic leader has sharply criticized Pope Francis' recent suggestion that Ukraine might enter negotiations to end its brutal, two-year

war with Russia, calling the pontiff's remarks "very problematic."

In an exclusive interview with National Catholic Reporter, Archbishop Borys Gudziak, who represents Ukrainian Catholics across much of the eastern U.S., said he and people across Ukraine "were really knocked off balance" by the pope's suggestion.

"Negotiating with Russia and [President] Putin today is a no-go," said Gudziak, speaking in an interview for NCR's The Vatican Briefing podcast. "Ukrainians have tried. They see that he is a relentless killer."

"I think the Holy Father really cares for the people of Ukraine, and he cares for the suffering people of the world," said the archbishop. "The expression … was very unfortunate."

Gudziak, who currently heads the Archeparchy of Philadelphia, has been a leader in the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church for decades. He previously led the eparchy responsible for Ukrainian Catholics across France, Belgium, Luxemburg, the Netherlands and Switzerland.

The archbishop was speaking to NCR while in Washington for a conference hosted by Georgetown University. He was responding to a question about an interview with Francis that was released by a Swiss broadcaster on March 9.

In that papal interview, which has not yet been released in full, Francis appeared to suggest that Ukrainian political leaders should not be ashamed to enter peace talks. "I think that the strongest one is the one who looks at the situation, thinks about the people and has the courage of the white flag, and negotiates," the pope said.

The pontiff's remarks have drawn criticism from across Ukrainian society. "Our flag is blue and yellow. We live, die and win under it. We will not raise other flags," Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba tweeted on March 10.

In the NCR interview, Gudziak spoke movingly about the suffering of the Ukrainian people over the past two years, and in previous conflicts with Russia.

"I think even the Holy Father has difficulty understanding who the world is dealing with, who Ukraine is dealing with," said the archbishop. "Ukrainians have no questions."

Gudziak mentioned the thousands of Ukrainian families who have lost someone in the war, or have family members who are missing in action, and are wondering if they are still alive.

"Hundreds of thousands of families are living in this acute anxiety from day to day," said the archbishop.

"I think that that's the message that the Holy Father needs to hear and that's something that he is incredibly responsive to," said Gudziak.

"There's many things he does behind the scenes to try to help, but the communications need to be systematic," said the archbishop. "They need to be coherent and they can't be manipulated."

Referring to the pope's March 9 interview, Gudziak said: "The Russians really had a field day."

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