Opinion

Guest Voices



Residents walk with their bicycles in front of a damaged church, in Lukashivka, in northern Ukraine April 22, 2022.(RNS/AP/Petros Giannakouris)

Sergei Chapnin

View Author Profile

Religion News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

July 20, 2025
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

In February 2022, as Russian tanks rolled across the Ukrainian border, a small group of Russian Orthodox Christian clergy did something extraordinary. They published an open letter calling for peace and an immediate ceasefire. Within days, nearly 300 clergy had signed it — an unprecedented act of collective dissent in Putin's Russia.

Today, many of these signatories face administrative or criminal charges, or in some cases, ecclesiastical punishment. Their stories, often suppressed and hidden from public view, demand documentation. A comprehensive new report from Fordham University's Orthodox Christian Studies Center, written at the request of United Nations Special Rapporteur Mariana Katsarova, reveals a hidden truth that American Christians need to hear: There is a vibrant, faith-based resistance to the war in Russia, and believers are paying a terrible price for their witness.

The numbers tell only part of the story. Since Russia's invasion began, more than 100 religious leaders and activists have faced persecution for opposing the war: 79 Orthodox Christians, seven Baptists, seven Pentecostals, three Catholics, among others. Nineteen have been convicted on criminal charges, with sentences ranging from two to 12 years. Two Christians have died in custody. At least 38 Orthodox clergy have faced ecclesiastical trials, with 17 defrocked and 14 suspended from ministry.

Behind these statistics are stories of remarkable courage that echo the witness of Christians of the late 20th century who dissented from Soviet rule.

Related: Ukraine's Zelenskyy meets with Pope Leo XIV. Both propose the Vatican as site for peace talks.

Fr. John Koval, 47, a Moscow priest, changed just one word in the mandatory prayer "for the victory of Holy Rus" that had been imposed by Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill, replacing "victory" with "peace." The priest's own altar server reported him to the church authorities. He was swiftly defrocked and forced to flee Russia within

hours in May 2023. This transformation of liturgical prayer into a political test represents what the report calls "a profound distortion of Orthodox canonical tradition."

Or take the case of two young Orthodox seminary graduates, Denis Popovich and Nikita Ivankovich, 28 and 29, both ethnically Ukrainian. They have been held in a detention facility in Moscow run by the Russian intelligence service since February 2025. After being held on fabricated administrative charges, they now face terrorism accusations carrying decadeslong sentences. Their real crime? Private conversations in messaging apps about the consequences of the war.

Nikolai Romanyuk, 62, a Pentecostal minister in Moscow, has been in detention since October 2024, awaiting trial for a 2022 sermon in which he stated that his church "does not bless" those who participate in combat operations in Ukraine.

Pavel Kushnir, 39, a gifted pianist and Baptist, died in pre-trial detention in Russia's Far East after a hunger strike, his body reportedly showing signs of beating.



Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill, left, leads the Easter service accompanied by President Vladimir Putin, background right, at the Christ the Savior Cathedral in Moscow, Russia, April 24, 2022. (RNS/Oleg Varov/Russian Orthodox Church Press Service via AP)

What makes this persecution particularly insidious is the coordination between the Russian Orthodox Church and state authorities — between Kirill and Putin. Ecclesiastical courts have perverted canon law for political purposes, transforming ancient spiritual disciplines into tools of political control.

Yet resistance continues in various forms. At least 27 Orthodox priests have voluntarily left active ministry rather than serve in what they consider a morally compromised environment. Entire parishes across Western Europe have voted to leave Moscow's jurisdiction, including a dramatic case in Bergen, Norway, where 135 parishioners voted to sever ties with the Moscow Patriarchate after their Ukrainian priest faced harassment for signing the February 2022 peace letter.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople has quietly become a refuge, receiving nearly 30 priests and deacons, including those suspended or defrocked by Moscow for antiwar positions. These clergy now serve Russian émigré communities across Europe. They represent that Orthodox witness against sanctifying violence that lies in our shared calling to stand with the persecuted church. As Hebrews 13:3 commands: "Remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering."

International religious institutions and ecumenical organizations, meanwhile, have remained largely silent. A few individual bishops have courageously spoken against Russian aggression, but of 14 autocephalous, or independent, Orthodox Churches around the world, only the Ecumenical Patriarchate and its autonomous church in Finland have taken public action. Most Catholic and Protestant bodies have issued no statements of solidarity thus far. This silence effectively abandons the persecuted and normalizes the suppression of religious conscience.

Explicit opposition to the war isn't required for the government persecution. Jehovah's Witnesses, banned in Russians as "extremists" since 2017, currently have 143 believers imprisoned — more than all antiwar religious prisoners combined. The state's message is clear: Religious communities must submit to political authority or

face elimination.

What we're witnessing is not merely political repression but a spiritual crisis. The Russian state, with the Russian Orthodox Church's active collaboration, seeks to subordinate the Gospel to a neo-imperial ideology with clear nationalist overtones. This represents what Fordham's researchers call "a fundamental challenge to the prophetic vocation of religious communities — their calling to speak moral truth regardless of political consequences."

The Christians resisting this coercion understand what's at stake. As one suspended priest, Fr, Sergei Rybakov, wrote: "This war has distorted the face of the Russian Orthodox Church and transformed it into a grimace twisted by anger and malice." Yet he continues his ministry online, hoping the church might eventually "regain its human face."

Advertisement

American Christians have concrete ways to respond. We can support the U.N. special rapporteur's mandate on human rights in Russia. We can advocate for our communities to express solidarity with the persecuted. We can establish humanitarian pathways for religious refugees and support organizations monitoring these abuses.

Most importantly, we can pray — not abstractly, but specifically by name — for all who chose conscience over comfort. Their witness reminds us that authentic faith sometimes demands costly choices. In a world where institutional Christianity often seems compromised by political power, these Russian believers demonstrate what it means to 'render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, and unto God what is God's.'

We at the Orthodox Christian Studies Center attempted to present this striking report to members of the All-American Council of the Orthodox Church in America meeting in Phoenix. This church originated from the Russian Orthodox Church's American Metropolia and, in the 20th century, was vocal in supporting religious dissidents in the Soviet Union.

Yet OCA officials declined our proposal on procedural grounds. In response, we published an open letter to the council that captured the urgency: "The Church's mission includes being a voice for the voiceless. When clergy are punished for

preaching Christ's Gospel of peace, our silence—and especially the silence of our bishops—can be interpreted as tacit approval of their persecution. We cannot accept this."

The original peace letter that sparked this movement contained a simple plea: "We call on all sides to engage in dialogue, because there is no alternative to violence except dialogue." Nearly three years later, that call echoes not from grand cathedrals but from prison cells, exile communities and underground gatherings where Christians continue to choose faithfulness over safety.

Their courage challenges us: Will we remain silent while our brothers and sisters suffer for righteousness’ sake? Or will we amplify their witness, ensuring their sacrifice for peace is neither forgotten nor in vain?

The persecuted church in Russia is speaking. The question is whether the global church is listening.