News



A church destroyed by a Russian attack on the village of Bohorodychne in Ukraine's Donetsk region is pictured Feb. 13, 2024. Several prominent American Catholics have launched a petition calling for the end of Russia's religious persecution in occupied areas of Ukraine. (OSV News/Reuters/Vladyslav Musiienko)

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Russian forces have driven out all Greek and Roman Catholic clergy from the occupied areas of Ukraine, said the head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church.

"Our church was liquidated in the occupied territories," said Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk in a June 25 interview with media outlet Ukrinform. "In fact, there is not a single Catholic priest in the occupied territories today — either Greek Catholic or Roman Catholic."

As part of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine — launched in February 2022, and continuing attacks initiated in 2014 — Russia has systematically suppressed a number of faith communities, including Catholic, Christian and Muslim. Churches and worship sites have been destroyed or seized, with clergy of various faiths imprisoned, tortured and in several cases killed.

Two Ukrainian Greek Catholic priests, Redemptorist Father Ivan Levitsky and Father Bohdan Geleta, were released from a year and a half of Russian captivity June 28, having been seized by Russian forces from their church in Berdyansk in November 2022.

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

Levitsky and Geleta — both of whom had appeared gaunt and weary — were among 10 prisoners who had been returned to Ukrainian authorities on June 28. Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy recognized "the Holy See's efforts to bring these people home."

Shevchuk noted in the Ukrinform interview that Russian officials in the occupied portion of the Zaporizhzhia region formally banned the Ukrainian

Greek Catholic Church by written decree, as well as the Knights of Columbus and Caritas Ukraine, part of the universal church's Caritas Internationalis global network of humanitarian aid organizations.

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Some Ukrainian Greek Catholics remain in occupied areas of Ukraine despite Russia's ban, "because there are our faithful, our people," said the archbishop.

However, he noted that such believers "are deprived of spiritual care," adding that in regions of Ukraine under Russian control, "the Stalinist times are returning, the clergy are being repressed."

In some places, such as Mariupol, Maryinka, Volnovakha, Lysychansk and Severodonetsk, "our churches are completely destroyed," said the archbishop.

Other churches, as in Melitopol and Berdyansk, have been closed, he said, and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic cathedral in Donetsk was "captured."

"When our priests were expelled from there, believers continued to come there" for prayer, he explained. "And the (Russian) 'authorities' did not like it. And one fine day, our people came and saw that the locks had been changed, that is, people were simply thrown out of their (church)."

A similar seizure took place in Luhansk, he noted, while in the village of Oleksandrivka, the Russian Orthodox Church occupied the Ukrainian Greek Catholic church and re-consecrated it as an ROC church, said Shevchuk.

Two joint reports from the New Lines Institute and the Raoul Wallenberg Center for Human Rights have determined Russia's invasion — which continues attacks launched in 2014 — constitutes genocide, with Ukraine reporting more than 135,141 war crimes committed by Russia in Ukraine since February 2022.

During its recent meeting in Bucharest, Romania, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Parliamentary Assembly adopted a resolution recognizing Russia's 10-year aggression against Ukraine as genocide.