News



St. Don Bosco School principal Vitalia Vovk stands at the entrance to the site of a future new school in Zaporizhzhia, in southern Ukraine (sign obscured for safety reasons). After two years of underground classes, Don Bosco's administrators started construction on a new school that will include both aboveground and belowground classroom space. (Marc Roscoe Loustau)



by Marc Roscoe Loustau

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Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine — June 23, 2025

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Even on a Saturday afternoon, the St. Don Bosco School (Greek Catholic) in Zaporizhzhia, a city in southern Ukraine, is buzzing with activity. Don Bosco hosts a weekend day care program and exercise classes for neighborhood adults while the faithful pray and gather for Mass in Our Lady of Perpetual Help parish church next door.

In other countries, this kind of bustle would be normal for an urban parish school, but Zaporizhzhia is one of Ukraine's besieged front-line cities. Russian forces were just 12 miles away across the Dnieper River, as of early May. Before the 2022 full-scale invasion, many of Zaporizhzhia's approximately 700,000 residents worked in massive steel and aluminum plants along the Dnieper River. The factories are still operating, but they also make Zaporizhzhia a strategic prize for the Russian forces that mount regular drone and missile attacks at the city.

Despite the violence, Zaporizhzhia has actually seen a population influx, with some estimates as high as 150,000 new residents arriving in the city since 2022. The newcomers have arrived from Russian-occupied territory, choosing to stay in Zaporizhzhia because of its proximity to the front line.



St. Don Bosco School principal Vitalia Vovk, far left, and Sr. Lucia Murashko are pictured in the courtyard of Our Lady of Perpetual Help parish in Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine. (Marc Roscoe Loustau)

"They do not want to move on," Don Bosco's principal Vitalia Vovk told National Catholic Reporter. "They are looking for a place to live here, to be closer to their homes. They want to be close to those who remained under occupation."

Over the past three years, Zaporizhzhia's civic and religious leaders have had difficulty keeping schools open. Russian missiles have hit school buildings in other parts of Ukraine. Children in Zaporizhzhia are not allowed to attend classes aboveground for fear they could fall victim to an attack. Children can study online, but students are unable to focus and parents worry their children are not getting crucial interpersonal socialization.

When local parents asked Vovk to organize in-person classes, Don Bosco renovated two basement rooms on the small campus. Don Bosco's 28 first-grade students can study math, writing and the arts in the safety of these underground classrooms. It's

a protected environment, Vovk said, where students can focus without keeping an ear out for air raid sirens.

"Underground education symbolizes our concern for children's safety, but most of all quality education," he said.

Now, after two years of underground classes, Don Bosco's administrators have taken the controversial step of starting construction on a new school that will include both aboveground and belowground classroom space. Workers have recently broken ground on the new structure, and have even completed installation of ventilation systems. While students will use the basement rooms at first, Don Bosco's administrators explained during a tour that as soon as the fighting stops, the children will move upstairs.

Administrators are planning for over 300 students and staff at the future Don Bosco campus.

"This will be a normal school," Vovk told NCR, "it's just that there are also underground classrooms."



Sr. Lucia Murashko and St. Don Bosco School principal Vitalia Vovk are pictured at the site of the new school campus in Zaporizhzhia, a city in southern Ukraine. (Marc Roscoe Loustau)

But some parents, including Greek Catholic refugees from Russian-occupied territory, say that the initiative is too risky.

"It makes no sense right now," said Nastya, a Greek Catholic laywoman in Zaporizhzhia. Nastya, who asked to be identified only by her first name, is originally from the southern city of Melitopol, which she fled in 2022 when Russian soldiers invaded. She also has two school-aged grandchildren who live with their parents in Kyiv.

Nastya said she would not send her children to the Don Bosco school's new building.

"Life in Zaporizhzhia is so uncertain," she told NCR. "If they build the school and then missiles hit it, it will be for nothing. It's nonsense."

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School administrators acknowledge that they have received negative feedback about the school project. Fr. Roman Vovk, the rector of Our Lady of Perpetual Hope, is also aware of these concerns. "Some people think that we are crazy," he said. (Vovk is married to the principal, Vitalia.)

But Fr. Vovk sees the new school as an important symbolic gesture. Critics of the school project, he said, would put their future plans on hold even to the point of giving up on living. "If you listen to these thoughts, soon you'll think we don't have to eat, to dress, to wash ourselves. All you'll do is wait for them to come and for something bad to happen to us."

At Our Lady of Perpetual Hope, Vovk counsels his parishioners not to give in to meaninglessness.

"We continue to live. We continue to think about our future. We refuse to surrender," Fr. Vovk told NCR.

Vovk also insists that the new school building continues work that Don Bosco is already doing. "Over the last three years," he said, "we've already put energy into these children." Those who argue against the new school campus, Vovk said, are discounting the value of the current educational programs, which are bearing fruit in the form of awards for excellence in regional theater and musical performance competitions.



Sr. Lucia Murashko and Fr. Roman Vovk point to a photographic display about the history of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Zaporizhzhia, a city in southern Ukraine. (Marc Roscoe Loustau)

Three sisters from the Order of St. Basil the Great have also been collaborating with Don Bosco administrators on the new school project. Sr. Lucia Murashko, who is originally from western Ukraine, highlights the school's broader meaning for Greek Catholics throughout Ukraine. She sees the school project as a historical allegory. When Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union, the government forced the Greek Catholic Church "underground" by arresting priests and confiscating ecclesiastical

property.

In 1991, Greek Catholics were finally able to worship freely. "After Communism fell," she said, "the church was alive again. It will be the same here at the school after the war is over. The school will flourish because there will be many teachers and students."

The school, if successful, could be a symbol not only for Zaporizhzhia but also for the whole Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. In the meantime, Don Bosco's new building is a sign that the church is preparing for this future rebirth.

Fr. Vovk describes some of the school's strongest opposition coming from outside Zaporizhzhia. The criticisms come from cities like Lviv, where many people from Zaporizhzhia have settled because missile attacks are rarer in that part of western Ukraine.



St. Don Bosco School principal Vitalia Vovk takes a call while giving Sr. Lucia Murashko a tour of the new school building in Zaporizhzhia, a city in southern Ukraine. (Marc Roscoe Loustau)

However, at Lviv's Ukrainian Catholic University, vice rector for outreach Dmytro Sherengovsky, who has conducted research in security and conflict studies, supports Don Bosco's new school project. Sherengovsky, who has young children, said he understands the decision to leave a front-line city to keep children safe. "Had I lived near the front line, then I might have thought about sending my wife and daughter out of there," he told NCR.*

But he recommends to critics that they view things from the perspective of those in Zaporizhzhia. The feeling of security, he said, depends on many factors. Ukrainians in front-line areas have "a very different understanding" of security, which reflects their experience on the ground.

"We are trying to build an understanding into society that we don't judge this. This is a decision that people need to make for themselves."

Sherengovsky is skeptical of critics' "wait-and-see" mentality, a belief rooted in his research on contemporary warfare tactics.

"The refusal to build something new during the war is dangerous," he said. "It's actually one of the psychological operations that enemies are using in modern warfare."

The building, even in its current unfinished state, represents "normality in conditions of abnormality." Just as important, Sherengovsky said, it sends a message about the future.

"It's important to promise there will be a good story at the end that people will believe."

**This story has been updated to correct Dmytro Sherengovsky's title at Lviv's Ukrainian Catholic University and to clarify a quote.*