News



People pray at the Catholic Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception of the Holy Virgin Mary in Moscow in an undated photo. (Dreamstime/Uladzimir Zuyeu)



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March 7, 2025

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As the third anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine was marked with prayerful declarations and dizzying new East-West initiatives, the voice of Russia's small but significant Catholic Church was conspicuously absent.

It too has been deeply affected, however, by the bloody and destructive chain of events, and still hopes to play some part in future moves toward peace.

"While some Catholics insist their church should actively support what the government is doing, others fear losing all contact with their Ukrainian relatives," said Bishop Stephan Lipke, secretary-general of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Russia. "It's hard to tell what may happen geopolitically — and I haven't seen any signs of reconciliation for now which might suggest all the sides are being listened to and taken seriously."

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The Jesuit, consecrated Russia's newest auxiliary in Siberia on Feb. 2, spoke as Archbishop Paolo Pezzi, the Russian Catholic Church's Italian-born head, visited Catholic parishes in the frontline regions of Kursk and Bryansk in late February to offer spiritual and moral support.

Lipke told the National Catholic Reporter that the Feb. 24 war anniversary was an opportunity to offer "ever more fervent prayers for peace," but said U.S. President Donald Trump's reset in relations with Russia's President Vladimir Putin was also proving difficult to understand.

Meanwhile, a prominent Catholic university lecturer expressed alarm at the current situation, and said she was "frightened and saddened."

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"This Putin-Trump alliance is painful and humiliating for Ukraine, and looks like a dictatorship of force and power," said the lay lecturer, who asked not to be named for safety reasons.

"I'm waiting for the sanctions against Russia to end, since they're harmful to the weakest strata of our population, who lack medicines and any way to maintain their

standard of living. But it hurts me to see the resilience of Ukrainians and the anti-war movement here in Russia being devalued this way. If America starts supporting Russia, I see no hope for the future."

Russia's multiethnic Latin-rite Catholic population numbers 796,000, according to latest church data, and is spread across 396 parishes with a Moscow-based archdiocese and suffragan dioceses at Irkutsk, Novosibirsk and Saratov served by six bishops, 304 priests and 338 nuns.

The church has maintained a discreet silence during Putin's three-year "special military operation," known by its Russian acronym as "SVO," speaking up only with calls for peace and on occasional public issues.

At a March 2024 plenary in Irkutsk, attended by the Vatican's nuncio, Archbishop Giovanni d'Aniello, the Russian bishops' conference called on citizens to "remember their civic duty, guided entirely by their conscience," in that month's presidential elections, which gave Putin a fifth term following the forced elimination of possible challengers.



The Cathedral of the Transfiguration in Novosibirsk, Russia, is the cathedral church of the Diocese of Transfiguration at Novosibirsk. (Wikimedia Commons/К.Артём.1)

Last November, the conference joined Russia's predominant Orthodox Church and other denominations and faiths in criticizing new Soviet-style legislation in the State Duma that would ban religious services inside apartment buildings and severely affect Catholic communities whose churches were destroyed or confiscated under communist rule.

The church has said nothing publicly, however, about current problems in its southern Saratov-based St. Clement Diocese, where three Ukrainian nuns were recently barred from entry, or about threatened restrictions by capricious local officials as Russia's authoritarian regime tightens its grip.

"While we're not completely free to say what we want, our silence has been accepted and we're being left relatively alone," Lipke told NCR."Though it's difficult to see what the government expects, it knows we form part of the worldwide Catholic Church and have to stay in line with it."

Confusion and bewilderment over the Ukraine war, widely believed to have left hundreds of thousands of Russian soldiers and conscripts dead and wounded, are nevertheless marked in Catholic communities.

The Moscow-based lecturer says she now avoids discussing it, so as not to "multiply the pain and emotional tension." She said she came close to stopping attending Mass after discovering that many fellow parishioners backed Putin's war plans and expected their priests to do the same.



Municipal workers clean an area at the site of a Russian missile strike amid Russia's attack on Ukraine, in Odesa, Ukraine, Nov. 6, 2023. (OSV News/Reuters/Nina Liashonok)

"Most of my closest friends have already left Russia — and even they are often defensive, assuming those of us who've stayed support the authorities," the lecturer, a Caritas volunteer, told NCR.

"Some part of my life and soul stopped existing three years ago, and I still can't understand the logic of what's happening. The phrase 'special military operation' seems the biggest lie of all, and I've never said it out loud. Nor do I think I have a right to happiness while this war is going on and people are dying."

