News



Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk of Kyiv-Halych, head of the worldwide Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, delivers the homily during a Mass of thanksgiving for Aid to the Church in Need at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City March 10, 2024. In a May 2 homily at at the Patriarchal Cathedral of the Resurrection in Kyiv, the archbishop denounced as a "sacrilege" Russia's recent seizure of a Catholic church in occupied Kherson, which Russian clerics have now dedicated to the Russian Orthodox Church. (OSV News/Gina Christian)

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The head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church has denounced Russia's seizure of a Catholic church in Ukraine's Kherson region, calling the structure's rededication for the Russian Orthodox Church a "sacrilege."

The Church of St. Archstrategist Michael, located in the village of Oleksandrivka in the occupied Kherson region, was captured and joined to the ROC during Holy Week of the Julian calendar, said Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk in a May 2 homily at the Patriarchal Cathedral of the Resurrection in Kyiv. (The Julian calendar remains intact for the present in Ukraine until after 2025, when all Ukrainian Greek Catholic parishes will follow the Gregorian liturgical calendar.)

The archbishop said that images of the confiscated church — which honors the archangel's role as leader of the heavenly host — evoked "the words of the prophet Elijah, who cried out to the Lord, saying: 'Lord, your prophets were killed, your altars were destroyed. I am left alone, and my life is being sought' (1 Kgs 19:14).

Construction on the church began in 2017, some 11 years after the formerly Orthodox parish was officially received into the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church.

The seizure is part of a steady campaign by Russia to suppress the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, along with Catholicism in general and other faiths, in occupied areas of Ukraine.

In December 2022, Yevgeny Balitsky, the Kremlin-installed head of the area's military-civil administration in the occupied Zaporizhzhia region, banned the UGCC, the Knights of Columbus and Caritas, the official humanitarian arm of the universal Catholic Church, denouncing all of them as agents of Western intelligence. The document confirming the ban came to the attention of UGCC only in December 2023.

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The Kyiv-based Institute for Religious Freedom reported March 23 that since the beginning of the year, Russian militants calling themselves "Cossacks" have seized UGCC churches and adjacent property in Ukraine's Donetsk region, while barring "believers of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church to enter the churches and the territory for prayers and worship."

Russian occupation officials in Donetsk have so far not responded to the requests for restored access, leaving Greek Catholics "deprived of the opportunity to visit their churches and perform divine services," the IRF said.

Priests who had served the sealed churches "were expelled from the occupied territories," the institute noted.

South of Ukraine's Donetsk region, two Ukrainian Greek Catholic priests were seized from their church in Berdiansk in November of 2022, one of whom now appears to have been illegally transferred to Russia, according to a human rights activist.

Redemptorist Father Ivan Levitsky is likely being held in an investigation prison in Russia's Rostov region, according to Yevhen Zakharov of the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group.

Levitsky's fellow Redemptorist Father Bohdan Geleta, who served with him at the Church of the Nativity of the Most Holy Theotokos in Berdiansk, is reported to be held in a separate investigation prison in Russian-occupied Crimea. Geleta is known to suffer from an acute form of diabetes.

Shortly after Levitsky and Geleta were captured, Major Archbishop Shevchuk, head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, said he had received "the sad news that our priests are being tortured without mercy." The archbishop has continuously appealed for their release.

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 more than 131,325 war crimes committed by Russia in Ukraine since February 2022.

Over the last two years, Russian forces "have been responsible for damaging or destroying at least 660 churches and other religious structures, including at least 206 belonging to Protestants," said Russian history expert Mark Elliott at a Feb. 29 panel discussion hosted by the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies.

"The lack of religious freedom in Russia is now being spread to Ukraine," said fellow panelist Metropolitan Archbishop Borys A. Gudziak of the Ukrainian Catholic Archeparchy of Philadelphia during the CSIS presentation.

"In Russia, religious institutions are able to function if they support Putin and the government," said Gudziak. "In the occupied territories, those that don't support actively the occupying regime are destined for annihilation."