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A still image taken from an undated drone video released Sept. 12, 2026, shows a destroyed

A still image taken from an undated drone video released Sept. 12, 2026, shows a destroyed building in Oleshky, the Kherson region of Russian-controlled Ukraine. (OSV News/Reuters/34th Separate Marine Brigade "Borysfen")

Gina Christian

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Pope Leo XIV spoke by telephone with Russian President Vladimir Putin Oct. 16, calling for a ceasefire in that nation's war on Ukraine and humanitarian aid to Ukrainian civilians starving amid a Russian blockade.

The Holy See Press Office announced that the pope — currently in Rome's Gemelli Hospital following an Oct. 13 lung cancer surgery — "expressed his deep concern about the grave humanitarian situation in the city of Oleshky," located in Ukraine's partially occupied Kherson region.

Leo's call comes after a Sept. 19 appeal by the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations, urging the pope and other global religious leaders to intervene.

The pope's call also coincided with his message for World Food Day (Oct. 16), in which he described "regular access to safe, adequate and sufficient food" as "a basic human right" to be safeguarded by nations."

Oleshky and its surrounding communities are estimated to have more than 6,000 civilians remaining there, including some 200 children, who are "effectively trapped in a 'gray zone' near the front line," said UCCRO.

Russian forces have imposed a "humanitarian blockade," with food supplies last "delivered to the area at the end of May," the council said.

In addition, Russian officials have repeatedly refused to permit both evacuations and humanitarian aid, said Ukraine's foreign minister Andrii Sybiha in a Sept. 21 Facebook post.

Sybiha said in his post that "chilling accounts are emerging" from Oleshky of residents who "scavenge for food scraps and gather grass, as there is simply no other food available."

According to Reuters, the Kremlin released an Oct. 16 statement regarding the call between Leo and Putin, with the exchange described as taking place "in a constructive atmosphere of mutual respect."

Putin, who wished the pope a speedy recovery, "thanked the pope for his willingness" to assist in "resolving the conflict" and "for his humanitarian efforts," said the Kremlin.

Putin also provided "a detailed explanation" concerning what he called Kyiv's "responsibility" for the humanitarian situation in Oleshky, while expressing "support" for the Vatican's aim to facilitate civilian safety and the delivery of essential aid, the Kremlin said.

"It has been agreed to cooperate on this matter," said the Kremlin.

Over the past several months, the Washington-based Institute for the Study of War has issued multiple warnings of a "dire" and "Russian-manufactured humanitarian crisis" in Oleshky.

In its Oct. 2 assessment, ISW noted Oleshky has not received any food deliveries since May 26. Drone attacks, mines and Russian occupation forces have prevented

the remaining residents from fleeing.

ISW said that Russia has "deliberately weaponized deprivation and bureaucratic mismanagement," with the blockade placing "thousands at risk of disease, starvation, and abuse at the hands of Russian forces."

Russia's aid blockade has further compounded previous damage to Oleshky, which was one of several cities flooded by Russia's 2023 intentional destruction of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant in Kherson, said UCCRO.

International humanitarian law, which governs armed conflict, mandates "rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief for civilians in need," according to the International Committee of the Red Cross.

The Holy See Press Office said Leo "called for a ceasefire to allow the delivery of food and medical assistance, and the voluntary and safe evacuation of the civilian population."

In addition, said the press office, "the Holy Father reaffirmed the Holy See's commitment to promoting dialogue and peace."

Russia's attacks —initiated in 2014, and accelerated by a 2022 full-scale invasion — have been classified as a genocide in multiple reports by the New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy and the Raoul Wallenberg Center for Human Rights.

[Gina Christian is a multimedia reporter for OSV News. Follow her on X @GinaJesseReina.]

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