Pressure to support Putin has given some Russian-born Catholic priests an affinity with Orthodox neighbors, some of whom have had courage to oppose the war.

When Moscow launched its full-scale assault on Feb. 24, 2022, news surfaced of Orthodox clergy being suspended and put on trial for speaking out against it.

While few such cases have been reported since, a new "confession of faith" was carried by a German news agency in January. This deplored the "frivolity" of church representatives who "use the name of God in their rhetoric" and "dictate which side he should be on in earthly conflicts."

"The silence of church people can be perceived as approval or acceptance, and therefore we have no right to remain silent," noted the appeal, which said it had backing from clergy in Russia and abroad. "Any humiliation of some peoples and exaltation of others, any form of national messianism and national self-glorification is incompatible with the teaching of Christ, especially that which, under the slogan 'God with us,' ascribes to one people the right to decide the fate of others."



Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill of Moscow (OSV News/Patriarchal Press Service handout via Reuters/Oleg Varaov)

Such voices have been completely drowned out, however, by the Russian Orthodox Church's primate, Patriarch Kirill, who has lauded Russia's war aims in sermons and speeches in the church's name, denouncing the "forces of evil, conflict and division" that "took up arms" against the Orthodox Church.

At a Feb. 27 meeting of the church's supreme council, Kirill praised the "God-pleasing work" of his military chaplains. In late January, the church had announced plans for a fivefold increase in the number of chaplains serving Russian troops.

Lipke thinks it's important to distinguish between Kirill's Moscow Patriarchate, which is akin to a state institution, from local Orthodox dioceses and parishes, which often steer clear of politics and maintain friendly ties non-Orthodox communities.

After Lipke's episcopal consecration, Orthodox Bishop Nikodim (Chibisov), metropolitan of Novosibirsk and Berdsk, invited him to visit. Nikodim also sent Orthodox representatives to a late February seminar on family pastoral work at the Siberian city's Catholic curia.

During his recent pastoral visit to Kursk, Pezzi held a "warm conversation," according to a Catholic communiqué, with Metropolitan Herman (Moralin) on the "difficult situation" in the region, now partly occupied by Ukrainian forces, and the Orthodox Church's "assistance to refugees and those in need."

Lipke said that if he could speak with Catholics in Ukraine and Western countries, many now inveterately hostile toward Russia, he'd stress the importance of mutual listening through "direct contacts whenever possible."



From left: Archbishop Paolo Pezzi, head of the Russian Catholic Church; Auxiliary Bishop Stephan Lipke of Novosibirsk; and Auxiliary Bishop Nicolai Dubinin of Moscow, at Lipke's Feb. 2 episcopal consecration (Wikimedia Commons/Eliatxo)

"Although we often view events, thanks to media dynamics, only through the positions of a few VIPs, we should keep in mind what's happening at other levels," Lipke told NCR.

"We should also remember the vast majority of church members, whether Catholic or Orthodox, are simple people, often cooperating closely together in pastoral care and charitable tasks. It's in this way that we may still, even as a small Catholic minority, be able to connect people in Russia with those outside."

That was the tone of Pezzi's message for the 2025 Jubilee Year, deploring how many people had now "become enemies because of divisions within families," and urging daily prayers "for the cessation of armed conflicts that disfigure the lives and destinies of people."

"God has allowed us to live through a dramatic period in the history of our country and the whole world, when peace and harmony, acquired at the cost of colossal sacrifice and labor, are once again being destroyed," Pezzi said.

"Assessing these events is a matter of reason and conscience for each of us, a matter of free choice that no one will make for us. It is important that this choice is based not only on political considerations or personal preferences, which are never entirely adequate, but on Gospel truth and church teaching."

In Moscow, the lay Catholic lecturer doubts Russia's small, marginalized Catholic Church can play any real role in the current situation. She also thinks Western governments should accept their own share of responsibility, for buying gas and oil that fueled Putin's war aims, and for allowing Putin's associates to obtain Western real estate and Western school places for their children.

"Like other Catholics here, I'm dampening my emotions, fulfilling my duties and trying not to participate in what goes against my conscience," the Catholic told NCR. "But Russian Catholics are so far from social, cultural and political life here that the authorities don't really notice us. While we don't have social obligations imposed on us, nor can we aspire to any significant mission."