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Draped in Ukrainian flags, Redemptorist Fathers Bohdan Geleta, left, and Ivan Levytsky, right, pose for a photo at the Kyiv airport in Ukraine June 29, 2024. To the far right is Archbishop Visvaldas Kulbokas, apostolic nuncio to Ukraine. (CNS/Courtesy Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church Communications Department)



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Vatican City — July 2, 2024
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Pope Francis prayed in thanksgiving for the release of two Ukrainian Catholic priests who were held in Russian captivity for more than 19 months, calling on Christians to pray for the release of all prisoners of war.

"I give thanks to God for the freeing of the two Greek Catholic priests," he said after praying the Angelus June 29, the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul. "May all the prisoners of this war soon return home."

The pope expressed his sorrow for all people suffering because of war around the world, asking Christians to "pray for all populations wounded and threatened by fighting, that God may free them and support them in the struggle for peace."

The two priests, Redemptorist Fathers Ivan Levytsky and Bohdan Geleta, were arrested in the occupied city of Berdyansk Nov. 16, 2022, according to the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, which said that after military items were placed in a church in the town the two priests were arrested for the "illegal possession of weapons."

In a June 28 post on its website, the church made note of reports that the priests were tortured while in captivity to solicit a confession.

Levystky and Geleta were among 10 prisoners who were released to Ukrainian authorities, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy wrote in a June 28 post on X.

"I would also like to recognize the Holy See's efforts to bring these people home," the president said in his post.

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Ukrainian Ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets told the Interfax news agency June 29 that the release marked the first time that the Vatican played a role in mediating the repatriation of Ukrainian adults, whereas they had previously only assisted in returning children to Ukraine.

Lubinets said that the Ukrainian government is "in direct communication" with the Vatican and expressed his hope that "a new channel of communication and return of Ukrainian civilians has finally opened."

In a June 29 statement, Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, major archbishop of Kyiv-Halych, thanked Francis for his involvement in the release as well as Cardinals Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of State, Matteo Zuppi of Bologna, the pope's peace envoy in Ukraine, and Archbishop Visvaldas Kulbokas, nuncio in Ukraine.

Archbishop Shevchuk wrote that more members of the clergy are among the thousands of Ukrainians that remain in Russian captivity and called on all people "to engage in the struggle to obtain the release of all Ukrainian prisoners, including civilians, as their detention violates all international norms, practices of conducting war and international law as such."